

西西：這是畢羅索

Piñata

By Xi Xi

Translated by Hannah Cheung & John Minford

PIÑATA. Suspended high above the Aztec Stadium. Shaped like a comet, trailing a fluttering tail of coloured ribbons. For the past two weeks, the stadium has had a huge fibreglass butterfly up there. Butterfly, brilliance and glamour.

The Aztec Stadium, the largest stadium in Mexico, with a capacity of a hundred and ten thousand. It is exactly twenty years since it was finished. The stadium is surrounded by slums, and the locals can't afford to watch the soccer. For an ordinary worker one match ticket costs half a month's salary.

A dove. One of the doves released at the opening ceremony. The others all flew away, but this one stayed behind, and now it's taking a walk all on its own down the side of the pitch. This is the International Year of Peace. The dove is the symbol of peace. But in the frenzy of the World Cup, no one can afford to play at peace.

A whistle. Blown by the referee. The ninety minutes of the Thirteenth World Cup Soccer final are over. Five minutes ago, the Argentinian forward scored the decisive goal. They beat the West Germans 3-2.

Silver rain. The piñata up above the stadium has burst, releasing shower upon shower of dazzling rain. Little flecks of silver paper and snow-white feathers rain down on the people standing at the centre of the stadium.

The players, locked in a tight joyful embrace. The coach, physician, masseurs dash in from the touchline. They lift up the heroes of the day, to receive the roaring ovation of the crowd.

A reporter. A clever reporter who has dumped his heavy camera case and is just carrying a small fool-proof 135. So he runs the fastest. By the time the other photographers (more than two hundred of them) have scrambled to his side, he has shot a whole roll of film.

Uniformed police and plainclothes police. They are trying to keep back the floodtide of reporters with a thick length of rope. So the reporters play tug of war with the police. Red weals are raised on many arms. Lens caps and broken camera straps all over the grass.

Railings. Short ones between the field and the stand. The spectators climb through them and flood onto the grass like splashing water.

Xi Xi is the pen name of the Hong Kong writer Zhang Yan 張彥, who published her first short story in 1965 and has since established herself as one of Hong Kong's most distinguished writers. A Girl Like Me and Other Stories, the first anthology of English translations of her works, was published by The Research Centre for Translation, CUHK.

One group unfurls a huge banner, another one straightens out a national flag. A Tarzan swings down from the stand, clinging tightly to a long strip of cloth.

The stand. Viewed from the distance, a mass of pure white. The organizing committee has called on the fans to come in white, to symbolize the purity of the male soul. Probably for this very reason, a lot of women have come in bright colours. Many of the men are wearing wide blue and white stripes too.

The dais. The guests have risen to their feet. The winning teams are assembled down below. One after another, the staff and the players walk up onto the dais to take their prizes. The one walking at the very front is the Argentinian team captain Maradona.

The Mexican President. He places the Cup in the hands of the winning team captain. The Wunderkind with his one gold ear-ring kisses the Cup, lifts it up high above his head and salutes the crowd. He is so excited, he even forgets to take his own individual medal.

The West German Premier. He flew over personally in a chartered plane to watch the match and boost morale. Standing on the dais, he holds out his hand to congratulate the champions. Afterwards, he gives the players of his country's team an even warmer embrace.

Argentina's Social Welfare Minister. He is the highest ranking Argentinian official to attend the games in Mexico City. The President is too busy with the country's economic problems. The people's livelihood must come first.

The President of the International Football Federation, Havelange. A Brazilian. He is on the presentation dais, and he too holds out his hand. Why couldn't it be the Brazilian team shaking hands with him? How we would have liked to shake hands with him, and hear him say the words—Sabah, sabah. In our native Portuguese, "sabah" means wonderful.

One evening in May, I was standing in front of the bookshelf looking for some books. My eyes suddenly met my father's eyes. It was a photograph, in a small glass frame on the bookshelf. It was my father's eyes that I saw in the photo. His eyes did not look into my face, they were

focussed on the television set opposite. It was broadcasting the World Cup results.

