

## Portuguese Short Takes: Three Storytellers in Portugal's Post-Revolution Years

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**Abstract.** How does literature map a nation's issues—namely, in the Portuguese case, the colonial war, women's role, and gay rights? The novel has been fiction's most successful form for the last two centuries, yet a case may be argued for a more compact form to convey modern-day conflicts. Joyce Carol Oates says that short stories are “a form ideally suited for the expression of the imagination.” Mário de Carvalho, Teresa Veiga, and Miguel Vale de Almeida wrote stories that, by the way they deal with issues and their mastery of the form, help to map contemporary Portugal.

### Establishing a canon for the short story

Anyone slightly familiar with publishing is aware of it: though readers have less and less time to read—given the huge competition from other media—longer novels still tend to be more successful than short story collections. And even great short story masters like John Cheever or Truman Capote are better known for their longer writings, Raymond Carver and Jorge Luis Borges being rare cases of authors who gained high appraisal while writing only stories.

Portuguese post-1974 fiction is no exception, with Saramago's, Cardoso Pires's, Bessa Luis's, and Lobo Antunes's novels as the best-known (and deservedly so) pillars of the country's literary prose in the democracy years.

However, short stories are important. Joyce Carol Oates considers them “a form ideally suited for the expression of the imagination” (*Oxford Book*

of *American Short Stories* 4). It could be said that an incisive short story can be like a knife whose cut disembowels before one even notices. The writers mentioned knew it too, for without exception, as a kind of sabbatical between writing their novels, over the years they often published stories in magazines and in major newspapers' summer editions.

Admittedly, writing a good short story is easier than writing a good novel. Size matters, as Russian critic Boris Eickenbaum acknowledged in 1925—for size in a literary work is a measure of breath, rhythm, melody, that is to say, form. A novel demands a long stance that is not for the meek, even in this era when from beneath every stone the unexpected writer seems to pop up. However, the same cannot be said about a great story or an outstanding novella. The same goes with poetry: to write a good poem may be in anyone's grasp, but to write a great poem is another matter. And if one were to try to design a canon of important Portuguese stories that would trace a map of Portugal's last four decades, one might look for other writers than the usual suspects.

### Why 1974–2001?

Prose fiction somehow deals with reality. It has been said that fiction searches for an epoch's inner truth, free as it is to avoid the lies of factual events. It takes its pulse from real life and reflects its tensions like a violinist tuning the strings of his instrument. Thus, a canon of Portuguese short fiction should deal both with the work on the language—the very key to literature—and the texts' connection with the outside world they somehow represent. Paul Ricoeur elegantly defined literature as “the quasi-world built by interactive literary texts” (*Du texte à l'action* viii), and when one talks about national literatures we picture the relationship between these two semi-worlds, the one made by texts and the one defined by geographical, historical, metaphysical, and mythical borders.

25 April 1974 is a defining moment in Portuguese twentieth-century history. It ought to be a very acceptable landmark to any sensible critic. Where should we put the other landmark? Maybe 11 September 2001. One may argue that the latter is not of such a national importance as the former. Then again, one may also argue that if April 1974 sent the Portuguese on a quest for democracy and its promised benefits—freedom, the abolishment of censorship, wealth, optimism—9/11 hurt the perception of democracy's overwhelming power in more than one sense. To say the least, security seems nowadays a more common word than freedom. Another argument in defense of this

paradigm: if Salazar could say “We are proudly alone,”<sup>1</sup> joining democracy’s family (namely joining the EEC in 1986) meant “alone nevermore.”

### Censorship

Jacinto Prado Coelho points out censorship as one of the main traits of Portuguese literature’s character—not only during Salazar’s dictatorship (1926–1974) but also during other regimes through about four centuries, with the religious *Index*, the Royal Censors, and so on (*Originalidade da literatura portuguesa*). It may go as well for any regime—it remains as a pressure on Portuguese literature. Nonetheless, print was very much alive, and writers tried to do their best. Only censorship was more than present, it was *present*. Writers got so used to seeing their books apprehended, or fearing that, they learned to deal with it by writing between the lines, insinuating more than expressing directly, for fear of imprisonment.

