



# Notebook of Colonial Memories

Isabela Figueiredo

Translated by Anna M. Klobucka and Phillip Rothwell



## **Notebook of Colonial Memories**

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## Introduction

Anna M. Klobucka and Phillip Rothwell

When Isabela Figueiredo's *Caderno de Memórias Coloniais* (Notebook of Colonial Memories) was published in Portugal in late 2009, it was greeted by marked critical interest and popular acclaim. It was also controversial. Figueiredo's literary memoir traced her growing up in the 1960s and 70s in Mozambique—then still a Portuguese colony. Its depiction of her “return” at the age of thirteen to Portugal, a country she had never seen, a few months after Mozambique's independence, offered an uncommonly candid and unsparing perspective on the realities of late Portuguese colonialism in Africa. Her memoir is traumatically colored by the political climate surrounding the “repatriation” of hundreds of thousands of former colonial settlers, mainly from Angola and Mozambique. Composed of 43 autonomous short chapters, originally published as posts on Figueiredo's blogs *O Mundo Perfeito* (The Perfect World) and its successor *Mundo Novo* (New World), the text comments on the author's childhood in Mozambique's colonial capital Lourenço Marques (now Maputo). It narrates her travel to Portugal, where her parents sent her into the care of relatives before joining her several years later. It offers powerful insights into her adolescent experience as a *retornada* (returnee) in her new homeland.<sup>1</sup>

Figueiredo, who since 1985 has worked as a high school teacher of Portuguese language and literature in Almada (across the Tagus estuary from Lisbon), was not a well-known writer in 2009. Her only previous work of fiction had been published in 1988, after its manuscript was awarded the

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1 For additional information about the author of *Notebook of Colonial Memories* and her own reflection on the text, see Gould.

top prize in a literary competition. The fact that the author of *Notebook of Colonial Memories* did not belong to Portugal's literary and cultural establishment reinforced the widespread perception of the narrative as an authentic and direct statement of witness and remembrance, although Figueiredo herself has forcefully insisted on her text's literariness. In a 2012 blog post about *Notebook*, she compares her memoir, which fuses organically autobiography and fiction, with works such as Marguerite Duras's *The Lover* and Karen Blixen's *Out of Africa*. Figueiredo complains that, unlike Duras or Blixen, whose belonging to the refined sphere of "literature" is never questioned, she sometimes finds her *Notebook* shelved by bookstores in the history section, as a raw document of Portuguese colonialism and its aftermath (Figueiredo 2012).

To recognize the literary ambition and merit of Figueiredo's *Notebook of Colonial Memories* is not tantamount to denying the text's testimonial value and political impact, especially in the context of twenty-first-century Portugal. The publication of *Notebook* received attentive and often enthusiastic reviews in most of the country's major print media outlets, from newspapers to cultural magazines. It also triggered an outpouring of reactions—in online forums, at book signings, in private messages or letters to the author—from the vast and diverse community of Portuguese retornados and their descendants. This gushing response—some of which Figueiredo chronicled in her blog—testified to *Notebook* striking a sensitive chord among its readership. The book has come to hold a unique place among the growing body of fictional and nonfictional writing and other cultural products concerned with the social memory and human impact of Portugal's complicated and messy process of decolonization.

Since the Carnation Revolution in 1974, which brought an end to one of the twentieth century's longest-surviving dictatorships and simultaneously to Europe's most enduring colonialism, Portugal's literary scene has been fundamental in the nation's coming to terms with its imperial legacies. The 1960s and first half of the 1970s saw Portugal embroiled in colonial wars against independence movements in Africa that affected every one of its families. The dictatorship's intransigence against the tide of history caused thousands of youths to be maimed and killed in the service of a state whose moral bankruptcy became increasingly obvious. Many of Portugal's great post-1974 writers have depicted in varying ways how that experience of "losing" Africa informs and underpins what it means to be Portuguese today.

