

**José Sasportes. *Os dias contados*. [With illustrations.]
Lisbon: Dom Quixote, 2004. Print.**

George Monteiro

"Chekhov's days are numbered," wrote Iollos, the correspondent for *The Russian Gazette*, to his editor, Sobolevsky. In this novella, Sasportes, exercising the romancer's prerogative, sympathetically extends the writer's numbered days by prolonging his life for another half year or so beyond the historical date of the Russian writer's death.

The idea is simple enough. This extraordinary gift of life extending from 2 July 1904 to 24 January 1905 has been the direct if unexpected result of the beneficial effect of champagne. When Chekhov's doctors take a final drink with their dying colleague—"German and Russian medical etiquette dictated that a doctor at a colleague's deathbed, when all hope was gone, should offer champagne," reports Chekhov's biographer, Donald Rayfield—the writer takes a turn for the better. He recovers his sense of his "body"—what in the professional work of the physician-writer Oliver Sacks is called "proprioception"—an individual's sense of his body as his own. With this renewed lease on corporeal life, Sasportes's patient will medicate with champagne for the rest of his days.

This "posthumous" half year presents the novelist with something of a tabula rasa. There do not exist for him, of course, the impediments of facts established in letters or diaries. The "life" can now be imagined to go almost anywhere. Surprisingly then, apart from two or three daytrips, Sasportes's Chekhov remains ensconced in Badenweiler where he has come for treatment and to die. In fact, he does nothing remarkable and nothing remarkable happens to him—beyond, perhaps, the sex his nurse gives him (an echo here, possibly, of Catherine and Frederic in Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*) or, at the end of his stay, the opportunity to write his own obituary.

The remarkable thing is that during the months added to Chekhov's life there are no climactic or even particularly dramatic events, new ways of thinking, gusts of wisdom, or bursts of uplifting spirituality. No new resolution, no change in character. If Chekhov comes to an enhanced appreciation

of the writings of Seneca and some insights into painting and photography, his posthumous life, taken on balance, seems to be little more than a continuation of what had been. He meets new people, who are very much like the ones he has known in the past. Perhaps the high point in the narrative is that when he is given a dog, he names it Champagne. Yet it reads like a deftly written parable, the last line of which is “Os dias estão contados.” To which the folk might well add: “e este já vai na conta.”

Jorge Martins's line-drawings are spare but engaging—just about right for Sasportes's well-executed Chekhovian story.

George Monteiro's books include *The Presence of Camões* (1996), *The Presence of Pessoa* (1998), *Stephen Crane's Blue Badge of Courage* (2000), *Fernando Pessoa and Nineteenth-Century Anglo-American Literature* (2000), and *Iberian Poems*, translations from the poetry of Miguel Torga (2005). Forthcoming are bilingual editions of Pedro da Silveira's *Poemas ausentes* and *Selected Poems* by Jorge de Sena. He has written the prefaces for two books by Charles Reis Felix, *Through a Portagee Gate*, an autobiography, and *Da Gama, Cary Grant, and the Election of 1934*, a novel, both published by the Center for Portuguese Studies and Culture, University of Massachusetts Dartmouth in its Portuguese in the Americas Series. He has in press two other books *Love and Fame in Fernando Pessoa*, and *Elizabeth Bishop's Brazil and Elsewhere*.