This state of affairs leads to at least two things: the omnipresence, in writers’ minds, of the censor (not necessarily the fear, but at least a sort of annoying, sometimes exciting, background noise), and the longing for foreign reading material to learn from. In fact, since the eighteenth century *o estrangeiro* was something more than a daring place filled with cultures and artifacts not fully understood—it was a world filled with promise, where ideas circulate freely. In a Western world too sure of its “superiority,” Portuguese (and, among them, Portuguese artists and intellectuals) tended to be something other than xenophobes, they were—they still are—enthusiastically xenophiles.

In literary terms, this means being open to outside influences. An interesting project would be, for instance, to compare the formative readings by American and Portuguese writers. Naturally, this could be extended to other nationalities. In a less developed form, it is easier to do so than one would expect, simply based on a *corpus* of interviews from printed sources in a given time. For the moment, this unproven assumption should be enough: Portuguese writers learn their trade not only from the writers who forged/formed the Portuguese language and mind frame, but—in a variable though significant amount—from outside sources. For instance, one can trace in Saramago the Colombian García Márquez’s influence more than that of any Portuguese writer. As for Lobo Antunes it would be Faulkner; for Mega Ferreira, the Argentinean Borges; for Diniz Machado, American hard-boiled detective stories and cinema *noir*. This is not a problem, just a hint at the variety of influences on Portuguese writers—which, somehow curiously, might lead to a

lack of communication among them. One of the not-so-beneficial side effects of this nearly automatic search for other literatures leads, sometimes, to an under-nourishment of mutual references.

### A canon

A canon is not much more than a proposal—a tentative reader. If the reader's organizer(s) to do their best, in the most honest and informed way, it is up to others to check whether that very reader is useful or not. When one deals with controversial canons of contemporary fiction, like that by Harold Bloom (*Western Canon*), disagreement and disappointment are inevitable: Does anyone agree with Bloom's choices? That's not the point, though. The point is, in fact, two points: (1) a canon is a useful tool to organize thought about literature; (2) thanks to Mr. Bloom's appraisal I happened to be able to read Cormac McCarthy long before Oprah found him. And I'm grateful to Mr. Bloom for that.

Thinking about a Portuguese short story reader, what texts from which authors would one choose? Would such a book be coherent? What would be the criteria? But, of course, literary quality, what else? The problem is that literary quality is hard to grasp. And although literary quality can have its judges, its award juries, its prestigious publishing houses, the so-called literary circuit (Bourdieu would call it the "literary economic system" [*Rules of Art*]), it is still a ghost being chased by fools, especially when one tries to find it in contemporary texts, failing to obey a simple mathematical axiom: the member of a group cannot contain the very group to which it belongs. If we translate "contain" by "evaluate objectively" the analogy becomes clearer. Of course, the alternative—that scholars only devote their time to texts from the past—would not only be sensible, it would also be unfair and pernicious. Unfair, because living artists should not pay for others' limitations, pernicious because literary studies follow Sisyphus's lesson: to keep trying, even if the possibility of success is unlikely.

Such a book should be based on a machine—what sort of machine? As always, it would be the reader's organizer(s)'s choice, plus its literary value: each story's connection both with Portuguese language and literature, how it adds to what has been written before. But I'd say each story should also be considered by the way it addresses Portuguese reality as well as the human condition. This could be asserted because, although it "represents a concentration of imagination" (Oates 5), a story also answers (echoes, distorts,

subverts) reality—it just can't help it. Thus, Portuguese stories to be inserted in such a canon should also be considered by the way they report (in the very largest sense of the word) Portuguese themes—in one way or another. Of course one cannot exclude novelists. But one is not compelled to include them on account of their success as novelists.

My reader is still a work-in-progress, but I know about a few stories (and their authors) I'd like to include and can reasonably justify. For instance, stories by Guilherme de Melo, Eduardo Pitta, Lídia Jorge, Teolinda Gersão, Pedro Paixão, Inês Pedrosa, Hélia Correia, Luísa Costa Gomes. Or outsiders like Adília Lopes's narrative poem "Autobiografia":

Os meus gatos  
Gostam de brincar  
Com as minhas baratas (72).  
[My cats  
like to play  
with my cockroaches.]

From Lobo Antunes I would choose one of his *crónicas*, namely, the one about a day at the mall, a tiny tale where he catches the essence of Portuguese suburban life in modernity. The same goes for Miguel Esteves Cardoso, one of the pillars of Portuguese contemporary writing, influencing, both in a good and a not-so-good way, generations of promising writers with his humorous and British approach to Portuguese culture.