In the photograph, Father was wearing a black shirt. There was a motif embroidered on the pocket near his heart. With a magnifying glass the motif was just about identifiable as a dragon's head. There was something dangling in front of the buttons of his black shirt. It was a whistle, hanging from Father's neck. Father was dressed like that simply because he was a football referee.

When I was very small, I used to follow Father to the football ground. He carried a bag with his sports clothes in it. As for his football boots, he just tied the laces together and slung them over my shoulder. I followed him, crunching the fallen plane-tree leaves loudly beneath my feet, trying to keep up with Father's pace. The boots kept dangling in front and behind. They smelt of mud and green grass. I could see the nine round studs on the soles. That was how it was when a six or seven year-old little girl followed her father to the football ground.

I had no idea why so many people had to chase a little white ball across the grass. I didn't look at the men in red or blue, I just watched my father. He always wore plain black, with a glittering silver whistle hanging from his neck. Sometimes, Father was a long way off, and I would sit on the muddy ground by myself, pulling at the grass, and drawing pictures in the ground with my fingers. Then suddenly Father would appear in front of me again, and hand me a bottle of some sort of iced black-coloured pop. That bottle of pop was my main reason for following my father to the football ground.

Mother was like me, she was never too bothered about the people in colours and their match. Every time she went to the sports ground, she would just sit on the chairs next to the table for the cups and medals, munch melon seeds and peanuts, and drink tea on her own. Father always had to referee at the weekends, and Mother's job was to iron the clothes carefully. Black serge shorts, black cotton shirt, black woollen socks. The woollen socks were fine, they didn't need ironing. But they always changed shape every time they were washed.

Father in the photograph on the bookshelf, his eyes rivetted on the television. How he loved

the game! Why not watch the World Cup together for once, the two of us? So I set the alarm for 1.45 on the morning of the 1st of June, and switched on the television. I didn't want to wake Mother up, so I put on the earphones. And that was how, through the quiet nights in the dark house, we watched the games together in silence, Father standing on the bookshelf and me sitting in front of it.

The goal. Two upright posts at the sides, and the cross-bar at the top. At the back of the goal is a net with big squares. The man in goal is our Brazilian goalkeeper, Carlos. This is our first match in the finals in Mexico. We're playing Spain.

The football. An ethnic football, with traditional triangular patterns painted on it. It's the same size as an ordinary football, but heavier, to compensate for the thin air up at this high altitude.

Gonzales. He is a player in the Spanish team. The ball flies from under his foot, hits the cross-bar of our goal, and bounces back. It hits the ground outside the goal, and the game goes on.

TV live broadcast. A slow motion replay. A still shot. The ball bouncing back onto the ground after it hit the bar. It did in fact land just inside the white goal line. It landed in the goal. But the referee didn't see, and obviously the linesman didn't see either. Did anyone in the entire stadium see?

The edge of the field. Seats for the team manager, the reserves and supporting staff. I am sitting here. I am Zico. I couldn't see Gonzales' goal clearly just then either. I'm not the television after all.

Santana. Our coach, sitting not far from me. He hasn't played me because of an old knee injury. I had to have a major operation. Actually my injury has healed. I can play for the national team. The team physician thinks me quite fit too, but the coach doesn't agree. He wants me to rest a bit longer.

My left knee. Is it going to keep me off the pitch forever? If I've come to Mexico this time just to be a spectator, I've come in vain. I am already thirty-three, if I can't play for the national team this time, I'll never have another chance. Another four years will be the end of old timers like me.

A small water pack. With this hot weather, the staff keep throwing small water packs onto the pitch. When these European teams come to play in Central America, the climate is already half their enemy. For us, the high temperature is no problem. Brazil is even hotter than Mexico.

Sunday. Why haven't they played our national anthem? Why did they play a hymn instead, before the match? It's never happened before. I lift my face and watch the sky. Sunday. Does God come to watch the soccer too?

A cigarette advertisement. A camel in the picture. I like this a lot. The colour is very like our team colour. It's as if the camel is also our cheerleader.

