

Crooked Grace

AN ANTHOLOGY OF THE LITERATURE OF PORTUGAL

EDITED BY KATHERINE VAZ*

One afternoon, while I was translating the poems written on the obelisk of Fernando Pessoa's tomb for some British tourists, a man in a pith helmet pronounced the poems a hoax. (Though he meant no irony, one could almost feel Pessoa's spirit surge in delight; Pessoa, after all, famously christened poets as fakers.) "I want something clear, clean, and crisp, as in Hemingway," the man demanded, while his fellow travelers rolled their eyes. "All this Portuguese wordiness; who is the Portuguese Hemingway?" The non-stopper talker in search of the laconic—this, too, seemed a Pessoa-like ease with contradictions.

"Oh, for God's sake," remarked someone, "*Look around you.*"

We were in the Jerónimos Monastery, one of the Europe's most breathtaking examples of Manueline architecture, where granite lattice and sea-ropes give way to stained glass and what I think of as "even the gargoyles spitting out gargoyles." Look around you indeed: The baroque abhors a vacuum, and outward it spills. The sidewalks are grand mosaics. Basaltic dragon's-tooth pieces, black and white, form ships or arabesques that are discrete jewels up close but part of a vast, larger picture. They embody a certain aesthetic wherein more is more and less is less, period. Edwin Honig, a translator and writer, once used the phrase "crooked grace," and I can't imagine a better one to describe Portuguese writing: Maybe the shortest distance between two points is a straight line, but sometimes a straight line can feel like a gangplank.

Had the man in Jerónimos not been so irritating, I might have suggested that the modernist Pessoa was fairly close to the diamond-sharp prose he

*Katherine Vaz is the author of the novels *Saudade*, a Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers selection, and *Mariana*, translated into six languages. The Library of Congress named it one of the Top Thirty International Books of 1998. Her collection *Fado & Other Stories* won the 1997 Drue Heinz Literature Prize, and her short fiction has appeared in numerous magazines. She was on the six-person U.S. Presidential Delegation sent to the World's Fair/Expo 98 in Lisbon.

sought, but I am bothered by the notion of picking one school and swimming in nothing else. I like Hemingway, and I like José Saramago's page-long paragraphs. I like Mark Rothko; I like medieval tapestries. When Borges described his Library of the Universe as containing everything real and imaginary in human consciousness, and that the job of the writer is to make a selection and arrange the jots in some coherent, artistic way, he summed up the process but left open the result. That could be rendered in baroque style, or a Matisse sketch that captures humanity in three pencil lines: It's all about restricting one's self to a number of things to suggest that more—an infinity—is behind that restriction.

The writers here tend toward that thunderous, Manueline brewing of prose. The nineteenth-century novelist Eça de Queirós described the Portuguese psyche as "jittery melancholia," and during my own childhood in the Luso-American community of California ("Luso" comes from the old Roman word for Portugal, "Lusitania"), the funeral rites often included the promise to remember the dead with "affectionate anxiety." This suggests a temperament that would foster a writing style of high nerves, but there's plenty that's calmer as well.

I've included Fernando Pessoa, "The Three Marias," José Saramago (the "J" is pronounced like the English "J," not the Spanish one), and António Lobo Antunes, all well known in America, and João de Melo and Lídia Jorge, famous in their native country. Several of these writers deal with the fascist era of Salazar, the revolution of 1974, and the colonial wars in Africa—what they call their Vietnam. I restricted myself to mainland twenty-century writers, which leaves out scores of authors in the Lusophone world, in Brazil, Angola, Goa, and Mozambique.

The translator Gregory Rabassa told me not long ago that he felt that Portugal was currently producing some of the finest literature in the world. Politics, history, religion, sexuality and love, poverty and war, revolution and betrayal: The storehouse there, as Borges might frame it, is beyond calculation on the Portuguese scene, and here are some writers who go in and bring out measure upon measure of crooked grace.