The concept of this reader would be, "one author, one shot," a difficult task, for some writers have a world of wonderful stories—Borges for one. Still, it can be done—it has been done. Although not always fair, it allows us to hear many voices. Afterwards, we can look more closely at authors who got our attention and find out more about their work. In early Japanese Karate, championship matches were decided by *shobbu ippon*—one strike that in real combat could be deadly. (Of course, one has to imagine that.) I rather like the concept applied to writing: one tale to make the difference. Actually, one should be enough—and if our mind is aroused by a story in such a way that we want to look up other works by its writer, so much the better. In a way, any anthology implies the possibility of hypertext: connections and ramifications born from each text.

### Reality calls: Three outstanding storytellers

The three authors discussed below are not necessarily the most important. Their stories, however, are particularly interesting both from a strictly literary point of view and the way they deal with reality calls, i.e., contemporary issues. Mário de Carvalho confronts the Portuguese colonial war (1961–1974), Teresa Veiga and Miguel Vale de Almeida approach gender issues. Veiga tends to picture a woman's fate as a trap set up before her time and into which eventually she will fall, mainly when born in a provincial area. Almeida approaches with both accuracy and sensitivity the social and intimate implications of gay life.

In Mário de Carvalho the plot device is the backbone of his work: the composition is there, perfectly set, before the writing takes place. The same follows for Almeida's work. And after the frame is set, the writer only has to insert the words in their most appropriate places—fill in the blanks, as it were.

Teresa Veiga is more serpentine. Composition is there, as well as structure—but it is not the main thing. Veiga is about the voice, usually a cynical young woman's voice—like a grown-up Alice with an M before the A.

As for Miguel Vale de Almeida, he uses a clear, straightforward style, and he is definitely the least literary of the three, his body of work being mainly in anthropology.

We have then: (a) a powerful tale about Portuguese colonial war on several fronts (Angola, Moçambique, Guiné, Cabo Verde, Timor, S. Tomé); (b) a dreamlike tale about a woman's coming-of-age; (c) a sharp glimpse at gay subjects in post-democratic Portugal.

### Mário de Carvalho

Mário de Carvalho (Lisbon, 1944) is one of Portugal's best-loved writers—by readers as well as by other writers. In fact, one could say it would be difficult (though not impossible, as human nature obliges) to find a reader who doesn't have warm feelings towards Carvalho and his work. This sort of information, negligible for long-dead artists, has its value when one knows how personal relations affect publishing success, mainly in small countries where the literary circles are yet smaller. Carvalho's work is respected, has found its readers across a thirty-year career, and has been the object of critical appraisal and the recipient of some important awards.

"Era uma vez um alferes" is not only a brilliant story, it also deploys a very simple, effective plot device that becomes a powerful metaphor about Portugal's colonial war: a soldier steps onto a landmine and can't move.

If it were a play we could call this the first act. Then—beginning of second act—comes a superior, a captain, who helps him endure the wait until help comes. The *alferes* is an ensign, a junior officer rank, and constitutes the part of the army who actually triggered the 1974 Carnation Revolution in Portugal: non-professional low-grade officers (i.e., young men with college studies, a plus in Salazar's Portugal) sent to the battlefield as cannon fodder, while the professionals knew better.<sup>2</sup> As for his superior, a captain (and a career officer), he is not only loyal to the regime but also a man reputed for his cruelty. However, in the course of events (or non-events) he shows both unexpected bravery and compassion, as he is willing to help his fellow in trouble.

We then have a young officer—unwilling, in spite of himself, for we'll come to know he fled to Paris at a certain moment of his youth—leading his men across the savannah, when suddenly he hears a click and realizes he's stepped on a mine. Now, like Portugal in that war, he can't move, neither forward or backwards. The only thing he can do is wait, wait for the mine brigade. But, to his surprise (and his comrades'), it's not the mine experts who come but a captain, this one a professional officer, known for his rigidity, his cruelty, his allegiance to the regime, his cold distance towards the soldiers. However, surprisingly enough, this captain now appears nearly shockingly agreeable: “—Então, nosso alferes, um contratempo irritante, hã? C'est la guerre [...]” (114) [“—My, my, lieutenant, what do we have here? Quite an upset, hmm?”].