The Batocada. I can hear the Batocada, our unique Brazilian carnival rhythm. Snap the middle finger, clap hands, beat anything within reach. That is the basic rhythm. Add some chanting and samba drumming. Every Brazilian feels excitement whirling in his heart when he hears the Batocada.

The spectators on the grand-stand. I see a stretch of yellow and green, and little national flags waving. I can hear people shouting—Zico! Zico! They still remember me. They shout my name with such enthusiasm. But what can I do?

A goal. A goal for our team, the only goal scored in the entire match. One-nil. We have won. We use the 4-4-2 formation, the defence Junior moving up to midfield to lead the attack. Strikers Careca and Casagrande have not really played their proper part. The match has not been an excellent one. But we have won.

A newspaper. The headline reads, in bold print: Referee + Brazil = One-Nil. At the end of the column, there are some titbits of information. The opinion of many Brazilian soccer fans is—"One-Nil, terrible!" Great disappointment with the national team.

A photograph of the Spanish team manager. The photograph appears in the newspapers. On one side of it is an angry accusation: if it had not been for the referee's incompetence, Spain would have scored that first goal, and the result would definitely have been different. On the other side of the photograph, there is another line: if the players have to undergo a drug test *after* the match, then the referee ought to have had an eye test *before* the match.

Father had very good eyes. Eagle eyes. But if he had been refereeing the Brazil versus Spain match, would he have seen the goal that bounced out after going inside the white line? I don't know. If not, it would really have been a bit unfair on Spain. Fortunately, Spain made it in the end to the final sixteen, and even (by some miracle) beat the Danish team.

This year is the Year of the Football Referee. In the football ground, the referee is often just a vague shadow, with no name, no number. Who notices him? But for me, every time I watch a game, I only watch the referee. And every time, I always seem to see Father. Father, all in black, running on the green grass, with a shiny silver whistle hanging from his neck.

Sometimes, I suddenly realize it's not my father. Like the time the referee wore two watches on his wrist. That really made me jump. My father only had one watch. This man in black with two watches was not my father. And the other time: both teams' uniforms were pale-coloured, so the referee and the linesmen changed into bright red. My father had never worn anything bright red. His image suddenly disappeared from the field.

Quite a number of referees already had white hair. In my mind, Father was always out there on the pitch in immaculate black from head to toe—black clothes, black shoes, black hair and black eyes. And he was always so young and full of vitality. Wherever the ball rolled, he would be there. The white-haired referee on the pitch was not my father. Of course, Father's hair did turn grey in the end, and by that time he was short-sighted and even had to wear glasses. But by then he had already retired from the field.

Are referees god on the football ground? Obviously Father was the supreme authority on the field. He pointed the ball to the east, and the ball could not be moved to the west. When he blew the whistle, everyone had to halt. He had a pencil and a small notebook in his pocket, and when a player played foul, he took down his name; the second time, the player would be sent off. Nobody could argue with him.

Mother was always worried. She would ask him: Did the fans throw eggs and tomatoes at you? Did they surround you and beat you up? Father would laugh. No such thing. Who ever

bothered to bring eggs and tomatoes to the stadium? When the crowd got angry, they just threw bits of old orange peel and chewed sugar cane. Father answered so casually. But as a matter of fact, in tough matches the police often had to be called in to maintain order and drive away the rioters. There was a case of a referee getting killed in Nigeria.

I don't know whether Father ever made a misjudgement on the football ground. He had keen sight, but after all, he was not a machine. At that time, there was no television, and the referee's decision was final. This rule remains unchanged even now. So there was no appeal against that questionable goal of Spain's. Many years from now, will people use robots as referees? Just as traffic lights have already replaced traffic police at road intersections. But I wonder whether machines are more able to judge right and wrong than human beings? Because we are capable of error, does that mean we have to abdicate the responsibility of judgement?

Guadalajara City. Camp for the World Cup Group D teams. Hallelujah, we can still stay here. Maybe it's because the organizers played the hymn for us at the match on Sunday. God is really with us.

Jalisco Stadium. We've been playing here every time since we arrived in Mexico. We're lucky not to have to run around everywhere. Look at the other three teams. They draw lots and end up in some hot stuffy place, the ground dripping wet. And when they make it to the finals, they have to adjust to high altitude, about two thousand metres above sea level. It's hard to adapt in a short while.

