

THREE FICTIONS BY AMILCAR BETTEGA

The Photographer

Translated by Jethro Soutar

The photographer thought he was alone and sat down. A huge glass window, murky from the salt air, filtered the sunlight that fell on the beach, dulling it slightly. He put his camera on the table. His gaze quickly sought out the sea, having lingered on nothing else since entering the cafe. It was cold outside and rather blowy, but the sky was still very blue. The toning changed constantly, but the sky was still very blue. Inside the cafe, the light was warm and syrupy. The nature of the glass, or maybe the salt air itself, which clung to his skin, slightly distorted the yellow tone that filled every cubic inch of that aquarium at the sea's edge. The photographer sat there. Waiting.

The photographer placed his hand on the camera and stroked it, as a father would a daughter. Then he left his hand resting on the contraption, as if he'd forgotten it was there. The sound of the wind and the waves remained outside, murmuring silently against the glass. The photographer went on staring at the sea, his hand resting on the camera, which also appeared to be staring at the sea, its focus pointed at the white spray of the waves as they burst on to the sand amidst glittering speckles of light and salt.

After a little while in that position, frozen, his shape outlined against the big glass window that looked on to the sea, the photographer stood up and turned towards the door. He picked up his coat and went outside. His camera stayed where it was, perched on the table, lens pointing out to sea, strap spread out over the surface of the table like a sleeping snake.

The photographer walked past the café and down the steps that led to the beach. He seemed to have difficulty walking on the too-soft sand. There was no one else on the beach and his footsteps were the only marks on the sand's smooth surface. By now he was close to where the waves reached. Doubtless his shoes were starting to get wet, his feet to grow cold. The photographer stood still, hands stuffed in his coat pockets, facing the sea. He stared out at it.

A few moments passed, then he started to walk along the beach. Hands in pockets, eyes fixed on the horizon, he strayed a little and took a route just to the right of the café. His silhouette became lost in the twilight of nightfall. But he soon reappeared, now much closer, ten feet or so from the big café window. He kept on coming and then stopped and stood still again, in the empty space between here and the sea.

The window framed him perfectly. His coat tails and hair ruffled in the wind. His long figure, back turned, hands on hips, stood out sharply against the backdrop of the sea. Its waves no longer carried flashing speckles in their spray.

Inside the café, all was still and submerged in half-light. It was so dark you could barely see a thing.

The Convalescent

Translated by Brian Gould

A gentle light shines in through my bedroom window, sliding up onto my bed like an extra blanket pulled up to keep me warm. A few books rest on the bedside table. In a little while I shall plunge once again into the stories they tell, I shall once again become involved in the comings and goings of the characters, whose restlessness I can feel from where I lie, a throbbing of life which the closed covers of the books cannot prevent from escaping.

But that is for later. For the time being, I let myself slip beneath the surface into the late afternoon sunlight. The light is thick, almost viscous, and gives me the feeling that I am floating in it as if my room were the seabed and my body possessed a density that was only slightly greater than that of the surrounding water, not enough

to drag me down to the bottom. My body feels light, emptied of its strength, but emptied too of what it was that consumed its strength. Tiredness, more than physical exhaustion, is now no more than a track left by the passage of illness. Its effect is almost narcotic: I slip from wakefulness into sleep and back again, over and over again, while the gentle yellow sunlight lulls my bedroom.

During these brief periods of sleep, I dream about the characters in the books resting on my bedside table. Sometimes I am one of them and I see myself lying in bed, motionless, in a silent struggle with illness. But it is by no means unpleasant: to see and feel one's body from the outside is also a way of recovering what seemed to have been lost. I leave my body for a few moments, and then it is as if I had relieved it, not of pain, because that is no longer present in a convalescent body such as mine, but of the residual memory of that feeling, of those critical moments in which the most extreme demands were made upon the body, to which it responded by multiplying its strength to new, hitherto unthinkable, limits.

I surrender to the pleasure of this moment, of the light moving down the sky, albeit so slowly that it seems to be trying to perpetuate the instant. At last I pick up a book, open it at random, and read a paragraph, though only one because my capacity for concentration is precarious, and what I see is a fig tree, its imposing trunk supporting an abundant foliage, in whose shadow there lies a man.