One does not need to be an expert in irony to see the ambiguity in these words. Three possible meanings come to mind: (a) the captain is not aware yet of how serious the situation is; (b) he is trying to lighten things up, as a doctor would do to cheer up a patient's spirits; (c) he is, for some reason, teasing the *alferes*.

However, one doesn't know why, and both soldiers and reader may admire his courage. Though slightly annoying, he seems fearless and genuinely willing to help the lieutenant. Maybe he's not so bad, after all. He volunteers to keep the younger officer company. *We'll both blow up, if it comes to that*, says his behavior. He's even compassionate, as if saying: *Hold my hand, soldier: do not despair*.

The *alferes* has trouble balancing the captain's presence with what he has heard about him before. Flashbacks and the present situation intertwine, never losing the tension. It is a compact tale, in spite of this double-sided structure.

Anti-personnel landmines were a soldier's—or, after the war, a child's—nightmare, especially in Angola. In 1996, Angola was labeled the country with the largest amount of such mines in the world. One of the rumors about

Princess Diana's death had to do with such reality—her fight against these mines forgotten in Angolan soil long after the colonial war ended.

For these anti-personnel mines didn't necessarily kill, they could take off a limb or two.

From this departure point—stepping on a mine—unfolds the rest of the story. Through flashbacks, the life of the lieutenant as a college student, his flight to Paris where he lived in exile, and a portrait of a young man as a clumsy rebel in a country that seems like a *huis clos*. Back to the *present* moment, nothing has changed. The soldiers are clueless until the captain arrives.

Thus we have two main characters: the *alferes* and the captain, whose interaction is somehow like that of Othello and Iago. And two secondary characters; no, not the medic or the other soldiers (I'd call them the chorus, as in Greek tragedies). The two secondary characters, actually both invisible, are Africa (its life, its "freedom fighters," its richness, its beauty, its strength, its inhabitants) and the landmine.

[O] alferes, uma vez mais, deu-se a profanar um poema entredentes. Eram versos de Sédar Senghor que gerações sucessivas de oficiais universitários haviam virado do avesso: *J'écoute le chant de l'Afrique lointaine et le chant de ton sang [...]. J'écoute le sang de l'Afrique putaine et le chant de ton sein [...]*. (99)

[(O)nce again, the *alferes* found himself mumbling a poem. Verses by Sédar Senghor twisted by generations of officers with a college education: *I listen to the song of far away Africa and the song of your blood (...). I listen to the blood of fucking Africa and the song of your tit (...)*.]

This version of original verses by Senegal's president-poet and independence hero, Leopold Sengar Senghor—the only mark of a black African in the story—appear without translation. No need. In the 70s and 80s, a cultured Portuguese—as the main character and the potential reader—would read French fluently (nowadays English has replaced it).<sup>3</sup>

Besides this poem, whose verses are maliciously twisted as children often do to lyrics of known songs, there are no Africans—and no *turras*—in this war story set in Africa. (*Turras* is another word for *terroristas* ["terrorists"], and it has somehow a nearly comic sound.) The black guerrillas are a present fear but absent as ghosts, or present only as ghosts. Well, there is the mine—the mine represents them, is their work, a mark of their presence as droppings are, in safari parks, sometimes the only sign of nearby beasts.

However, this reasoning comes undone when we realize that actually there is no mine—and whatever it was, it was not put there by the *turras* (materially) or by Africa (symbolically). What seemed like war—in Africa, against a fearsome enemy—ends up being a completely Portuguese affair, a monologue of the colonizer with himself, or a dialogue inside that monologue, between two opposite sides of the same coin: the young, idealist *alferes* trapped in a situation he didn't ask for, and the captain, unable to accept that the way he sees things is outdated, if not utterly wrong.

Kafka and Beckett can be considered strong influences in Mário de Carvalho's work, although he stays closer to common ground than them. In other works, Carvalho will show a benevolent humor (however aggressive it might pretend to be) that will eventually reach its peak in the 1992 novel *Era bom que trocássemos algumas ideias sobre o assunto*, in which a frustrated middle-aged man tries to become a member of the Portuguese Communist Party, not because of some ideological sudden illumination, but because he's hurt, his life seems a failure, and the PCP seems like a nice, cozy place where the elderly are treated with respect.