Flowers. Words formed with flowers—Welcome the Brazilian team to Jalisco. Nearly everyone in Guadalajara is a Brazil fan, because our national team won the Third World Cup Championship in this city. It's like coming back home.

Sunshine. Sunshine like this may be too strong for the other teams, but to us it's bright and beautiful. We love it. Today the temperature is thirty-three degrees. The stadium takes more than sixty thousand and it's been full from the very start. Everybody has come to watch "the Match of the Century".

The soccer stars of the past generation. I can see them sitting in the stand—Riverlino, and Chazino. Sixteen years ago, they played on this field. Beside them, the former Brazilian manager Zacano. Around them are numerous Brazilian soccer fans. I can hear the rhythm of the *Batocada*. I can hear them shouting “Sabah, sabah”. In the beginning of the finals week, we really did not play well. More than five hundred fans got very angry and went home. Perhaps they’ve come back again for this Brazil-France match.

Grass. My team-mates are out there running already. Their game is superb. Continuous triangular short passes, using the 1-2 in the first quarter, wave after wave, level by level. We decide not to send anyone to mark Platini. It would give Rocheteau and Fernandez too much of a chance. We don’t have to worry about Platini. He’s got Elzo on his right and Alemao on his left.

The French team. Their game is every bit up to ours. They have a perfectly matching mid-field line-up, including Platini, Europe’s outstanding Footballer of the Year. More precious still, they have adopted an attack strategy which is similar to ours. This is exactly the kind of match I have long been waiting for, real soccer.

A rooster. Every time the French team play, fans smuggle roosters into the stadium. Is the bird watching the match too? On the pitch, either side sets up a possible goal every seven or eight seconds. The midfield players are always there to support the forwards, even the defence constantly back them up in a “stacked” formation. Each side is able to utilize the full width and depth of the football pitch. Of course, the most important thing is their skill with the ball.

The side of the pitch. I am still sitting here, still a reserve. But I’ve already been out there twice. I finally got my chance in the match against Northern Ireland. Only a twenty-minute short stint. I got the ball soon after I was sent out on to the pitch. I heeled it straight to Careca, and he booted it powerfully into the goal. Three-nil. We won. Who says Friday the Thirteenth is an unlucky day?

The second half. In the last match against Poland, I was sent out to play in the second half. We won that time as well, in the end. The next day the newspapers were full of my praises:

Brazil still needs Zico . . . Zico was radiant the moment he appeared. Pele got quite carried away on the radio. I’m sorry, he said, the Pope may be a Pole, but God is a Brazilian.

Twenty-seven minutes into the second half. I’ve been sent out for the third time—at last. I’m so happy. I run to the middle of the field. Soon I get the ball, and pass it quickly to Branco out in front. He goes straight into the penalty area by himself, right up in front of the goal. The other side has no choice but to trip him up. Just then, I hear the referee’s whistle.

The penalty area. The penalty spot in the other side’s area. All around the grass is green and lush, but this spot is bare and shows the yellow of the soil. When Branco tumbled on to the ground, Alemao dived down cheerfully to hug him. Penalty. As if we have already won, already scored the first goal.

A foot. My foot. It has to shoot the penalty. The rest of the team spread out behind me outside the penalty area, standing there, watching in a leisurely fashion. Some commotion behind the goal. A host of eyes watching me. I make the sign of the cross on my chest with my hand and start the run-up.

Bats. The French goalkeeper. He stands in the goal mouth, glaring at me. The ball flies towards the net. His body flashes and he knocks the ball out. I feel a total blank in my head. My team-mates also seem stupefied for a second. They want to go up and kick it again—but it’s too late.

A cry of surprise. Sixty thousand people utter a startled cry, all at the same time, like a thunderbolt. I’ve missed a penalty, me, Zico, at this crucial moment, in such an important match.

A head. My head. Who is it softly patting my head to comfort me? Oh, Platini. He has a head of very pretty curly hair, like the angel Gabriel in some picture or other.

