

Three Short Stories by Vitorino Nemésio¹

Translated by Kelly Washbourne

Revised by

Francisco Cota Fagundes

Fishhead

When Abílio went to Brazil (Mateus Queimado relates), his mother made him heaps and heaps of shirts and long johns. I remember that very well. There were a few of us: Abílio, me, Fausto, Hemetério, Francisco da Segunda, Tiázé. But the latter two did not have dinner or spend evenings with us, swaddled in bibs or held by the hand of a servant, like Chinchinho did. They smelled of fish, and when the mucous built up, they would wipe it off on their coatsleeve and swallow the rest, whimpering.

Francisco da Segunda was small and lively as quicksilver; Abílio, serene and sluggish. Hemetério had the body of a greyhound and stuttered a little; Fausto was ahead of everyone in school and was short-sighted. If someone wanted to get him angry, they would stick a stone in his pocket or stealthily pull on the brim of his hat when he was studying. Both at the same time, orchestrated by Francisco da Segunda (who gave the sign by winking his eye), made him crazy. He would turn really red, lower his head and attack. Then we would all take off; and when Segunda, light as a monkey, would provoke him, a wild chorus of hooting would go up:

“Fausto’s a stupid girl! Fausto’s a stupid girl!”

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Abílio avoided taking part in these mischievous persecutions, being kindly and fat. He thought only of playing cards and a five-year-old little brother he had at home who had been born prematurely: Pirrilha. If necessary, Abílio would run a hundred meters in one breath and not even Segunda could catch up with him: he would squeeze his lips together tightly, and would let loose such an explosive slam with his feet at the finish line that the earth seemed to shatter! But if he ran a lot, he would sweat. He would sit down on the school steps and needed to catch his breath for several minutes. Then he would wipe off the big drops of sweat and be rendered powerless, while Tiázé himself would manage to spit on his nose without danger of getting belted in the jaw.

Some time before, we had made up that masterful way of picking up the gauntlet. At the slightest quarrel—a bet, a disputed spinning top—the strongest or most fearless would issue the challenge:

“That a lie? That a lie? Touch my nose!”

The other would spit on the tip of his finger, and if he touched, you’d hear the sound of a slap, until the first genuine blow scored a knockout on some nostrils.

But Abílio, who was somewhat gloomy and noble, did not like fights. The challenges went mainly to those who had fishermen fathers, who were used to the jabbering at the grocery until all hours, the profanity during the hauling of the nets, the terrible oaths uttered by the mothers calling one another bitches at the public washes, until one rumbled another’s hair or turned her butt to her, conveying by the slapping of her own buttocks something about being purer than thou. Their husbands would come make peace or end the episode at the foot of the wall, razors in their fists. We, “the sons of the soil,” would play at other things. Our parents had offices or stores; our mothers had large rooms with console tables, silver ferns and begonias. We were a different breed...

My mother, for example, liked Senhora Claudina a lot. She was Abílio’s mom. She’d always say:

“I seldom go over to Senhora Rosinha’s house, but we’re friends, that we are! So my Abílio and Matesinho are hand in glove with each other...”

My mother would tease us when she saw us:

“There goes the blind man and his dog.”

If we were to take the saying at face value, the blind man would be Abílio, God help him. Everything I wanted. To the sand to cut reeds? To the sand to

cut reeds! Let's make pan-pipes! He preferred a rifle and a sword—with which he looked amusing, a long piece of string measuring his girth. But I'd say: "Shall we make pan-pipes?" and then we'd actually make two, and I'd keep the one with the better skin. And "dum...dum...dum..." we'd prove my mother's saying about the "blind man and his dog."

We were growing up. At noon, Teacher rang the chime, and we went calmly and directly to the stair rail; afterward, whoever had the longest legs would be the first one to the street. From the school railing one could see the rolling sea. In the winter it was always thick and green, as if it had been spit. The beach—shorter. Giant walls of cast-up foam leapt over the fishing-net shed. And if the wind and rain picked up, it was virtually always a trifling drizzle, a light rain heading northeast, with screeching seagulls gathering by Pexinho's grocery. In the schoolyard we played flea-or-louse and it stunk of human effluvium...

But after the fogs, the sky over the islands would open, Teacher would come to the window to smoke, hiding it the while. Off in the distance, there were already reasons for Teacher to keep mum: floating harbor porpoises, and the sails of the crew of the Velhinho, which last winter perished at sea. We'd then go take a swim, leaving our clothes and shoes hidden in the reed hedges.

One day, Abílio and I found it funny that what God gave us was full of goose bumps when we came back from swimming. Our skin, yellowed from the noonday sun, was dripping. More than an hour in the sea (we played hooky from school that day) made our teeth chatter. We dried off by rolling in the sand. Then, still naked and sitting, Abílio threw a fistful of sand at my belly.

"Knock it off!"

Abílio spit at me a little below the belly button.

"Knock it off!"