In the end, hours pass and, for some reason, the experts are late. They will not come, and we will know that the captain never called them in. The *alferes* faints and—nothing happens. When the soldiers check on the *alferes* they realize he died of a heart attack, of exhaustion, of fear. He died. The mine was never there or, another possibility, it was a fake, put there on purpose as someone's idea of a bad joke.

They go back to the fort. There the rumors spread. The captain, by himself, calmly smokes a cigarette. The medic, drunk, screams in tears, “Sádico, sádico do caraças!” [“Sadistic, sadistic shit!”] until others take him in.

Discussing this story in public libraries, I noticed it is not clear for some readers whether it was the captain who prepared the whole scene. It is clear for me. But it says two things: Carvalho could write a tale that summarizes the very nature of the Portuguese colonial war, and the debate about it is still there and wounds are not yet entirely healed.

### Teresa Veiga

Teresa Veiga (Lisbon, 1945) has published, so far, five collections of stories and novellas, plus one (not so good) novel. When *História da bela fria* came out as a comet, in 1992, nobody knew what to say.<sup>4</sup> Teresa Veiga was a mature writer publishing her third collection of stories as humbly as a struggling

writer should do—however, with an empowered style one could expect to see only in masters. Very well, we can cope with that: she waited as long as needed, until she was in full control of her art, before publishing whatever she thought worth publishing. Not just a collection of stories but a selection of stories. And these were long stories, nearly novellas some of them. The sentences were accurate, classical, the paragraphs were long without the forced length of some Latin American–influenced magical realism. They were long in a nineteenth century way, elegant, sober. She seemed to be someone who was writing with leisure on her hands, and for an educated reader who has no time to lose with rubbish but who can afford an hour or two of sheer, old-fashioned reading pleasure.

The titles of some stories such as “A amante de Kropochine” (“Kropochine’s lover”) may remind us of Russian-born Nina Berberova. And yes, I feel (but it can be an illusion) echoes of Berberova’s *Astachev à Paris* and *Le mal noir*. Berberova (1911–1985) was a descendant of White Russians, whose wonderful gems of novellas were (re-)discovered only very late, in a similar (but less spectacular) way as Hungarian Sándor Márai. Did Teresa Veiga read those same books? I would say so, though I can hardly prove it. As it happens, I can’t even prove that Teresa Veiga is Teresa Veiga!

She must also have read Agustina Bessa Luís (1924), but then again every Portuguese writer read and loved (or jealously loathed) Agustina’s torrential and ironical and wise fiction, full of aphorisms, genial glimpses at the human mind and behavior.<sup>5</sup> From Agustina she takes the humor, the bitter irony, the cruel detail. Not the form, though. Where Agustina has been criticized for the lack of editing in her books, one can say nothing about the clean, clear waters of Veiga’s discipline.

We say *she* but, until now, nobody but her publisher really knows Teresa Veiga’s identity. Is it a real name? Is it actually a woman? Would she really nowadays be in her sixties as *Wikipedia* attests? Who knows? Some tinker with the idea of her being the alias of a renowned writer, and I would not discount that possibility. Her publisher definitely knows. And, of course, she knows—if she is a she.

All the stories in *História da bela fria* are in the first person. First person tends to favor the idiosyncrasies of a personal voice. Though, it goes without saying, the option for this narrative mode doesn’t necessarily translate immediately into a search for an authorial voice. However, it does promote such a search. It could be Narrative 101: the third person is an easier tool to outline events; the first

person privileges the voice, and makes us rely on (the reader either accepts it or stops there) the narrator's idiosyncrasies, manias, style, etc. Even when the narrator is distinct from the author—and in fiction it seldom happens—there is still a connection between them, and the author's first imaginative task is to interiorize (and then exteriorize) the narrator's voice.<sup>6</sup>

Veiga's narrators are, nearly always, women. As for the tale, it tends to be apparently trivial, though filtered through the narrator's voice, who is slightly unreliable (no reason not to trust her, but...) for she is not always sure of the way she tells things (thus making the reader feel less secure): "Talvez eu devesse ter começado por contar [...]" (13) ["Maybe I should have begun by telling (...)]."