The ninetieth minute. After a gruelling match, we draw with the French team, and have to play extra time. This time in Mexico, we’ve won all four of our matches. We’ve managed to preserve an unbroken record.

The hundred-and-twentieth minute. Both sides have scored one goal each. It’s still a draw, and we have to decide the result by penalties. If only the matches were played by rounds, then we could

draw happily. If only we could play the match over again, we would play harder and better.

Russian roulette. Several billion people in the world are watching us play this cruel game on TV. Our seasoned player Socrates misses the first penalty. The angel-like Platini. The angel carries the ball to heaven. Then it's young player Cesar. The ball hits the post and bounces out. Two penalties missed for Brazil. We're out.

Kimarus. Chairman of the Brazilian Football Association. He always wears shoes of different colours when attending the national team's World Cup matches. One golden yellow, the other jade green. Whichever colour they are, they both look dismal.

A drum. The drummer and the dancers round the drum are all wearing golden yellow and green. The samba music suddenly dies when the French team's last penalty goes into the net.

A little girl. She's come to Mexico with her sister to watch the soccer. She is a fellow Brazilian. She says sobbing to the reporter: I'm going to cry all the way home. Zico's our magic shooter. He's kicked two hundred penalties. Why has he gone and missed this one?

Father had a nickname—"Penalty King". When I was young, I didn't know what a penalty was. I only knew that kings were majestic-looking people. Then I grew up, and witnessed the destroying power and pressure of penalty shots. Father who was the Penalty King must have given countless penalties in his career as a referee. Was he an extremely strict judge? Or were the players on the pitch too rough? In the current season, there are indeed many players too anxious for victory. However, some referees are really too strict. For instance, Argentina's goalkeeper has just given the referee a gentle pat on the shoulder. Why should he be given a yellow card?

Taking a penalty shot is certainly a terrible experience. In the Mexico match against Paraguay, Sanchez, "the Hope of the Country", missed a penalty shot too. The wizards conclude he must be under a spell. Mexico's black and white wizards have always been on bad terms, but now they join forces, and pray at the sun pyramids and moon pyramids for blessings on their national team to win. Apparently, when the Paraguayan team plays

a match, a wizard always goes with them, and the players all carry charms to protect them. Mexico and Paraguay, each has its own wizard. The football matches are like magic contests.

Some people say the penalty shot is God's game. Does God watch soccer matches at the edge of the clouds too? An Argentinian father say, he has made arrangements with God for Argentina to win. I wonder: can such arrangements be made with God? How? The West German bishop has said nothing.

The weather is hot in Mexico. The pressure at this high altitude is obviously a challenge to the referee's stamina as well. This time, the International Football Federation has selected thirty-six referees, three of them from Asia. I have formed no special impression of them. I feel sorry for the African referee. It's a surprise when he is selected to referee the Argentina-England match. Argentina will not accept a European referee, and England refuses to have a South American. That leaves only six candidates for selection. In the end, the Tunisian referee takes on the big task. And he turns out to be guilty of an oversight.

He fails to notice Maradona's handball. The French television commentator berates him fiercely, even insulting his country. When a referee makes a mistake, it should be borne by the man himself. If my father makes a mistake in an international match, are people to blame the whole of China? What about Father, standing in the photograph on the bookshelf? What is his feeling on the matter?

Strangely, good referees are always anonymous. Well-known referees are mostly judges of questionable goals. Perhaps a good referee should just be a shadow. The best match should be one in which people do not feel the presence of referees, just as the best film technique is that which goes unnoticed by the people watching the film. The best make-up is that which leaves no trace. The best government is one which does not disturb people and seems to be non-existent.

Nobody disturbed her, but Mother still woke up in the middle of the night, and went swaying to the washroom. She asked: What are you doing? I said: We are watching football. She said: Football? Why watch football? I'm not going to. You can watch on your own. Mother always

swayed when she walked. She went back to sleep again.

The training camp. The Brazilian team camp in Guadalajara. A team which has undergone long-term rigorous training should perform well. How about us? Other teams have been training for three or four years, but we didn't even know who was in the team until the beginning of this year.