Smack!: a bit of fishing-net float in exactly the same spot. We were dry, both with taut skin; far off one could hear the chucka-chucka of the flour mill and the hee-hawing of Trajela's donkey. It was low tide, and so you could hear its far-off, sluggish gurgling. So with sticks, we would measure each other and talk about our things. Despite the dead silence of the place, we hardly listened to one another. Our agreed upon interest in nudity was from an even more serious and isolated world, beyond that enclosure of smooth hot sand.

I said that our maid, Malagrida, would blow on the coals as the chiming of our church bells summoned people to prayer. My mother—out.

"What about you?"

"Standing right behind her..."

Each one of us would dig his own hole in the sand with the measuring sticks. We would look sidelong at one another. I saw the whites of Abílio's eye, wet with a gummy sheen:

"Well I..."

"Spill it!"

"I don't have anything to tell. I'm, uh, going with Lucinda." I had not seen him so serious; he had his hand inside the hole, rounding the bottom. Since I said nothing, he threw sand and said: "I have to go to Brazil to earn the money for the ticket for her to join me there."

"So is it good?"... I asked, still stuck on the memory of Malagrida's skirt as she bent down to blow on the coals.

Abílio furrowed his brow and said, facing me fearfully:

"Is *what* good?!" Pause. I felt ashamed! Perhaps happy at the stupid gravity that could probably be read on my face, he then allowed: "We, uh, only when we're married... You want to be my best man?"

We buttoned our suspenders and became friends like never before.

II

In the second grade exam, I scored a pass with honors; Abílio scored a bare pass. How sad! He turned up in long pants, white vest, dona Claudina's *châtelaine* serving as a watch band. Since he bit his nails, the watch was a rest to fill a minute of his ignorance when flustered by "Who was the king who ordered the Leiria Pine Forest planted?"

Mr. Fontes, the teacher from Cinco and member of the examination committee, muttered: "D. Dinis ... D. Dinis!" Abílio, however, who was crazy about bulls, had piped up with "Dom Afonso Quarto, the Brave"—and escaped flunking by a hair's breadth.

Outside, my father and his waited for us alongside Teacher, who said not one word to me; but he did not let Abílio go:

"Fishhead here is going to blow the results for me!"

Abílio's father was ashamed of his son, angry at him, angry at Teacher, feeling sorry for himself and for his son:

"You little scamp! (Look how you have that shirt collar!) And you made me spend a mint, only to see this!"

"Fishhead here is a blot on my record!" the teacher persisted.

Abílio's father had squatted down a bit to wipe away his tears, but pressed

the handkerchief and forced him to blow his nose, without his needing it:

"Hard! ... The darned fool, who was head of the class in decimals! (Come on, boy, don't cry, Teacher's in charge in school, but *I'm* in charge of you!)."

But Abílio was crying in pain, his eyes bloodshot. When they announced the results, Teacher softened.

"Abílio Cardoso de Aguiar, pass. Mateus Queimado Gomes de Meneses, excellent."

My father gave Abílio a kiss before kissing me. Abílio's father solemnly shook my father's hand:

"Ah, senhor Meneses! How heartening to have such a son!"

We were all fairly embarrassed; only Abílio stopped crying. No one knew whether because he was spared from flunking, or for some other reason. In a sudden impulse that consumed him he grabbed my arms and said:

"Lucky for us, eh, Mateus!"

And it was in his eyes that I felt I had passed with honors.

III

From that day on at the Aguiar's only underwear for Abílio was made, with so much care and the gathering of the friends and neighbors of dona Claudina, his mom, that (stupid memory!) it just seemed like the chore of chopping onions (even by the mother's tears!) the night before slaughtering a hog.

I got a tutor for my first year of secondary school; Abílio had started in his father's shop, measuring out oil and wine. But it was not for long: he was going to Brazil to take up with an uncle. In the evenings, if I came into the store, senhor Aguiar would get choked up and let his son off:

"Go run around with Matesinho! Since you didn't have the smarts for school, maybe you've got the back for carrying coffee..." And changing his tone, "You just wait, your uncle won't spare you..."

But Abílio—so grieved by everything, so fond of his father—had become hardened, indifferent, as if cynical. He was much paler, his lips whiter; but the jugular veins in his neck were stiffer, and all along the streets of the village, during our walks, he would sigh and look at me with those eyes in which I had read my true distinction.

It seemed to me, however, that something was now turning our Abílio into "pass with honors" and me into "pass"—and hurray for the old man! I didn't know what it was, nor if it was so: I knew that the uncle from Brazil was his uncle, his name was Garrão and he had a butcher shop in Rio. Abílio showed me his calling papers, a portrait of his uncle with his curly mustache

and the scrambled egg on his waistcoat, and the letter-case his mother had given him for him to put his passport and a scapular of the Sacred Heart. It was held by an elastic band; it was brown and it creaked. Abílio asked me for a *Written Testimony: Token of your devoted friend Mateus Queimado Gomes de Meneses*. And it was then, when he was going to stick my keepsake in the letter-case, that I saw a picture of the girl and—*Heaven above! The Heart of Jesus is with me!*—it was his Lucinda.

