

FROM FADO ALEXANDRINO*

Amid his colleagues, dragging his bag, he went out of the faded barracks building and immediately made out on the other side of the grating, on the sidewalk, a kind of sea monster of faces, bodies, and hands that was quivering, waiting for them in the ashen noontime of Encarnação where traffic lights floated randomly, hanging from the mist like fruits of light. An invisible airplane was whistling above the clouds. A platoon of cadets ran by, almost next to them, chewing up the gravel of the parade ground with the jaws of their huge boots, spurred on by a quartermaster whose empty eyes looked like those of china dogs on sideboards.

“What a shitty month of March,” the transport corporal muttered to his left, the knapsack on his back stuffed with African knickknacks that ragged one-armed blacks fob off on soldiers on leave in cafés in Lourenço Marques: tinfoil pipes, wire bracelets, horrible fetishes hastily carved with a jackknife in a miserable tin-roofed hut by some native. And he thought I’m in Lisbon and in Mozambique, I can see the houses in the lower middle class neighborhood section and the trees in the jungle at the same time, the gouty little gardens and the straw huts devastated by machine-gun fire, the octopus with happy anxious arms calling us and the enormous, gigantic silence that follows ambushes, peopled with soft moans like the protests of the rain: he peeked under the Mercedes on the trail, and the guy sleeping in the cab a foot away from him was staring at him now with the distant distraction of corpses at wakes, their smiles softened into the amiable indifference of portraiture. He saw once more the commander taking leave of the battalion in the post gymnasium, the acid shine of his rimless glasses, the fingers held out, soft, to the soldiers at attention, almost propped up by gymnasium wall bars, and he thought I’m still in Mozambique, at the outpost, sitting at the bar watching night come on: the orderly handed out the malaria pills at dinner, a slight drizzle falls in the Encarnação afternoon, the Lisbon afternoon, making the soft smell of wet wood rise up from the coffins, the round smell of earth, and soon hundreds of insects will rise up from the tar and scatter, buzzing, on the streets of the city just as in the woods of Omar, until after a while they disappear out there in the darkness of the shelters. The transport corporal

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moved his duffle bag from one shoulder to the other, angrily breathed in the dampness of the air:

“Look at the fucking weather we found here.”

Heads clinging to the grating, faces split into enormous laughs, confused, sharp, mingled voices called us. An aged sergeant in a white lab coat came out wearily to smoke by the door of a building with a red cross on the wall, went back in again, dragging his feet, and the soldier caught sight of the corner of a desk, glass cabinets, the rows of ever smaller letters for the anguish of nearsighted people. Lisbon, he thought, disillusioned, twenty-eight months of dreaming about the stinking city and finally Lisbon is this, while a beer truck, growling on the gravel, came through the main gate past the sentry's toy musket, bits of Sandeman wine and Binaca toothpaste emerged from the rooftops, the officers were playing cards in the mess hut, waiting for their dinner soup. But there wouldn't be any attacks today, there wouldn't be any attacks ever again: the trails, the bombardments, the hunger, the massacres had ended, here I am again in the Encarnação district and in the rotten little houses that were like abscessed teeth near the foul-smelling open gums of sewers that Cape Verdeans with picks were listlessly digging.

“The flu for sure,” the transport corporal prophesied, “a week of hot-water bottles and lemon tea until the sneezing goes away.”

He was sweating in the bunk, his weapon by his head and an infinite weariness in his limbs. I'm going to die. The doctor looked at him with his hands in his pockets, absentmindedly, a half hour later someone told him to roll over on his belly, and at the same time they gave him an injection in one buttock for malaria, the pain spreading through his flesh as if a suddenly fiery molar was now white-hot in his tail. Completely motionless, his eyes closed, he felt his own blood pouring on the cushion, against his neck, just like a wounded animal running away, and around him the peaceful sound of the trees and the voices shouting at them from the other side of the grating in confused merriment: each leaf, he thought, is a trembling tongue, each eye a knot coming out of the wood, each body a branch bending down, startling and effusive. The General Services lieutenant trotted madly through the Mercedes' elongated shadow, whose mouth opened in a bottomless yawn, and on the walk embraced an old man writing in the air with the tip of his cane, undecipherable initials of emotion. He stumbled over the bag, carefully avoiding stepping on his neighbor in bed, who lay on the Lisbon pavement in a repugnant pool of intestines, turning his eyes aside so as not to find the

bullet hole in his ear, and he noticed that the octopus of people waiting for them in happy anguish was twisting and stretching with colic beside the main gate, swallowing up the troops one by one with the carnivorous shriek of kisses: They're going to eat me too, he thought with terror, they're going to eat me with their tentacles of sleeves, shirts, neckties, topcoats, pants, sad worn widow's weeds, they're going to pulverize my joints with their vehement and imposing affection. The General Services lieutenant was carrying a screaming child around his neck, then a graduate disappeared into a whirlwind of pushing and pats on the back, and the soldier remembered him in the jungle, a mortar on his back, walking bent over through the underbrush in the quiet of the morning in the direction of the abandoned black quarters where some warm unglowing coals were dying out.

