Lost in the Paradise

My little grasshopper airplane cannot fly very high

Sometimes a penis is just a penis. Sometimes its name is green wave death. Caetano Veloso, who found “Lost in the Paradise,” and Gal Costa, who found it again — each borrows its troubles and hides their name. Veloso is credited as the songwriter, but this is not a written song:

I am the sun, the darkness
My name is green wave
Death, salt, South America is my name
World is my name, my size
And under my name here am I

These are impossible claims, inscrutable demands. This verse is the perfect alibi, which can be repeated but not discovered. To say South America is my name is to refuse name and place. In Veloso’s version, My name is green wave death is the punchline, the villain’s confession that says goodbye, admits everything: You are dead, and I am yours. Which is to say: I am your killer. Who can claim to be nature?

Also in 1969, John Barth’s fifth book, Lost in the Funhouse, was published. The title story begins: “For whom is the funhouse fun? Perhaps for lovers.” Veloso’s song, “Lost in the Paradise,” begins with a similar diffuse warning: My little grasshopper airplane cannot fly very high. As Costa sings it, the drama is the withholding of the name, while Veloso builds to the delivery, the fecund gift of death.

The typical male orgasm carries hundreds of thousands of deaths, and perhaps one death-in-life, one suspended sentence. My name is green wave death is that death sentence which refuses to be a refrain, unless the song is repeated, by the listener or the singer, or by another singer. It happens once, forever. It is the dead sister to My little grasshopper airplane cannot fly very high. The latter is clear-spoken in Costa’s “Lost in the Paradise”;
the former is lost in the funhouse of the song, a staccato secret buried in the noir shadows of her version.

What’s the trouble with “Lost in the Paradise”? Must we say it? Can we not pass [through] the distorting mirror and leave it alone, or does our image stick, grotesque and forlorn and marked for death? The song is a photo, of the singer and her object, and of the listener:

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\begin{align*}
&Don't \text{ help me, my love} \\
&My \text{ brother, my girl} \\
&Just \text{ tell my name} \\
&Just \text{ let me say who am I}
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These lines were written by Veloso. They are writeable, and speakable, and therefore repeatable. The song slows down to accept them, even as My brother, my girl is irreconcileable, an invitation to Costa to help deliver the message. My name is green wave death may not be said again. The trouble with “Lost in the Paradise” begins with the impotence of its opening lines — My little grasshopper airplane cannot fly very high.\(^{45}\) In time, it passes through the impossible confession at its heart: My name is green wave death. Reader, we have done the impossible. We have repeated the unrepeatable. May trouble spare us all.

\(^{45}\) The line is unspeakable, anymore is unspoken.