IV

That year we grew for the many in which we had only played and gotten into mock fights. My mom rarely went to see dona Claudina; but whenever she did, she would take me, and we would have to see the long johns being made for Abílio. In short, he seemed like a bride the night before tying the knot.

So: we went to their house again, the varnished steamer trunk was already in the hall. I remember clearly that it was yellowed with flea-colored scratches, and I had seen it the night before when it was carried on his back by Augusto Escanchado, who used to carry the caskets that way. Dona Claudina was bathed in tears as she packed long johns. It smelled of starch and of the lemons used to alleviate seasickness.

It was when dona Claudina handed them to my mother so she'd see how heavy they were that senhor Aguiar's footsteps could be heard on the doormat. He bid us good evening. The oil lamp shone sadly in the back of the dining room.

"Did you bring the rope?" dona Claudina asked. Senhor Aguiar silently produced a coil of it. "Won't that be too small?"

"To secure the trunk, it'll do. You just need to tie it crisscross."

Now began the work of packing the immigrant's trousseau in that coffin. Senhor Aguiar lay hold of the lamp; my mother kept putting in layers of clothing, which dona Claudina would compress.

"There's what comes of not being too bright, dona Rosinha..."

"Aguiar! Can't you shut up even today?! Remember that this time tomorrow, our precious angel will be out to sea!"

Aguiar, unflinching, grabbed the lamp:

"He knows full well I have done my duty as a father. But to claim that he's an eagle, when he's just a fishhead, like that smart pants of a teacher had the gall to say to my face... Where is the boy, anyway?"

He thought we were both out in the yard. But Abílio, in the room where

he slept next to his little brother (and you could hear everything through the door), was counting leftover buttons from his button game to give to me. Once, by a fingernail's difference on the slab stones, he had lost to Tiàzé at the end of an unlucky evening, and wound up pulling the buttons off his pants, just to make good on his word! What a beating he got!...

Then he grabbed the old pocket knife (his mother had given him one, with a new blade, for the journey) and insisted I take it. I didn't want to.

"Take it! It's the last thing I'm giving you."

"Your brother could use it..."

"Pirrilha is still too tiny to play with knives. Look at his little hand..."

Pirrilha was sleeping with his mouth open, fist clenched. Abílio's eyes, those pure and suddenly responsible eyes, filled with tears. "Did you hear what my father said?... Take this. It's the last thing old 'fishhead' is going to give you..."

He hid for a second the line of his eyebrows on his wrist, looked at Pirrilha's brow and took me to the kitchen. He was completely colorless, like a bit of smile stuck to a corner of his mouth. But out in the yard, I saw that his lips were trembling and that his thirteen-year-old face was covered in bitterness.

The moon was shining as if it were day, a lively, sonorous moonlight from the formless mass of the sea. The yard was large, with thick-stalked cabbages, and in the back, a Bermuda cedar. We talked for a while...: Francisco da Segunda would fall and hit the water belly first; I began to insist that Tiàzé would go farther in swimming; and Abílio: he insisted that Estoiro was the freestyle champion and could hold his breath longer under water and come up for air without coughing up water. One fond memory after another, we talked about everything: about school and the reed hedges. Abílio had the urge to answer nature's call ("to go on your feet," as they used to say on the island). So as to not break off our talk, he dropped and went right there, in a hole at the foot of the cedar.

"So do you always want me to be your best man, Abílio?"

He wiped himself on a handful of lemongrass leaves and said with an air more pensive than sad:

"Lucinda dumped me when I scored a pass..."

I'm very well, thank you!

João Cachalote spends the evenings sitting at the kitchen window, relaxing. He goes from there to Adrião's general store and the sea. Adrião's store has a sky-rocket laid across the doorway as an advertisement, and in the most wind-blown winter evenings, a closed half-door. It is on these very days that João Cachalote's daughters do not let him go out, and being at the window feels better to him.

"I'm going out for a minute to Adrião's store; be right back..."

"Oh, father! You make yourself comfortable right here! With the weather like this! ..."

Who is speaking this way to João Cachalote, master whaleman, known from the Reef of Newfoundland to the Islands of Baixo, who can plunge the tip of a harpoon behind a mosquito's ear, or grab a bushel of salt by force and hurl it in the face of anyone who calls him a liar?! "Oh, those infernal nags!" João Cachalote thinks, dragging himself to the middle of the kitchen as he leans on his jacaranda walking stick with half an ivory tooth on the tips, and is already struggling again toward the window, undecided whether to keep up the fight and go out anyway or to curl up in the chair at the cat's feet.

