

## Three Poems

Ruy Belo

Translated by

Richard Zenith

### The Game of Quoits

In this square my childhood resurrects  
here my life suddenly has a new wellspring  
and surges with the force it had when it started  
The time hasn't passed only my consciousness  
which I feel temporarily transported back a few years  
only my familiar sensation of reflecting on that time  
of being a spectator of the succession of succeeding days  
of not just living of not living without even knowing I live  
in a delimited space where things and people  
evidently were because they simply were  
only that consciousness and sensation make me suspect  
that the time that never passed has passed  
The churchyard in late afternoon the game of quoits  
the clatter of the quoits the iron stakes  
the sun setting on itself and round like a simple  
quoit tossed by someone through the space of the day  
and ready to fall into the sea as onto a stake  
the extravagant and thoughtless act of tossing  
the quoit as if in that act life itself were at stake  
the stock-still profiles of those who look on

with caps on their heads and hands in their pockets  
 it all happened it happens here thirty-five years ago  
 as if here no one had gotten old  
 or suffered or died or endured  
 the enormous hunger needed to produce one rich man  
 as if no one here had gone in search of his country  
 in countries far far away from here  
 It's the very same churchyard same afternoon same quoits  
 Even this café where I sit watching and watch with my thinking  
 is the same café where I split my first beer  
 with my father a beer that resisted  
 the heat of the summer day  
 in that wicker basket submerged in that well  
 It's the same taste I've had in my mouth  
 for many years now chewing wine and bread and life  
 the taste of women the taste of girls  
 forever inaccessible like any absolute  
 forever impossible yet pursued as if possible  
 the taste of defeat or the taste of palpable  
 earth day by day running through my fingers  
 and one day bound to fill my mouth forever  
 I've aged I know and all I've gained  
 is what I lost. I'm a grown-up now.  
 Meanwhile night has engulfed everything the game is over  
 and across the sky of time there was a man who passed  
 or a certain quoit that by chance was hurled into life  
 and that lives in the precarious trajectory before the fall

#### **Hand to the Plow**

Happy the man who manages sadness wisely  
 and learns to divide it among the days  
 Though months and years pass it will never leave him

How sad it is to grow old on the doorstep  
 while weaving in our hands a belated heart  
 How sad to risk against human returns

the blue equilibrium of summer's sheer mornings  
 by the ocean that overflows with us  
 in the long farewell of our condition  
 It is sad to see in the garden the sun's solitude  
 reaching from the city's houses and din  
 to a distant hint of river  
 and the meager life meted out to us  
 It is sadder to have to be born and to die  
 and to have trees at the end of the street

It is sad to go through life as if  
 returning and to enter humbly into death by mistake  
 It is sad in autumn to conclude that summer  
 was the only season  
 The wind passed by in solidarity and we didn't see it  
 and we didn't know to go to the green depths  
 like rivers that know where to find the sea  
 and know which bridges which streets which people which hills to talk with  
 through the words of a forever uttered water  
 But what's saddest is to remember tomorrow's acts

It is sad to buy chestnuts after the bullfight  
 between sunday and the smoke on a november afternoon  
 and to have asphalt and many people for your future  
 and behind you a life with no childhood  
 looking back at all of this some time later  
 Day by day the afternoon dies  
 It is very sad to walk among God and be absent

But manage, poet, your sadness wisely

#### **Flower of Solitude**

We lived we conversed we resisted  
 we crossed paths on the street under the trees  
 we perhaps made a little stir  
 we traced timid gestures in the air

but what words can explain  
that ours was a solitary and silent  
profoundly silent heart  
and in the end our eyes watched  
like eyes that watch in forests  
In the midst of the tumultuous city  
in the visible angle of its countless edges  
the flower of solitude grew lusher each day  
We had a name for this  
but the ruthless time of men  
killed in us the one who was dying  
And in this ambitious heart  
alone like a man christ dies  
What shall we call the void that flows  
relentless as a river?  
It is born it swells it will empty  
and in all of this it's finally a sea  
We lived we conversed we resisted  
without realizing that in everything we die a little

Richard Zenith lives in Lisbon, where he works as a free-lance writer, translator, and researcher in the Pessoa archives. His *Fernando Pessoa & Co.—Selected Poems* won the 1999 PEN Award for Poetry in Translation, and his new version of Pessoa's *The Book of Disquiet* (Penguin) was awarded the 2002 Calouste Gulbenkian Translation Prize. His many other translations include *Log Book: Selected Poems of Sophia de Mello Breyner* and António Lobo Antunes's *The Inquisitors' Manual*. His own poetry appears in literary reviews. E-mail: rzenith@gmail.com