He sleeps peacefully, his head pillowed on a rolled-up jacket. He has just eaten some figs, as is attested by the skins heaped up by his side. And how he sleeps. The shadow he casts is stationary, even though the sun is sinking toward the horizon. Some birds are making a fuss in the branches of the fig tree. But nothing seems to disturb the man's rest.

He lies still. His shadow blends into the afternoon shade beneath the spreading branches of the fig tree and he remains motionless. Night is falling. The temperature drops a few degrees. But nothing disturbs the man's sleep. He remains peacefully and deeply asleep.

While an ant wanders across the back of his hand, following the route marked out by the veins.

The man at work is seated at his work desk, trying to work. But if we wish to be strictly accurate we shall have to say that he is already at work, since this 'trying to work' is itself part of his work.

He has just finished reading a text in which the writer discusses, with sensitivity and at times even poetically, the job of writing.

And now he is writing something having to do with this text. He tries to put himself inside the skin of the author who wrote about the job of writing, he visualizes that author and writes sentences that he thinks that author might write in the event that he wished to add to the text or — he says to himself, in a flight of daring — even make some improvements to it.

This is clearly not part of his work. It is a kind of escape, one more among so many that the man at work embarks on in order to put off the moment when he will eventually have to start working. He creates for himself a thousand commitments and entangles himself in complicated situations, just so as not to have to face up to that moment of truth. He postpones things, he behaves as though he had all eternity before him, and in this way he contrives to keep alive, somewhere amid his fragile thought processes, the idea that his great book is holding itself in waiting and that one day it will emerge, one day when he has the time and the mental availability to settle down to the task.

But the man at work is mistaken.

He is mistaken because all his escapes, all his digressions to get away from work, also form part of his work.

And also, apart from the convenience, there is great comfort and consolation to be had in the knowledge that a great book sleeps within him. The man at work is aware that, despite all his difficulties, both imaginary and real (because in addition to the ones he creates for himself there are also concrete and quite important concrete obstacles, such as, for instance, the low, one might say insignificant, sometimes non-existent remuneration he receives for his work, which causes him, as one might deduce, evident problems of a material order, which, however, he prefers not to

specify for the time being) since, despite all those difficulties, all the twists and turns that serve the purpose of postponing the moment when he will have to settle down to his true work, despite all this, he knows he has it within him to produce something important, when the time comes.

That is his secret, his innermost node, which no one can reach without his consent, in other words, unless he himself should bring out into the light the fruit of this highly private and personal harvest.

And that is good enough for him.

It is sufficient for him to carry on bearing the anguish inflicted upon him by everything that keeps him away from his work but which, as noted earlier, contradictorily contributes to his retaining his belief that one day everything will be perfect and that, when that day comes, nothing will be able to keep him from his true work.

To dream of that day is to dream of paradise. We are all more or less agreed that paradise does not exist, but deep inside each one of us a hope still flickers that something closely resembling paradise awaits us at the end of this long, hard, and all too often unhappy, journey. As if it were a reward, a kind of compensation to make up for all the bitterness that we have to experience in the world.

For the man at work is no different from everyone else. He, too, still goes on living in the hope that one day, at last, everything will be perfect and nothing more will be able to keep him from doing his true work.

At this moment the man at work realizes that almost always, whenever he mentions his work, he uses the expression 'true work', as though there were some other kind of work that was not true but false. But this misuse of language, for let us call it that, dates back to a period when the man at work needed to justify, in the eyes of others as well as to himself, the somewhat unconventional situation into which he had been led by the kind of work he does.

Luckily for him that period has now ended. Now he can laugh up his sleeve at all those people who consider him a good-for-nothing, a parasite on society, an exploiter of those who, by doing productive and useful work, keep the world's gold on the boil.

Now he is able to talk about his work like anyone else, naturally and

eloquently, sometimes even demonstrating a certain quiet pride. When someone asks him what he does, he no longer stammers, no longer finds it embarrassing to have to answer such a simple and straightforward question, so commonly asked in the course of normal social intercourse.

Quite the opposite: he now has the ability to speak at length about his work, provided, of course, that he has before him an interlocutor who shows interest and is willing to listen.

Since, however, that is not always the case, what usually occurs is that, at the sign of the first yawn or other display of impatience on the part of the person he is addressing, the man at work falls silent.

Da obra de Amilcar Bettega, *Prosa Pequena*, Porto Alegre: Zouk, 2019.