

JOÃO ALMINO.

The Book of Emotions.

Trans. Elizabeth Jackson. Champaign, Ill.:
Dalkey Archive Press, 2011.

João Almino's *Book of Emotions*, newly available in English thanks to a superb translation by Elizabeth Jackson, is narrated by a blind photographer. The trope of the blind prophet or poet is ancient, but a blind photographer is assuredly a very contemporary innovation. What truths might such a figure convey to a society that seems to have lost its way amid the tumult of images that through their superficiality and ephemerality distract our attention even from the social and political realities they purport to represent?

The Book of Emotions is Almino's fourth in a quintet of novels set in Brasilia, which together constitute a tender tribute to the flaws as well as the fortitude of the city's inhabitants. The septuagenarian Cadu narrates this installment of Almino's quintet, telling a story of the early twenty-first century from the vantage point of the year 2022. In his early fifties, when he still had his sight, Cadu was carried to Brasilia in the wake of the implosion of his relationship with Joanna, one of the great loves of his life. For a little more than a year he kept a photo diary; twenty years later he remembers those photographs so sharply that he is able to select from among them to assemble a "Book of Emotions," so named because each photograph represents an emotion he either experienced at the moment when he snapped the shutter, felt when he was photographed, or was overcome by when he viewed the developed image.

In Almino's novel we do not see these photographs but read Cadu's description of them. We thus inhabit a position contiguous with the blind photographer's. He works through memory; we work through imagination. The common ground upon which we meet is the territory of both emotion and interpretation. Cadu describes the composition and context of sixty-two photographs, on occasion pinning a specific emotion to an image but more typically allowing the emotional truth of the image to emerge circuitously. He is not a fully trustworthy narrator, and the legacy of Machado de Assis is in this sense persistent and influential. We may take his glosses with a grain of salt, for Cadu interprets his pho-

tographs and indeed his life choices in self-flattering ways, even when he feels remorse. He has devoted his life to art rather than commerce, to beauty rather than realism, to vengeance rather than justice, and to erotic passion rather than fidelity. His path is strewn with broken hearts, including, at times, his own. He considers the loss of his sight late in life a blessing in many respects, because it frees him from attachment to the beauty he sees when he looks in the mirror, as well as the beauty he finds in women.

A blind photographer is not as oxymoronic a figure as it at first appears. A photograph freezes a single instant in time, as particles of light reflect off objects and are captured by film or a CCD chip. Cadu's visual memories are also frozen in time: when he reencounters Joanna in old age, he imagines her forever youthful. Movement and change happen through time. The frozen moment defies movement and change and promises eternity. Crucially, for Cadu, beauty and sensuality operate under a similar temporality, for "Pleasure isn't measured by time but rather by intensity" (130). In this sense, Cadu is the perfect hedonist and the perfect photographer.

If Cadu is rendered comical by his romantic troubles and his bumbling efforts to derail the career of his nemesis, Eduardo Kaufman, the novel's playful engagement with temporality nonetheless offers a serious reflection on visual and textual art, memory, imagination, and social dislocation at the beginning of the twenty-first century. We learn that in 2022 Brasilia will have suffered even more from the social inequalities, poverty, violence, and crime common in Brazil's major cities today, that corruption will continue to flourish in government, and that social and political meaning will continue to be mediated by facile images that bounce across the screens of our virtual lives. In the face of all this, *The Book of Emotions* invites us into an interior and profound space in which the art of photography is celebrated, ironically, with the absence of photographs. Unlike W. G. Sebald, who unsettles our confidence in the inventions of fiction by including photographic reproductions in his novels, João Almino reinforces our confidence in our own visual imagination by not including photographs in this novel. As we come to understand the sixty-two photographs that make up *The Book of Emotions*, we find common cause with the blind photographer precisely in the capacity of narrative to plumb the depths of human experience and the ability of readers to think and feel their way up through those depths to solid ground. This extraordinary novel offers a lyrical homage not only to the art of photography but also to the art of living.

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