Pele's voice. He is the radio station's special World Cup commentator. He's right, our team is playing better and better. They have not lost or drawn a single match, or conceded a single goal. In the end, they are out of the Cup because of a single penalty shot. Early this year, we were not organized. No players, no coach. Until February, when we borrowed Santana back from Saudi Arabia. The 45-year-old Pele became anxious and offered to play for the team himself.

A videotape. The TV in the training camp is playing the videotapes of other matches in the World Cup. It all has nothing to do with us any more. We only wish for the Ramil Cup to stay in South America, and not be taken away to Europe. Paraguay, Uruguay and Mexico are out too. The only hope rests with Argentina.

A hand. The television shows a hand clearly. Maradona's hand. The ball has been hit into the goal with a hand. According to his own explanation—it is the hand of God. The Wunderkind with the golden ear-ring is a true "malik". "Malik" means naughty boy in Brazilian. A man cannot always be a naughty boy, a naughty boy has to grow up and mature.

Another hand. The hand of the English goalkeeper in protest. This hand indicates to the referee that it is Argentina's handball, but the referee has not bothered. In the end England has lost. I admit I never wanted the English team to win, because they insulted South American players by calling them beasts. But it's unfair for them to lose because of a handball.

The twenty-third of June. The day we leave Guadalajara. We finally have to leave because the deciding match will take place at the Aztec Stadium. But it's a pity that our next stop will not be Aztec, but Rio de Janeiro.

Suitcases. We are packing our luggage to go home. I put items like sports clothes, sports shoes

into the case. These clothes should have been totally torn and grabbed by the crowds at the stadium. Sports shirts exchanged with other players, loads of souvenirs from Mexico—that's what should be in the case.

No. 10 sports shirt. Golden yellow No. 10 shirt. My fellow countrymen say no one can wear a No. 10 shirt again after Pele. But I, I possess a No. 10 shirt. This is the last time I'll wear it in the World Cup. When I take it off, I will never have another chance to put it on.

A medal. Our national team uniforms have the symbol of the Golden Goddess printed on them. The Golden Goddess, the goddess of victory in Greek myth, wrapped in thin lace, stretching her wings and lifting the huge Cup. We have not been able to be World Cup champions since 1970. Is it because we have lost the Golden Goddess?

A pile of newspapers. A pile of abandoned newspapers. They point to all the coaches sacked because their teams have lost. Only the Moroccan coach has become a hero in his small North African nation. He is a Brazilian. Morocco is the happiest team to be eliminated. The players can stay in Mexico to watch the games. They can't travel in South and North America. Their country has even prepared a national banquet to welcome them back.

The bus to the airport. Everybody is dejected during the hour-long journey. Santana says he'll go back to his farm in the South. Socrates thinks he'll take up medicine again. He'll go to Italy in four years' time, but not as a player, as a spectator.

The Bull Ring in Guadalajara City. All along the road small stalls, still loaded with Pique—the mascot of World Cup '86, football key rings and other souvenirs. But the hawkers have hidden away their little Brazilian flags and replaced them with French and West German ones.

The airport. Several hundred Brazilian and Mexican fans have come a long way to the airport entrance to see us off. They sing us a song: "You are a little angel". All of us are in tears.

Father never refereed again after that. Perhaps it was because his hair finally started to turn grey. The life of a referee is longer than that of a player. A 30-year-old player is already old; a

goalkeeper can manage until 40; but a referee can last still longer. Father gave up refereeing; but that did not mean he left the football ground completely. He just did not run about on the field. As a matter of fact, he still sat at the side of the pitch. He became a coach.

When Father became a coach, I was already fourteen. My hair was cut short and no longer tied into two little plaits. On autumn afternoons, I no longer carried Father's sports shoes on my shoulder and followed him to the football grounds, crunching the fallen plane-tree leaves loudly beneath my feet. Instead, I would get up at around four o'clock in the morning and go with him to watch the team training on the ground. The football ground in the early mornings was completely different from during matches. There were no pedestrians in the streets, no spectators on the stand. It was dark and quiet everywhere. Members of the team would arrive one by one, and run along the edges of the ground to exercise. Among them ran a fourteen-year-old girl. I was that girl.