There he is, Rise-and-Fall, using the still-warm shawl that the old man had left on the chair, and with his belly running like the motor of the first boats that dared to outdo paddles and rigging... João Cachalote struggles to steer near the cat's domain and never takes his eyes off him. Rise-and-Fall's peacefulness argues for resignation. At first he drives him out amicably; but the cat yawns and lingers, and the old man, remembering that he did not hold his ground sufficiently with his daughters, lets loose one of his hollers like the ones he used to do. The cat slinks off, low to the kitchen floor, and João Cachalote, shawl around his knees, sits down.

The girls are right: it is windy. Every wind-lashing in the street is the power of God! Good Lord! ... A sand-bearing cloud comes to try out the window pane. And how huge the surf is at the fortress when the big cresting waves formed far out can hold no longer, and break! There, sitting under the nice, dry blanket, one is much more comfortable. Besides, the dirty tangled mop of clouds in the sky is threatening rain, a sky João Cachalote knows only too well. At the door of Adrião's store they always asked him:

"Safe weather, João?"

"The wind's coming down east-northeasterly... a bad sign! We got a storm brewing. 'Less that patch there to windward clears up..."

Today is one of those days: sad, steamy, thick. (And João Cachalote flings his jacaranda cane against the wooden floor.) He grimaces with an expression he seems to pull out of his pocket like a mask for just such occasions: annoyance, with his droopy mustache, yellow at the tips from pipe burns, the pipe with which he talks to people sometimes—but deep down he feels in fine spirits and enjoys himself. The sea is there with all its foamy crests, greenish, and from time to time the pounding roar of its waves, arid and unfailing. It is just how he likes it. He reclines in his chair and confirms the outline of the fortress (to see it, look out that way...): kapow!—another wave breaks. The old man's happiness is so secret and large, that although never a word is heard from him, he seems to be applauding: Hurray!

But from Adrião's store comes a whiff of a human throng, a hint of gambling and sugar-cane brandy. It is hardly perceptible. Now it's the old lady who keeps the shawl around her head and comes out of there with a half a bar of soap wrapped up and a glass flask hanging from her little finger, with whisky for her husband. And then peglegged Adrião who comes to the door, spits into the road and turns back inside. João Cachalote stirs in his chair, plans another attack. No, let the girls get angry. "The girls" are three: Teresa, Joaquina and Rosa. The mother, also named Rosa; but the mother has already passed on, regrettably. This is not something that is called by the name of the living nor is it a topic broached in the company of those three young things who do not let him prosper: "Now, father, the black grouper isn't good for you! ..." "Now, father, take your hood, you're going to catch a head cold!" "Now, father, turn up the collar of your coat, mind your throat!" The old man becomes proud, and wriggling in his chair, he imitates each of his daughters in turn; he looks askance to see if any of them are coming; he is all but bellowing, in retaliation for all the vexation: "To hell with you three and all your henpecking!"

Joaquina tiptoes in, watches him attentively for a while, and asks:

"Did you say something? Are the pains in your leg acting up again?"

The old man turns onto his left side, snorts angrily—and the issue is dropped.

Joaquina, "my middle one," runs the house. She molds the bread, cooks, does the wash. Every week she runs a polishing cloth with sweet almond oil over the household articles. Doralice, a thirteen-year-old washerwoman, the niece of their neighbor, Cacória, and Rosa's goddaughter, "my youngest," does the small errands and already has the same arguments as the older ones. Joaquina dared take on the "messy business" of impeding João Cachalote when, at bedtime, she went to the room to put the marble-tipped walking cane into

the corner with the spittoon. It must be put behind the door of the dining room, without fail, with the daughters' three parasols!

José da Praça, who comes into Adrião's store... He noticed him standing at the window; he laughed; he gestured with his head as if to say:

"So, not coming to the store a while today?..."

He replied with a vague gesture, a wave of the hand at the window toward the clouds, as if by way of reply:

"Thanks; but I don't feel like going out, with the weather like this..."

The fact is, he can't... Why can't he at least think honestly? They won't let him! "The girls" scold him. And João Cachalote hears the loud laughter of José da Praça, his best friend, now that both are old and infirm.

They spend hours on end in Adrião's store, talking of courage and "profits." With the weather like it is today, the conversation begs for tales of the sea, trials among the crew on account of downed masts: an Englishman named Jack who took João Cachalote to the red-light district, in St. John's of Newfoundland, and two ladies of the evening sat, one on each of his knees, pulling on his mustache and singing. José da Praça listens to him, wearily, with his large, ugly butcher's hands resting on his kidneys.

Today, let hear whomever wishes to hear, and to hell with the others! He lives all alone with an unmarried son, Quincas, on the Main Square. That is why they call him José da Praça—José of the Square—where he has a house and his butcher shop. But he spent more than twenty years in Bahia, set up in Caquende, and made some good money. He brought his short, half-mulatto son, with his capoeira walk and a little mark on his face, a kind of overripe grape. The girls are crazy about him. What could they see in him? João Cachalote does not know, nor does he care. What he does know is that Quincas hung around his door, waddling, his ox-eye viscous above the overripe grape. João Cachalote—on the lookout... From inquiry to inquiry, he caught Rosa flushed with embarrassment quickly leaving the window. He needed nothing else to act...

