

AVESSOS AVULSOS:

A handful of poems by Salgado Maranhão

Translated by

Alexis Levitin

It took me nearly ten years before I finally confronted this marvelous collection of poems first published by *7 Letras* in 2016. The cause of my delay was absurd. I simply could not imagine how to translate the title of the book. But at last, during a two month visit to Salgado in Rio, beside the monumental face of rock rising perpendicular towards the sky above Urca, I dared to open the book. And what I found was a stimulating mixture of despair and defiance, of desert and of daring, and of the endless search for the self through words. Having opened the book, I gobbled it down. And in one month of intense dedication, it was done. Salgado and I worked together through the limpid cool days of May and, quite swiftly, we managed to wrangle his 53 scenes of words into English resonance.

As for the title that had me buffaloed for so long, I worked my way through numerous variants. The literal, but dreadful “various inside-outs” or “assorted adversities,” gave way to “gathered contraries” or “collected reversals.” Then came more inventive possibilities such as “reversals in verse” or the variant “verses in reverse.” In the end, I chose to eschew syntax and hit the reader with a grammatically unmitigated starkness: *Verses Reverses*. I leave it up to you to decide exactly how the two words relate to one another. Perhaps the title of the sonnet that serves as a kind of epigraph to the book might be of help: “Um Outro Um.”

Um Outro Um

Caminho com o outro que é um vulto
a me seguir ao sol. O que não tem
nome ou norma e sequer se faz oculto,
porque livre é seu hoje e o seu além.
Não posso deletar esse atributo
que já está na conta do armazém
do ser. E ainda que me faça astuto,
eu próprio já não sei se quando é quem.
Se me desperto acordo em alvoração
aquela voz que grita nos meus ossos
uma pavana feita de alarido
(num apelo febril mais do que posso).
Por vezes, me pergunto estarecido:
foi ilusão de espelho esse ter sido?

An Other Other

Beside me as I walk there is an other,
beneath the sun this shadow follows me.
With neither name nor norm it seeks no cover
since both in *now* and *then* it's free to be.
This stubborn attribute I can't revise.
It's listed in life's registry as true.
And even though I've managed to grow wise,
I still can't figure out if *when* is *who*.
If I wake up there wakes in me, bone deep,

a voice that cries, bewildered and afraid,
a pavane sounding like a song of grief,
(the fevered plea of one who feels unmade.)
At times, I ask myself, in great dismay,
was all I saw a mirror's lie at play?

Cena Verbal 41

Retorno à sala de confrontos: um
bicho que se sabe fênix sob os frutos
do lixo e rejeitos de afeto.

Tudo é

certeza vendida aos pedaços
para fazer dormir. Que posso eu
cantar no galho da memória?

Plantaram-me

na pedraria sem limo,
longe da brisa e das sobras
da enchente. Ando em toda parte
e só vejo a morte (anfitriã do medo)
em seu labor implacável.

Assustado,

toco em meu corpo
e sinto a dor o crepúsculo.

Scene of Words 41

I return to the corridors of confrontation: a
creature who knows he is a phoenix beneath the garbage
of discarded fruit and the leavings of affection.

Everything

is certainty sold by the piece
to allow us to sleep on. What can I
sing on the branch of memory?

They planted me

on a rockpile without loam,

far from the breeze and the residue
of a flood. I go everywhere
and all I see is death (hostess of fear)
implacably at work.

Frightened,

I touch my body

and feel the ache of dusk.

Cena Verbal 42

Quando os chacais trouxeram o deserto
à tua porta,

não clama aos deuses insólitos:

estarão surdos ao trovão
do teu sangue. Já não é um tempo
de idílios e a noite é essa náusea
que acoita vidraças.

Buscamos um
Colo sob o bosque e a cintilância
e herdamos os frutos sem néctar;
a paisagem onde a vida é lâmina.