Nowadays training is strict and detailed. I see all sorts of training on TV. When Father was a coach, training was just a question of letting the players run in circles, practise shooting, and split into groups to play against each other. When the team went to play, they never took a psychologist with them; not like the Uruguayan team which takes a clown with them to keep the players cheerful. I wasn't sure if Father was a good coach. I only heard that he acquired another nickname, "the Red-bearded Military Adviser". I knew what a "military adviser" was. There was one in *The Three Kingdoms*—Zhuge Liang. But what did the "red-bearded" part mean?

When he came back from the pitch, Father was always very tired, and fell into a deep sound sleep as soon as he lay down on the bed. As a referee, it was always just his body that got tired. When he became a coach, his mind got tired too. Every football match brought immense pressure. But there would never be an invincible team. I only knew that Father's hair grew greyer every day.

Father had only been a coach for a short time. In my mind, he was always a referee. Coaches and referees are concerned about different things.

Coaches are concerned with the match results while referees are there to maintain order, to uphold justice, and lay great stress on the rights and wrongs. Those who judge others will also be judged by them. In the football ground, Father scrutinized many people. Outside the ground, many scrutinized him.

It was really a strange experience to watch the World Cup with Father on those quiet nights. Mother was sound asleep. The television made no sound, I listened to the commentary on the earphone. But Father, he could only watch the silent screen. Did he need the commentary? I hardly thought so. He didn't need the guidance of others to watch a soccer match. I didn't understand, I couldn't resolve the uncertain points in the match, but Father must have had his answers.

Early dawn. The plane from Guadalajara has landed at Rio de Janeiro airport. We are back in Brazil. The World Cup final has not been played, but we have come home. It is an awkward day indeed.

Rio de Janeiro, one of the most beautiful cities in the world. My homeland. On March 27, 1953, I was born in this city. My name was Latel Antones Coenbura. The ordinary people do not know my name, they just call me Zico.

A side-entrance. The airport side-entrance. The Football Association staff lead us out of the airport through the side-entrance, as a group of fans have assembled at the airport entrance. The Football Association is worried that we may be booed and jeered by the fans.

Mount Corcovado. Rio de Janeiro is a city situated at the foot of the mountain and by the sea. There is a statue of Christ standing high on the Corcovado mountain. Stretching out its arms and blessing the city below the mountain. If we had won the championship, the sculpture would look as if it were welcoming us. Now, all it can give us is consolation.

Copacabana Beach. Winding paths on the broad beach. When I was small, I played football at a corner of the beach. I was so thin and weak then, no one would believe I could become a sportsman when I grew up.

Sugar Loaf Mountain in the bay. A spiders-web of tram lines reaches direct to the peak. I

often saw this mountain when I played football on the beach. Then it gradually got dark and the mountain disappeared. That was when I would hear cousin Melinda's voice. She came looking for me on the beach and cried loudly: "Latel Zico, come home quickly."

A palm tree. The tree I know so well. Where there are two palm trees, there is a goal. My elder brothers all love playing football. My father was once a goalkeeper too. When we were small, we all played with a ball made of socks tied together.

A soft-drink can. An empty can which no one kicks. Where are the kids who kick soft-drink cans like footballs? Where are our future football artists? Is it because they have not got up so early, or is it that they no longer care about football?

High-rise buildings. The more high-rise buildings there are, the less football pitches there are. In the past, there were altogether more than ten thousand football grounds from Rio de Janeiro to Sao Paulo. Now there are only a few hundred left. It is said that today there are more football grounds in Denmark than in Brazil.

A row of shops. It's too early, the shops are not open yet. Every time our team is in the World Cup, the President gives civil servants a half-day off. The banks, restaurants and shops are all closed. Now, we'll have to wait four years for another holiday like that.

A bank. Perhaps it's bankers who say that every time the team plays in a World Cup, the whole country loses a lot of money, because of the lost working hours. They believe that stopping work in the whole country for a soccer match is like encouraging pointless strike action.