"Senhor Quincas, I'm a good friend of your father's, but if you don't sweep the street in front of the house I'm going to bust your snoot!"

Quincas sized up the old man: João Cachalote got around hunched over, supporting himself step by step on his little jacaranda walking stick mounted in marble. He had wrinkled skin and crow's feet around his eyes. But the line from his brow to his chin—"I'll bust your snoot!"—was a sign he would really do it. Quincas remembered his father; he remembered his beloved

Joana from Travessa do Ourives; he remembered that his bones were still intact, and gradually backed off, grudgingly... Rosa got really thin, but little by little forgot Quincas's overripe grape. Naturally! That's the way of it.

These things pop into João Cachalote's head once in a while, there in front of Adrião's store. In the distance the fortress can be seen, with the cannon serving as cornerstones, cannonbreeches on up. Buried in the sand-and-balsam-covered clay, full of rock barnacle and blight, they no longer look like real cannon, from the time of the Coast Guard! On the high wall that runs down the dock—the big old ring to which they tie up the luggers. It was there he moored the American sloop's dinghy to take it aboard to escape conscription. With the guard nearby, Broca (wearing a frown, quarrelsome over the tax on fish...), how could he climb aboard without them seeing him? It was then that he came up with the plan to go down the searock with a bundle of clothes on his back, hurling himself from the Amoreira fountain into the water—and voilà! He would swim to the dinghy that had cunningly changed direction. He would leave behind the bluff of the pine-covered island. There on a cliff-top, on a little bypath—his father's form, waving goodbye...

The evening is growing darker. It is on account of the weather, becoming overcast; but daylight can still fall farther down the chromatic scale before sunset. Behind the house, Rosa is singing:

*I went out on the high seas,
I made it halfway, and stopped...*

Drafted cat! Won't you believe that while he seems to be caressing his master with its paw, he's actually sharpening its claws on his hand?! João Cachalote licks a wound on his thumb, a scratch of trifling blood. That is the finger he uses to grasp his cane, for the trip from his house to the store. In the old days, his thumb had a different use, that's for sure: to get a firm grip on the whaling spear, to aim and sink it. A road of blood united the sperm whale to men, attentive to the line tub, fearing a kink. He smelled his sweaty shirt and the burning line:

"Hard astern!"

Ah! Time and fingers! Good-for-nothing whalemén! ("Shoo, cat!")

Just then they lit the little Espartel lighthouse. Lighthouse!... A propped-up candle that every day drinks a sip of kerosene! The lighthouse was the one on the northern end of Betefete,² which shone its flashing light on the vast reef, the great white broom that would sweep away the cutter's hull...

"How do you feel this morning?"

"I'm very well, thank you, you son of a bitch!"

The question and reply were in English.

João Cachalote longs for America and for the car that took him from New England to California. He hears rifle shots in the night from his chair. He has the shawl up over his knees—and it is as if he were shaking the placer from the lode in a skimmer, when he was in the gold mines. Now, he does not even sift the hard-shelled wheat he gets from Trunqueiras, from the country of his holy mother, who is with God.

Teresa, "my oldest girl," is there with Joaquina and Rosa's little god-daughter panning in the grain storage room. Where is Rosa? (he suddenly remembers Quincas' swaying caipira):

"Rosa!" he cries, in a complaining tone.

His voice carries, further than necessary.

"Father...?" sings a voice from the sky.

And a wispy young girl of twenty comes lolling in, all dressed Carmo-style as if she were taking vows. Ah! ... (João Cachalote thinks behind the folds of his forehead): this one no longer needs a cane to defend her from Quincas and the like, with that belt around her waist, run through the bone belt-loop.

"Did you wish to see me?" the daughter asks, after a silence in which the measure of each is taken: she smilingly, he cunningly.

"To *see* you?! I want you to get this shawl off my knees—all it does is make the cat make me nervous..."

Rosa leaves with the shawl folded and a maternal smile on her slender face.

She looks more and more like her mother, God preserve her! She spends her mornings in the church listening to the priest and singing, from under her hooded veil:

In heaven, in heaven, in heaven

I will see you all one day!

Later, with the church empty, she fills with the dampness of the shrines and places white lilies all around the saints. Her skin is like the queen-of-Hungary roses from the backyard orchard. There will not be a nose in this world to smell it, God willing!

João Cachalote is no poet, and he hardly knows how to sign his name on the dotted line; but truly he dotes on "his youngest!" And he stopped to think

that, if he has Rosa and some modest blessings, it was the other Rosa, whom God took, who gave him everything. Blessings and three daughters, God knows. If only they let him go a while to the store...