One single exception in *História da bela fria* is "O Poeta do campo" ("The provincial poet"), in which the *fait divers* is a remembrance from a town judge of his first professional ordeal. However, it soon gains the tonalities of a perverse children's tale and the telling of a vague pedophilic seduction doesn't avoid—on the contrary—the characteristics of a traditional oral tale. And the magistrate gets lost in his tale: "Culpada ou inocente? A verdade é que não consigo chegar a uma conclusão" (58) ["Guilty or innocent? Truth is, I can't reach a conclusion"]. It is a trait of Veiga's narrators: no matter how clear minded they are, or even cruel (and cruelty can be a sort of pragmatism in the real world), they get lost in their own tale, or we may say they get lost chasing their own tale. They stumble, they get more (or less) than what they asked for, and therefore they usually lose. There is always something missing, a bitter taste in the mouth, the feeling that the human capacity to truly enjoy emotional victories is overrated.

Veiga's subject is frustration—frustration allied to a sort of tenacity, a capacity for endurance that demands a sacrifice. To put it plainly, her stories are about that knowledge of defeat that seems to be the very condition of a woman's fate in a certain Portugal that might have gone free but whose real life, mainly in its provincial environment, still has its roots in a frozen time.<sup>7</sup> "História da bela fria" and "Consequências do processo de descolonização"—my two favorite Teresa Veiga stories—deal precisely with events that might occur anyway, but our feet (well, her heroines' feet) may be imprisoned in dry mud, and therefore it is too late for them. One could remember Fernand Braudel's lesson: ideas take a long time either to go or to settle, and episodic events (for instance, a revolution) are not going to change that from one day to the next.

Veiga's narrator is not exactly an unreliable teller—on the contrary, she always tells what she thinks actually happened. The thing is she's not always sure of what exactly did happen. She doesn't know how to wrap up a story

either. In both stories, “História da bela fria” and “Consequências,” there is no real closure. But, of course, that is exactly where Veiga wants us. No real closure.

*História da bela fria*’s first story has that very same title. It won’t take long for the reader to realize that both book and story are one single *manifesto*: of a tone, a pace, a willingness not to take prisoners.

The structure is intriguing. One tale is boxed inside the other, and there is a lack of leverage that creates a strange effect, for it seems it is badly organized, yet we know (since page 1) that the authorial voice is the master of the narrative events.

First we have the narrator’s learning of life circumstances from eavesdropping on her mother’s friends’ confidences. Then, all of a sudden, she gets stuck in one of the stories—oddly enough not one she heard from them. From the moment she knows Aline she becomes obsessed and for half of the story (11 pages out of 21) we listen to Aline telling her mother’s story and, soon, her father and stepmother’s tasteless tragedy (i.e., operatic in a kitsch way). Like a story depicted on a lady’s fan, “bela fria” is just the name of a villa but also a synecdoche for three other *belas frias*: Aline, her father’s second wife, the narrator, and, yes, also the author. It is indeed a statement, a war cry: watch out, folks, here comes the *bela fria*, the ice-cold beauty.

Two main references pop out at me, one literary, the other cinematic: the in-boxing of *One Thousand and One Nights*, and the narrative mistake in Hitchcock’s *Psycho*, when for half the film we follow one story and then it is taken away from us and we’re thrown forcefully into a very different one.

Unless the reader accepts the several tales as part of a single puzzle, all these women are ice-cold beauties. Given the circumstances—provincial, well-off hypocritical families in, let’s say, the second half of Portugal’s twentieth century—that might be the only way out for a clever woman

As for “Consequências do processo de descolonização,” the book’s other great story, it is a title leading straight to ambiguous readings. In the literal one we have a scholarly text on the consequences of the decolonizing process. Otherwise we must approach this title suspicious of irony and wonder where it will lead. What is it? Such blunt, “unattractive” titles are not that uncommon in twentieth-century literature. After all, literature is a tension between faith and suspicion in the power of words to mean what they say, and one can argue that in this resides its power.

Once again, as often recurs in Veiga, we enter a world where a pragmatic young woman (16? 26? both possibilities are likely), with a slightly cynical

and disenchanted view of the world, faces a situation she can't control—in which she's powerless—but only up to a certain point. Events unfold in a trivial, though somehow oneiric, mode.