"If this weather keeps up," the transport corporal complained, "I swear that even my soul won't be of any use."

The airplane broke through the clouds with its landing gear aggressively down and approached the hidden landing strip like a great awkward and rigid dove, full of square pores of windows, a long red line down its metal back. Slowly, painfully, as if he were putting the pieces of a forgotten game in place, he put back together inside himself the city he had left two years before amid boats whistles and military marches, when the ship left the pier followed by the gull croaking of families, who flew around the hull like enormous afflicted and funereal birds, waving the open January umbrellas over the olive waters. It was the first time I saw my father fly (he thought, lying on the mattress while the engines of the packet ship shook his lungs and made the urine in his bladder slosh), and he kept on flying in my memory in the wake of the propellers as it went away, quarreling with the birds over a frothy dinner, until my sister's only letter reached Mozambique:

Abilio I hope very much that when you get this you will be in good health and happy myself and my son are well thanks be to God in spite of the fact that Vítor doesn't give a penny for the child and makes a scene here at the door every time with slaps and threats Abílio I've got some very bad news for you and it is: father kicked off they were doing folk songs on TV and I was only paying attention to that when to tell him to go to bed I touched him on the shoulder with my finger and he fell over onto the sofa like a rag doll and his elbow knocked our departed mother's lamp onto the floor that transparent one where you can see the wire and which was given to her by the lady where she worked days Dona Márcia at the haberdasher's promised me some good

glue to fix it we had the wake day before yesterday and almost all the neighbors came Mr. Honório the boss Salgado cousin Esmeralda and the nieces who brought the poor crippled woman from number fourteen in a wheelchair you remember how we used to throw stones at her windows and she would holler hoodlums hoodlums at us Uncle Venâncio from the post office took care of the death certificate the undertaker's bill is being paid on time if you happen to have anything send it on because he was your father too and it isn't right for me to put up all the dough myself there were wreaths of flowers a small one with a purple ribbon from his friends at the café and another one of mine so pretty that Osório from the soccer team said to me hey missy Otilia it makes me feel like dying myself and I answered right back rest easy with the cough you've got you won't have long to wait for your turn that's why the funeral had a hearse priest six taxis and three private cars a woman I work with at the factory lent me a skirt and a shawl everybody was sorry you weren't there and send you their condolences and best wishes I hope you come back soon and safe and sound you see so many cripples on the streets a hug from your sister Maria Otilia Alves Nunes goodbye five hundred escudos would be fine for me.

Now (he thought when he finished the letter and put the envelope into his bag) the old man is still flying, his umbrella open, under the ground, his mouth full of mud and clay, with his little blurry pensioner's eyes carefully watching a ship that isn't there going off filled with soldiers in the direction of Africa, more and more insignificant on the stamped-paper blue of the river. The transport corporal was examining the low sky of Lisbon mistrustfully, in the same way that a tongue slowly feels an aching tooth: rolls of harsh dark rudderless clouds, and a strange feeling of hollowness, emptiness, as if the ceiling of the city were a slope of immense translucent steps that don't lead up to any door.

"A case of pneumonia at least," the guy predicted shaking his head sorrowfully as he would on patrol when after the mines had exploded, the men would come together, mute, not knowing what to do, around a lacerated, bleeding body.