Now night has fallen, wholly and deep. The cat escaped; and since there still is no lamplight in the house, things are perceived more clearly, things that by day or with the wicks burning are not heard from: roaches, loose floorboards, a seed that a hasty rat left behind in a hole. João Cachalote no longer can see if the sea is green or if it has foaming crested waves, but he feels its great salty pulsing and just now saw its intense phosphorescence. In Adrião's store they have just lit the acetylene burner. They are playing cards. The old man sees only a beam of light that sweeps the doorstep; but he knows they are in a card game; he feels the pressure of a queen hidden in his left hand; an ace of hearts leading a hand explodes in his ear.

On board the *Free Town* play was heavy—half a dollar. Jack, to his right, would cut; the one who had the touch was the black man from Kentucky, a kitchen worker. The man discarded diamonds; the game proceeded. In the last cards played—the manille of hearts falling from the black man's hand! João Cachalote feels as though he's being lifted up on the prow of a whaler, and he's busting the Kentuckian in the chops with the full force of his fist. A knife flashed: "Shut up! Son of a bitch!"

Jack gave the man a blow to the head, until Captain Matthew's whistle and smack broke it up.

Bolstered by his good memory, João Cachalote sat upright. Despite the jacaranda cane, which he never let go of, his steps are unsteady: he is staggering somewhat ... sailing close to the wind until reaching the hallway ... from the hallway to the door out, which he opens and closes behind him.

In St. John's of Newfoundland they played "best," at the house of some girls from one of the port's hidden streets. Once he went there and Jack placed two of them on his lap, one sitting on each leg. The girl on his right knee (and the old man goes down a step) was a tough redhead, well built, freckled... The girl on his right knee...

A tremendous din on the stairs: a body falling, and a stick, tumbling in a jumble.

"Rosa! Rosa!" Teresa and Joaquina cry at the barn door. "Come here, Father was going to the store and fell down the stairs!"

Gold! Gold!

The emigration of the Rosas, my family, to America (John Derosa, an American subject, relates) is tied to the discovery of gold in the mines of California in the long-ago month of January, 1848. Only when a great urologist whom I consulted in Paris discovered that I had a bit of cystic sand could I feel within me, by a strange association, the emotions felt by James Marshall, the New Jersey carpenter, when he saw, glittering among veins of quartz in the flanks of the Sierra Nevadas, the first mysterious nuggets. From that day on, when I suffer a relapse, I call to mind the Edenic times in which John Sutter was the undisputed king of the lonesome spaces of the Far West, at Sutter's Fort, receiving the homage of workers and fortune-seekers and hearing the bleating of millions of stray rams crowned with wool and antlers. Marshall was overseeing the construction of a mill on an affluent of the American River when the first veins of gold burst up at his feet. How amazing! The Puritans were still living in pairs back in New England way and California's sprawling acres were strewn with flowers. Without rails, or the drunkenness of machinery; only a magnificent, harsh natural silence. The Sacramento Valley stretched out in a dizzying panorama like a fathomless thickness which only a few chosen souls dared explore. How I would have liked to see that pedant Chateaubriand go in there!

But the news of gold traveled fast. San Francisco (slightly larger than Horta) emptied out. No one wanted to hear about lowly jobs, about life measured out in tasks that paid a pittance. So shepherds, surgeons, peaceful, fussy judges hastened to go dig over the gravelly deposits of the backwater.

At first no one wanted to believe the hearsay of sorts that spread from the Pacific shore to an astonished Baltimore; but soon they saw that the riverbed sands were a-glitter, and their hands began to tremble and contract. Gold! Gold! ...

After the Rocky Mountains let the good news through, early American adventurers and the crews of ships voyaging on the east coast sped west. It was this horde that people today see in films breaking pitch-pine chairs in saloon fights, and which Abraham Lincoln kept in line with a knock on the head and a blow. The crew would revolt. And around Cape Horn, across Panama, from all compass points, California filled with gold-hungry miners.

My concern with this exodus, as the American great-grandson of penniless Portuguese, is not its sudden explosiveness, nor its picturesque rarity, but

the great expectations of those who were headed there and the resistance they were met with from wild animals and the snow that crowns the Rockies. Most of these wretches wound up face down in the mountains with the early symptoms of cholera, and all of them sunk in a sea of greed and despair, the lure destiny baited so that these regions might be settled. Only a precious few would strike upon an ingot of gold mixed in with the blood of entrails—and they would never let it go!

That was the lot of my great-uncle on my father's side, António Machado da Rosa, a carpenter in his beginnings. I came to find here, on my visit to Terceira, a nearly ninety-year-old man, Ti João Fura-Olho, who met my uncle when he returned from his travels. He described him to me in stammers, all gums when he spoke, but colorful and expressive. My uncle was a herculean, ill-tempered man, who had been born in Vila da Praia in 1821. He was eight when a gang of adventurers from Havre and Plymouth came to settle on the island—roughly around the time of our first train tracks on the Baltimore line, and the rise of Andrew Jackson to President of the United States.