The subject of this tale is quite plain: the narrator spends the summer in a vacation hotel as a chaperone for her unmarried cousin. There they meet a family of *retornados* (people who came back from the colonies) and become daily acquaintances. The father is an unpleasant former military man and the first sentence opens with him: “Um tipo nojento, o coronel, sempre a cagar sentenças” (61) [“A disgusting man, the colonel, always full of shit”].

Then we meet the mother, a composed lady, very upright, although “diariamente fornicada” (61) [“Daily attended to in bed”],<sup>8</sup> and Semiramis, the beautiful daughter. However, these are just the preliminaries: neither the title, nor the colonel, nor the mother, nor the seductive Semiramis are the main characters or what the story is about. We are finally introduced to the son: a midget who somehow didn't develop as his parents expected (unheard of in the colonel's family, filled with competent males), and stays “prisoner” in his room, studying to enter the university, to compensate for his obvious physical incompetence.

### Miguel Vale de Almeida

Miguel Vale de Almeida (Lisbon, 1960) has been for years a respected voice in the Portuguese public arena and is a major contributor on gender issues, as well as a gay rights activist. His books on anthropology are translated into English, and he has been a visiting professor in American universities. Of the three writers, he's the one who currently follows more actively the European tradition of the intervening intellectual (though Carvalho was exiled in Sweden until 1974). At the same time, he belongs to a new generation—those who were teenagers during the revolution—whose cultural center is no longer Paris but New York. There is a clarity, effectiveness, and economy in his storytelling that owes a debt to outstanding twentieth-century American fiction both in written and cinematic form.

*Quebrar em caso de emergência* was published in 1996 by a small publishing house, Olhapim, now vanished. Almeida had published only one novel, *Euronovela* (1997), a political tale awarded the prestigious Prémio Caminho for best science fiction. That work, written both before and after some of the stories in the collection, identifies Almeida's main targets as a fiction writer, as an anthropologist, and as a citizen: gender issues, the frail and strenuous building of a sexual identity, and tensions between individual choices and social acceptance.

There is a portrait of Portugal in the 80s when Almeida himself was a young man and then a full-grown adult, and a sharp glimpse into the slow social building of a gay identity that is now understood to be part of an open society. There had been books (not many) on the subject of homosexuality, but Almeida's short stories have an agenda. Without being polemics, they do have a clear and sound ideology.

As with Carvalho, in "Uma razão para tudo" we have a simple situation from which the amplification of meaning derives. A social worker questions a juvenile delinquent accused of a petty theft in a hotel room. The boy is a punk in more than one sense: not only is he jobless and mainly living in the streets, he is also close to being a male prostitute of the lowest kind—the ones picked up on street corners. (Sociological fact: Portugal being a country of *bons costumes*, homosexual prostitution in some parts of the country has been for decades at once illegal, like all other kinds of public exposure, and accepted, that is, ignored.)<sup>9</sup> As with Carvalho and Veiga, the reader perceives an author fully in charge of his tale.

The title—"A reason for everything"—quotes the main question the social worker asks the boy: "Tem de haver uma razão para tudo!" (106) ["There is a reason for everything!"].

The social worker seems to try to understand the boy's motives and inquires about them. But it soon becomes apparent that she is not only disinterested but also devoid of genuine empathy and the intelligence necessary to grasp the boy's inner drama. Her disinterest in really wanting to know *why* he stole the wallet represents the lack of concern of a system both intellectually blindfolded and emotionally comatose. The question is eventually answered—not by her but by the reader. Though the wrongdoer himself is reluctant to answer the clumsy social worker, he nevertheless conveys to us what it was like dealing with his sexuality in a small town. Almeida's style is precise and sensitive yet able to put bluntly things that make the reader understand the mixture of shame, loneliness, and inevitability that the boy faced growing up:

O beto é rabo! O Beto é puta! (110)

[Beto takes it in the ass!]

Eventually we do find out what went on in that hotel room. There was a theft, the theft of a man's wallet. Only the motive was not money—but something else. After a businessman had picked up the boy in the street they went to the man's hotel room, where the man allowed himself to engage in

sex. But when Beto tried to kiss the man he was rejected—violently and with disgust.

In the end, the juvenile delinquent gives an answer that satisfies the social worker's need for a logical explanation:

Foi para roubar?

Ya. (113)

[Was it to steal?

Yeah.]