The panorama of Maracana. The name known best among Brazilians is not Maradona, but Maracana, the country's largest stadium which can accommodate two hundred thousand spectators. It was the happiest day in my life when I ran on the Maracana pitch. I was wearing my favourite red and black striped sports shirt. I have worn that shirt for sixteen years.

A clothes shop. It's too early, the clothes shop would be even less likely to be open yet. Clothes shops make us think of Father because he was a tailor. Are my relatives waiting for me at the Maracana stadium already? How will I meet them?

The outside wall of Maracana. I believe our relatives and friends are already standing inside the stadium. Will my elder brother Eldo be there too? Iraq has lost in the World Cup, and blamed it all on the group of Brazilian coaches. They immediately dismissed them and employed West Germans instead. My elder brother, who is a coach in Iraq, must have been sacked.

A monument. The monumental stone outside Maracana commemorates the time when Pele shot "the most beautiful goal in history" inside the stadium. Standing outside the main gate of Maracana, I seem to hear my cousin's voice: "Latel Zico, come home quickly."

The World Cup is over. Altogether Father and I have watched fifty-two matches. We watched two games a night, and kept it up for an entire month. Day became night. Everyday I kept yawning, and my eyes were heavy and drowsy. But Father is energetic and spirited, his eyes are still sparkling. I thought that with the World Cup over, my life would go back to normal, and I would be able to sleep well at nights. But here I am, still waking up just after one in the morning. There's nothing on television, patches of snowflakes appear on the screen. I switch on a small lamp and look at Father. He's got his big eyes open too. With no football to watch, he just looks at me.

Father, the World Cup excitement comes once every four years. We'll just have to wait four years. Four years will soon be over, and we can watch soccer together silently again in the quiet of the nights. Four years, and then another four years, an endless succession of four years. In the end, perhaps your photo and mine will be standing on the bookshelf together. But who will accompany us then? Will he too have all these unresolved questions? He will have to search and reflect upon everything alone.

Father, all these years you have been standing up there on the bookshelf. During these days, you've been looking so lonesome. No one talks with you, no one watches football with you. I often come to the bookshelf to look for books. Why haven't I seen you? Books and you have formed my history. Aren't you the most important book in my life? All this time I've never

thought of opening you and reading carefully. Now I can finally get to know you all over again. Through soccer. I feel we have never been so close before. In the past, we lived together, but we were actually only strangers to each other.

Father, now there's no soccer to watch, why don't we just chat? Let's just talk about a particular match for a night. You must never have felt tired of soccer. Can't remember who it was who said that the football is round, and there is no definite rule that the better team will win. So Brazil has lost. I really hope South America can win this year's World Cup. For the European teams, winning is just like gilding the lily, isn't it? But for the South Americans, it is their only consolation in life. Mexico still stages the World Cup in times of such economic difficulty. It is only trying to distract itself from its worries, so that its people can forget about reality for a while. After the matches, they will have to face their mammoth foreign debt again, and there are still large groups of families not properly resettled after the earthquake.

Sometimes even just a dream, just a short moment of happiness is rare enough, isn't it?

For instance, the fighting in the Middle East that has been going on for years. The battles actually stopped during the World Cup. The football rolling onto the bloody battlefield can bring peace with it. Father, look, why can't all the nations and fighting factions in the world simply have a game of soccer, and end all their conflicts on the pitch? Wouldn't that be better?

It's getting late. Father, aren't you tired yet? Let me tell you something. The Brazilian team has returned to their country. They arrived at the airport in the capital early in the morning. Officials from the Football Association led them out the side-entrance to avoid the rioting fans who had assembled at the airport entrance. In fact, the fans had come to welcome the team home. They were beating drums, swinging and dancing to the samba, and holding up banners, one of which read: "You have done your best to raise the status of Brazilian football. Win or lose, you're still heroes." Another banner read: "Zico, we won't judge you by a single penalty shot. You're still the best."

September, 1986

*Xi Xi has written that Gonzales shot the controversial goal in the Brazil vs. Spain match. In fact the goal was scored by Miguel Michel.