They were—from what Fura-Olho told me and from what I could glean from some pamphlets backing the cause of a certain D. Miguel—a down-and-out people, Freemasons of the Scottish rite and—I imagine—involved in the July Monarchy conspiracies and other actions by the French Jacobins in Lafayette's party. They agitated for a Constitution and an idle Queen, filling the island villages with desolation and dread. My uncle, then eight, saw a naval attack on Vila da Praia by ill-armed cutters; and with other boys his age, after the squadron's defeat, would amuse himself by rolling iron cannonballs through the streets and forming battalions with reed sabers and old tin cans. Thus did Miguel de Unamuno write biography in Bilbao during the Carlist wars.

The only serious effect of that political adventure was to bring ships more frequently and fan the flames of the young boys' desire to emigrate. But strict laws forbade leaving the island before the age of recruitment, and my uncle António Machado, at twenty, had to flee in a barrel in an American sailboat used for contraband and sperm whale hunting. He spent two years as a deck-hand between Terra Nova and Portsmouth, eating ship's rations and catching lashings from the captains. If the ship took up fresh water in a Portuguese port, my uncle would hide out in the hold, and would only emerge from his burrow when they would put off, dripping with the salty brine, his skin all cracked.

Ti João Fura-Olho told me that my uncle had tried several times to leave the crew; but the lugger's captain, a hard, cynical slave trader, told him he was

beholden three years of service without pay for having gotten caught on board, thus spared from paying with his life.

My uncle would tell terrible stories of pirates and traffickers from the Gold Coast, who hovered around the on-board conversations, and it happened that, hearing them from the mouth of the old man at third or fourth hand, they seemed to me at the same time experienced by the specter of António Machado da Rosa, by slaves in my reminiscences from books, by Fura-Olho and by me. The most entertaining held an authentic liveliness from my uncle's experience: they were his adventures when the ship would take up fresh water.

The vagabonds disembarked. My uncle was the object of special surveillance by a repulsive, drunken Canadian behemoth. His name was Jack. And as he would go down the squalid streets, he would terrorize the poor women with his brutal lust and his colossal size.

They were anchored off St. John's of Newfoundland when the rumor of gold in California spread. Jack had not gotten as drunk that day; and, at my uncle's prompting, as they regrouped on board, he bound the slaver's hands and feet and set a course for Halifax. Having distributed the contents of the ship's strongbox equally among the fierce crew, they penetrated into the American wilds toward El Dorado.

Ti João Fura-Olho tells these tidbits with a great store of details and effusion, which are reflected in my tale. But the integrity of his memory, his kind little eyes and his thumb flat as a leaf (which accompanies things held in high regard and is raised to show intention), do not seem to belong to someone who never went net-fishing beyond Ilhéu da Mina.

He has a store in Porto Novo. It is what he calls a shop, "American style," a little greengrocery open in the very hovel in which he lives, with a junk pile out front and a dyer's weed wood pyre. The chimney looks like it was made with two playing cards—and, in fact, it seems some gambling sometimes goes on in there. In the evening he smokes a grey tangle of roast dried stickleback; and on the oven's two or three slabs, scaled mackerel is dried on cane mats. A balsam fig props up the sticks in the air.

Ti João lives off the wine and whiskey he pours at ten or twenty *réis* down the throats of the local fishermen. He has his tavern stock put aside in a raised platform in the middle of the house, which a thin whitewashed partition separates from the dark alcove. Sheets of tobacco hang from the ceiling and a bunch of hobbles. There he lives and works.

The old man is an early riser ("I rise to my feet early," as he says). He eats a dried stickleback with a chunk of corn bread, he swigs a bit of wine, and stretches out a handful of rushes in front of him, braiding long ropes that he sells to the winegrowers' fruit press operations there in that region of lava beds. Then he helps with the nets in the shallow in exchange for a handful of bristling sardines, and he himself cuts the collard greens for dinner, which he cooks in a big pot used to boil albacore.

Every few days he goes to Vila to fill the whiskey jug. On the way back, there are the customers curled up in the stack of dyer's weed, waiting for their dram of booze. Ti João would dig out from deep in his pants a big key strung on with a length of string with a conch shell. The door to the shack squeaks on its hinges and snaps off. The bar fills with the noise of voices and the stubborn fumes of cigarettes and alcohol. Then the stories come out.

Another time, when talking about my uncle António's adventures in California, he said to me:

"Wait a minute."

He opened a trap door that leads to a hole in the foundation of the hovel—exposing the island's broken, tortured ground—and disappeared down it a moment. He popped his head back out, clutching a piece of cardboard:

"This picture," he said, wiping the iodized stain with his finger, "was given to me by Mr. António Machado da Rosa, one afternoon when he came into my shop. It's from his shiftless free-roaming days, afore he had the cattle ranch forty-five miles outside Los Angeles."