Such an answer is satisfying in the way it keeps the system safe—and everybody safe from troubling questions: What was the boy doing with that good citizen? Why would he be there? Why do people do such things? Hypocrisy is the key: as long as they keep to themselves, things run smoothly. It was a robbery, a simple robbery motivated by monetary needs and not by love betrayed. The man didn't want to kiss Beto, for it was safer to his identity to maintain things as a financial transaction rather than as an emotional one:

Deslizei um bocadinho, para lhe dar um beijo, dois beijos, sei lá, apetecia-me beijar-lhe os lábios. Esbugalhou os olhos e empurrou-me para o lado, à bruta. “Alto e pára o baile! [...] É melhor ires-te embora. Vá. Quanto é que levas? Nem me deste tempo de perguntar.” (112)

[I moved slightly, to give him a kiss, two kisses, I don't know, I felt like kissing him. He widened his eyes and brutally pushed me aside. “Now you wait! [...] You better go now. Go. How much was it? You didn't even give me time to ask.”]

In fact, the title is ironic (as usual with Veiga), and in its normalcy promotes a second-degree reading in which the reader does indeed access the true motive for the boy's crime.

Vale de Almeida shows his sensitivity in talking about what is not supposed to be discussed. Playing off with the title of one of Raymond Carver's best known stories, “What we talk about when we talk about love,” perhaps an invisible presence, we could say that this story is about *what we talk about when we steal our one-night-stand lover's wallet*.

What do we know about that young man? We know he met his partner/client/victim in some shady street. The man was probably a married businessman passing by and—although he did things with the boy—he couldn't

withhold his contempt when a tender kiss was attempted. There's the motive: a lack of emotional connection.

We realize now we let ourselves fall into the trap of prejudging. Maybe the boy was not a juvenile delinquent after all. Not a chronic thief, at least. He was indeed an outsider. That condition does exist and, in simple strokes, Almeida makes it clear to us: growing different, enduring continuous bullying, being marginalized, and slowly pushed into a side world with its sordid aspects.

Miguel Vale de Almeida was elected to Parliament in October 2009, the first gay Portuguese MP in 35 years of democracy. In October 2010 Portugal was the third European nation to approve gay marriage.

### Imagination and the imaginary

Three authors and three stories that express three major issues in contemporary Portugal: the ghost of the colonial war, the shifting status of women, alternative sexualities.

Short stories involve us because they connect myth and experience, and do so in incisive ways. Literature entails imagination, but it is more effective when it conveys reality, not when it flees it. Are there more realistic stories than Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* or Grimm's fairy tales? The way things are today, I look forward to reading an excellent story about the current economic crisis that adds to the ever-evolving canon. For, as Kafka would put it, reality is needed. Or, to misquote Beckett: one doesn't need to be a realist in order to grab reality by its horns. Or its tail, Picasso might have added. Portuguese fiction is the result of both a collective and individual work-in-progress. Its answers might be given by individual authors, but once published they belong to the realm of literature. They belong to us.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Estamos orgulhosamente nós." Although Salazar died in 1969, the authoritarian regime lasted until 1974. EEC: European Economic Community. Later it became only EC, European Community.

<sup>2</sup> Data about Portugal's lack of literacy until 1974 vary, but it is accepted that the illiteracy rate was high, between 30% and 40% of the adult population, uncommon in Europe.

<sup>3</sup> Portuguese writers, like Portuguese readers, appear to be more open to the world than, for instance, French. Though not scientifically proven, I believe that Portuguese writers tend to be fluent and active readers of several other languages. In my experience, minor languages or those with little political influence tend to promote such multilingualism.

<sup>4</sup> A first collection of stories, published ten years earlier, had a very discreet career. Same for *O último amante* (1990).

<sup>5</sup> Saramago more than once acknowledged Agustina's genius, in a generosity towards a fellow writer not always easily shared by writers in quest of immortality.

<sup>6</sup> Martin Amis has been often accused of letting his own voice show in his first-person stories (and nearly all of them are first person): no matter who tells the story—an American police-woman, a Russian old man—they all sound like Amis.

<sup>7</sup> The same could be said about men, but in Veiga they are usually too plain to endure significant metaphysical pains.

<sup>8</sup> To put it mildly.

<sup>9</sup> Salazar's "mild customs."

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