

*Analfabeto / An Alphabet*

**Chapbooks by Ellen Baxt:**

Enumeration of colonies is not EPA approved.

The day is a ladle

Tender Chemistry

Since I Last Wrote

# **Analfabeto / An Alphabet**

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**Analfabeto**

# **An Alphabet**

For Fay Baxt Cohen, 1907-1998  
My first storyteller  
Her hands were soft, a good time for breathing





Everyone wears white. Everyone orders something that sizzles. There is a deep voice speaking a sound check into a microphone. Um dois tres. Dois tres. Um dois. Um um.

The concert hall is a shell. The couples in love are hot and testy. The dishes are for two. I waste half.

The couples sit next to each other or  
The couples sit side by side.

Crossing the street, the mother drags on a cigarette. The mother  
drags her son across the street. Across the street, the mother is in  
spandex drag but is a woman. Her son sucks his white pacifier.

Outside City Hall there is a banner that says Agora Justiça and Engenho da Mata. There is a big red X through the words Estados Unidos. The post office is always closed or seen from a bus window. On Sundays the street at Copacabana is closed to cars and the tan bicyclists ride by. The boys want to know what I'm writing.

Analfabeto

Illiterate

affection or

disease

Easter lily

I have to set my watch.

They went up the street. Dawn.

Let me light a match. target,

aim or white: swallow

We have no firearms.

to long for, an appetite

Let's go out in the open air.

We're going to clip his wings.

Everything's fine. Blue

A motorcycle delivers blue cylinders of water.

The buildings have two addresses, one above the other so  
you are always at the wrong building.

Pressure of proximity.

The boy does not want to enter the church. There are witches.  
Also there are Catholic saints in African melodies.

The American woman on the beach is barbudo, heavily bearded on her legs. When the children whisper bigode, mustache, she pretends not to understand, but stiff shoulders. On the plaza a girl asks, You are a fabiana? but she doesn't know fabiana. You are like my friend, she says. If the friend's husband finds out, finger slices neck, but on the plaza they are on laps. A hand reaches up and takes a breast. Another reaches down between thighs. Mamão is papaya. Mamãe is mommy. Mamar is to suck or milk.

Fabio is from Rio and tells me I must not go alone to Caruaru. Having found me at the train station, he taps my shoulder. Reclining in our reclining chairs he asks if I am sad. No, I just like watching Brazil out the window. You have beautiful eyes. You have a boyfriend? No, I am a lesbian. I not can kiss you then? No, you not can kiss me. In Brazil it is not good to be like you, but one day your people will have their day of glory.

There are many stars above Salvador. My mother is bowling in her blue bowling bracelet.

Humidity curls the pages. Sometimes I lie about sozinha/solteira. Because it is New Year's Eve, the avó in the elevator wishes me saúde, prosperidade e bom marido.

Só is only. Sozinha is alone.

A person should drink two liters of water a day. Eu tenho saudade. People should stand behind the yellow line. My city is clean. I have one sister and one brother. I stay hungry. The president won on a three-meal-a-day platform. On TV, O Brasil que come ajudando o Brasil que tem fome with the Brazilian flag as a tablecloth. A yellow-vested waiter serves a patron from a platter, fork and spoon in one hand like tongs. A woman chirps Tudo bem? into her phone. Tudo.

When I am writing on the plaza suddenly there is a circle of children. Write my name. Write my name. Write my name.

LETICIA

GABRIELA

LUÁ

LUIZ ANDRÉ

JOÃO VICTOR

Write your name. ELLEN

Say something in English. Say something in Spanish. A dog is chewing an itch. What can you write? A flatbed truck carrying petroleum. The museum is closed. The dog leaves. At the bookstore café there is: ler ouvir comer. Read hear eat. I am not so afraid in Niterói. There are one-storey houses and a cluster of men playing guitar and singing. Guitar is violão. The wind is picking up. A plane lands over the water as the ferry departs. Christine is at her desk in the Palisades plotting Grimano, Italy. The kids stand up and pump their swings. Intermittently, a bell rings. Across the water they're trying to get rid of the winter clothes. The mannequins' shirts say "Liquidação" across their torpedoed breasts.



My hair's getting long. I miss my brother and the red carpeting in the hall. I told them I'm going to stay. Unexpectedly, I found a career.

1. Choose
2. Shoes

1. Batch
2. Badge

1. Pin
2. Pen

Outside the movie theater I buy caramel popcorn in a brown bag. She buys pão doce with coconut shreds. *Lisbela e o Prisioneiro* is a comedy and sometimes I laugh at the right times. She thinks it is only in Brazil that people talk during the movies and complains about her people's manners, falta da educação. In the dark she puts on her glasses. Later she shows me where to buy shirts and pants and underpants. I blush.