I took it from his hand eagerly. He was a massive figure, a hulking, powerful man with bootlegs up to the knee, stitched vest, revolver in his waistband and cowboy hat. In the back of the portrait, grimy from contact with Fura-Olho's fingers, the following could be read:

Antonio Machado da Rosa, head of the team that camped in the county of Lower Lake during the month of August 1850. He extends this to his friend João as a token of his friendship. Ribeira Secca, Ilha Tesayra, Assores.

I looked away from the aureole around the daguerreotype and closed my eyes, somewhat disturbed. I recalled the Lakeport hotel, the capital of those distant lands where I spend the second night with Helen after the kidnapping... I had just covered the distance from Lovetown to Lakeport on a cowboy's sorrel. Fearful, moved, I squeezed her waist and the pistols hanging in

their holsters and indifferently felt the purity of Helen's haunches in the deer-antler butts of my weapons and the cold hardness of the holsters against my love's flesh.

The horse rode almost unbridled and we had to ride at full bore for six hours before reaching Lakeport. Night fell over the dense forest, and great black cumulus clouds threatened to burst on us. I dismounted at a stop on the toll road to adjust the curb-bit of the bridle and noticed one of the horse-shoes was clattering, held on by a single nail. How could we go on? We then saw in the distance a giant bonfire that bloodied the horizon. Could it be a ranch working late, or a camp of gangsters?

Helen, trembling, asked to turn back; the horse, frothing, sweat running off him, opened and closed his nostrils. Wrenching off the horseshoe and the last nail in the hoof, I headed for the signal in the direction of the torchlight, ready for anything; and as I dismounted with my sacred cargo, I came upon a gang of hunters squatting around a campfire, where they were roasting the head of a buffalo, throwing the bones to a pack of hounds. The slough from the animal's horns, dripping fat and blood, smelled of burnt shavings. A cowboy, risking tearing out the buffalo's nails while still hot, scorched the bristle-wool that was coming undone from his shirt. In short, we were in a real halfway house—a true outpost in the lonesome spaces of California. I—or my uncle António Machado da Rosa, pioneer of the Far West? ... Oh, time!"

"Ti João," I said suddenly to Fura-Olho: "Did my uncle António spend much time in that way of life?"

"You know he did, sir... with a fearsome rifle! Yer uncle would tell that he'd got his from a Kentucky rancher, tobacco country. But the best 'uns were the Mexicans' from Texas, which had horn inlay designs burnt into 'em. With a powder-flask, you know? Not a buff'lo nor a goat all around Califo'nia that didn't jump when that scoundrel would take aim at it!"

"Can Ti João lend me this picture?"

"But don't lose it on me, for Pete's sake! I'd sooner lose a ransom in gold! A poor man like me is worth more than merely what he can grab, God knows!" And glancing at the shack, his throat tightening, he continued: "These straw mats, the whiskey, this junk... ? Things you buy and sell! ... That's all! ... Now the reputation, respect, a person's influence, that's something else! Wow. And friends like Mr. António Machado da Rosa, men of importance, nowadays. Go see for yourself! Every one a good-for-nothing! Am I right or not?!" And a furtive tear ran down Fura-Olho's cheek.

Giving him assurances I would return the picture after having it copied in the city of Bico de Pena, I asked him for a ten-*réis* shot of whiskey for the two of us and for him to sit with me in the doorsill and enjoy the cool air. It was an afternoon with sooty skies, an easy, lazy island day. Ilhéu da Mina, to the south, looked like a fish-pie cut with a shovel. To the northeast, the white shoals of Forte da Ponta do Cavalo. A girl ran by on the toe-tips of her clogs, and asked:

“Do you sell tallow, Ti João?”

“Go get it at Faísca!”

And, letting my gaze follow that sandy little breast, which called to my mind that of Helen fainted in my arms during our escape—I plunged into the silence of the sea and of the suddenly wise old man, as if they were the very source and root of what I had come there to find.

Notes

¹ These three stories, in the order in which they are included here, are based on the edition: *Obras Completas*, Vol. VII, *Paço do milhafre, O mistério do paço do milhafre* (Lisbon: Imprensa Nacional/Casa da Moeda, 2002). We gratefully acknowledge the publisher for copy-right permission.

² Azorean whalemens term for New Bedford. —Trans.

Kelly Washbourne (PhD, University of Massachusetts Amherst) is a poet, translator from Spanish and Portuguese, and Assistant Professor in the Institute for Applied Linguistics at Kent State University in Ohio. His forthcoming publications include *After-Dinner Conversation*, a critical translation and introduction of *De sobremesa* by Colombian writer José Asunción Silva, the first *fin-de-siècle* novel from Spanish America to appear in English (in press, University of Texas Press's Pan American Literature in Translation series). Though he has worked predominantly from Spanish, he has translated and annotated the Brazilian epic poem *Cobra Norato* by Raul Bopp for the journal *Brasil/Brazil*, cultural theory by Roberto Schwarz, and Amazonian poetry for *Amazonian Literary Review*. He has done research in Amazonia and is a graduate of the Monterey Institute of International Studies. Email: rwashbou@kent.edu