The octopus behind the grating was slowly growing smaller, clumps of people, each group surrounding a soldier, were leaving the small square of Encarnação, where traffic circled patiently like a great, weary ox, turds of smoke fertilizing the skinny trees that imprinted delicate bronchi, branches, on waxen wall plaques. Only a small group remained, doggedly lined up by the main gate, so close now that he could make out the features and arms that

hugged the shadows to their chests (anxious, like the blacks vainly glued to the barbed wire, cans in hand, in hope of some leftovers from the battalion's mess), women, men, old people with wrinkles, furrows of the resigned expectations of the poor, clumsy shoes, like shapeless stones, planted on the smooth sidewalk slabs. The recruits brushed against them again as they trotted by, goaded by the shouts of the officer candidate and the kids sergeant, who followed him like a shepherd's dog, insulting a fat man who was lumbering painfully at the tail end of the column, liquefied with despair and fatigue, the buildings of the post squatting insignificantly in the rear: the Army was all over, the shooting was all over, death was all over, night after night in the blind, peeking through a small hole at the quick orange light of weapons. One, two, three eager hands grabbed the transport corporal by the jacket, by the stripes, by the buttons on his tunic, as if they were dividing precious spoils among themselves, a tiny old woman in a shawl hung on his jacket weeping, leaning her face against his belly, timid, contented, emotional, my sister probably couldn't come because of the kid, and the bitterness of not having anyone to call him, push him, wet him with kisses, the corporal was smiling in confusion, not understanding, We're still in Africa, we're still following the remains of the trail, still crossing through the white muteness of the mornings of war, the smell of manioc on mats and the slow odor of black people, we're still standing in front of the high wheeler that blew up, the broken back of the driver splayed over the steering wheel. He came out of the main gate dragging his bag and searching with his eyes, unable to find the bus stop: even the bus stops have changed in this country, goddamn it. People passed in a mechanical hurry, faces, chests, limbs moving with increasing speed. A blindman with an aluminum cane was swiftly tapping on the corner, the loudspeaker for a sale turned its gabble loose from atop a pushy little truck: the guys with greasy briefcases and dirty collars who were exchanging African money for Portuguese money had evaporated, on the esplanade beside the sea, for the soldiers going on board, twelve percent, fifteen percent, twenty-one percent, thirty percent. There wasn't a single figure left clinging to the grating, and a redhaired boy covered with freckles, with a delivery basket on his shoulder, gave the information to Go down two blocks to the electrical store and take number forty-seven. The boy's pupils were green, their rims speckled with tiny yellow spots, the rain was like a kind of damp dust twinkling faintly in the air, the wooden Gypsy houses surrounded the district with the pestilential disorder of a native village: children, lame donkeys, stones and automobiles tires on the galvanized roofs. Can the squat building in Buraca still be there

behind the railroad tracks and the sad night-weeping of the whistles? (The bag drags along at his heels like a tail.) The picture of my nephew in the seashell frame on top of the sumptuous TV set? As he walks, he tries to remember the setup: the toilet, the room, the candy-box lids that served as pictures on the wall, the water tank, always out of order, showing the slats in the framework like bones. A line of people, almost all women, is waiting silently for the bus: tomorrow, they'd sung in Angola when I passed through, I'm going to light a candle at the Muxima, I'm going to São Paulo fort, I'm going to see the bilious-colored water of the bay. Forty-seven finally stops with a sharp sigh of brakes, and after the metal door draws back with the sound of a folding screen the women begin to get on, heads down. The driver taps his fingers on the steering wheel and takes off with a leap amid a rattle of tin. The soldier grasps one of the chrome pipes of leather loops that sway from the ceiling, holds his bag between his knees, and watches a quivering parade of streets, avenues, unknown buildings, skeletal little dusty squares under a hazy sky. From time to time a buzzer sounds, the vehicle slows down with successive squeaks of springs, and ends up in a faint with a final shudder: the people getting on and off have the same bitter and confused tilt, the same faded clothing, the same infinitely distant aged features. (On taking leave of the chaplain at the post, he thought Never again will I see this guy, never again will I hear this guy's voice on the parade ground, never again will I hear his useless latinizing around the coffins.) The bus rolls on again, slowly and with difficulty, more façades, more buildings, more trees, once open spaces now covered with a pimpling of shacks, sidewalks deluged with garbage, little kids, and dogs. The way dogs and small boys look alike in this country, he thinks, is the way they look alike in Africa: the same begging expression, the same dull hair, the same slack-lily limbs.

He suddenly sees the narrow three-storied building squeezed between the grocery store and a chipped, old structure, he quickly pulls the cord, I've arrived, and the tepid people traveling with him look up with surprise: a bald-headed guy appears, startled, from behind his newspaper, like a hippopotamus in a zoo tank, with thick glasses befogged by news items and letters. He elbows passengers who cough, indistinct muttering is joined to the sputtering of the motor, and he gets off, hugging the bag that trails its languid aversion on the ground, and he stands stupidly on the sidewalk, following the bus as it goes off with the indolent waddle of a fat person, with its inert, indifferent cargo.