Eis o trofeu que nos demarca
o medo
sem fronteiras. Eis a corrosão da alma
sob as unhas.

Scene of Words 42

When the jackals bring the desert
to your door,
don't cry out to the lofty gods:
they will be deaf to the thunder
of your blood. This is no longer a time
of idylls, and night is that nausea that
rattles windowpanes.

We seek
a lap beneath the forest and its scintillations

and we inherit fruit without their nectar;
a landscape where life is just a blade.
Behold the trophy that stakes out for us
a fear
beyond all borders. Behold the corrosion of the soul
beneath these fingernails.

Cena Verbal 43

Declamo aos jardins que brotam
desse chão primevo.
Esses palácios de mortos insurretos,
com suas flores de éter.

Sou do barro

onde crescem as vinhas
para a utopia sem dor. Vim cardando
estes relâmpagos de acender
palavras ante a nudez das estações. Vim
cortando a memória aos pedaços
para servi-la aos famintos.

De longe

ouvi as matracas e os tambores
ávidos e era em minha carne
que tocavam.

Na gramática da promessa,

só os desejos não dormem.

Scene of Words 43

I declaim to gardens sprouting
from primordial earth.
Those palaces of the rebellious dead,
with their ethereal flowers.

I am of the loam
from which arise Utopian
vineyards without suffering. I come unknitting
lightning bolts that set words
afame before the seasons' nakedness. I come
cutting memory to bits
to feed the famished. Far off
I heard the rattles and the ardent drums
and it was on my flesh
that they were playing.

In the grammar of promise,
only desires never sleep.

Cena Verbal 44

Já não retorno à estação das sombras,

onde a aurora acorda com as víboras.

Meu reino é essa convulsão de vozes

em que atravesso espelhos e derivas.

Penso nos pássaros que me queimam

as mãos;

penso nas pétalas de chuva

sobre as flores. Dourada é a manhã

despida nos varais; largo é o azul

que enlaça a litania das horas. O mais

é o ganido da palavra,

que adormece a pata dos lobos.

Scene of Words 44

I'll return no more to the season of shadows,

where dawn awakens with the vipers.

My kingdom is that convulsion of voices

where I pass through mirrors on errant ways.

I think of the birds burning

In my hands;

I think of petals of rain

upon the flowers. Golden is the morning

naked in the clothes-lines; endless the blue

that embraces the litany of hours. Beyond all that,

the howling of the word

that tames the paws of wolves to sleep.

Alexis Levitin's fifty books in translation include Clarice Lispector's *Soulstorm* (1989) and Eugénio de Andrade's *Forbidden Words* (2003), both from New Directions. He has published five collections of poetry by the Afro-Brazilian poet Salgado Maranhão: *Blood of the Sun*, *Tiger Fur*, *Palavora*, *Mapping the Tribe*, and *Consecration of the Wolves*. Other Brazilian works in translation include Astrid Cabral's *Cage* and *Gazing Through Water* and Leonor Scliar-Cabral's *Consecration of the Aleph Bet*. He has won two NEA Translation Fellowships and has been a translation resident at Banff, Canada, Straelen, Germany (twice), and at the Rockefeller Foundation at Bellagio, Italy.

Salgado Maranhão's work has twice received Brazil's most prestigious award, the Prêmio Jabuti. In addition to nineteen books of poetry, he has written song lyrics and made recordings with some of Brazil's leading jazz and pop musicians. He has received two Honoris Causa doctorates in Brazil and recently was inducted into the Maranhão Academy of Letters. His poems have appeared in translation in numerous magazines such as BOMB, *Massachusetts Review*, *The New York Times*, *Pleiades*, *Subtropics*, and *Words Without Borders*. He has toured extensively in the USA with his translator, visiting well over one hundred colleges and universities, including Harvard, Yale, Brown, Princeton, Swarthmore, Middlebury, Davidson, Tulane, Northwestern, University of Texas at Austin, and University of Chicago.