The earlier works of writers like António Lobo Antunes and Lídia Jorge relate the experiences of Portuguese sent to Africa as part of the fight to cling on to the empire no matter what the cost. What was less prevalent until more recently were texts, like *Notebook*, that deal with the experiences of the retornados—those whose lives were entirely based in the former colonies and who were forced or opted to resettle in Portugal as the colonies gained independence. Yet, as Raquel Ribeiro points out, more than three decades after the Carnation Revolution, there has been a veritable boom in writing about that experience and, in particular, in dealing with what she identifies as the “stigma” of being a retornado in Portugal. Picture books, diaries, autobiographies, memoirs and fiction both feed into and feed on a nostalgia for what was left behind in Africa. They also assert the need for a recognition of the qualitatively different experience of the end of the empire to which they testify. Like Figueiredo, many of the over half a million Portuguese (by conservative estimates) who relocated to Portugal in the years following the independence of the colonies had little or no contact with their former metropolis, and were not universally welcomed there. They were considered to be direct competition for jobs at a time of political turmoil and economic crisis. They were often branded as imperialists in a peculiar sophism that exonerated the “true” residents of mainland Portugal from any responsibility for five centuries of colonial rule overseas.

Portugal’s imperial project was the longest and one of the most erratic in modern European history. In search for a sea route to India, Vasco da Gama made landfall in Mozambique in 1498. Thus began Portugal’s claims to imperial hegemony in southeastern Africa, claims that would repeatedly be challenged by complex realities on the ground and by other European colonial powers. Portugal’s imperial pretensions in the region only came to a definitive end on June 25, 1975, when Mozambique became formally independent.

Mozambique’s borders were a creation of nineteenth-century imperial diplomacy and brinkmanship. They were settled during the Scramble for Africa, an era when Portugal was considered a weak player on the imperial stage. Indeed, swathes of the colony, while technically Portuguese, were under the jurisdiction of concession companies, with little or no interest in long-term investment in Mozambique. A coup in Portugal in 1926 paved the way for the rise to power of António de Oliveira Salazar, one of the twentieth century’s most unlikely dictators. A professor of economics at the University of Coimbra, he was empowered by the military as the minister

of finance in 1928 with a sweeping mandate to solve Portugal's economic dysfunction. By 1932, he had become prime minister with a vision of Portugal's imperial destiny that included a more efficient exploitation of the African colonies as a means of earning much needed foreign reserves and providing food for Portugal.

Until the 1930s, few Portuguese migrated to Mozambique. Political opponents of the regime in Lisbon and convicts had been deported to the colony, but there had been little success in attempts systematically to settle Europeans. Salazar ended the concession company regime in Mozambique, reasserting Portuguese sovereignty. Initially, he discouraged settlement schemes that had operated to persuade white Portuguese to move to Africa, because he felt they were a drain on Lisbon's resources. By the early 1940s, however, taking advantage of the economic opportunities of Portugal's neutrality as the other European imperial powers were engaged in the Second World War, Salazar authorized major irrigation and engineering projects in Mozambique and began to subsidize the immigration of workers from Portugal. His plan was to replicate Portuguese rural society in the colonies as a means of more easily benefiting from the natural resources Africa had to offer. In 1928, there were around 18,000 whites in Mozambique. By 1960, this number had risen to over 100,000. Immediately prior to independence, around 200,000 whites considered Mozambique to be their home. This steep rise had been fueled by schemes that offered subsidized or even free passage to Mozambique from Portugal.

The end of the Second World War changed the international dynamic with regard to colonialism. The "wind of change," as British prime minister Harold Macmillan famously asserted in 1960, was sweeping through the African continent. Partly because it had not experienced the war like the other European powers, and partly because of Salazar's increasingly dated and intransigent view of his nation's imperial destiny, Portugal refused to countenance giving up its colonies.

In Mozambique, the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (FRELIMO) was founded in 1962 and initially led by Eduardo Mondlane, a researcher for the United Nations with a doctorate from Northwestern University who married a white American, Janet Johnson. He was assassinated in 1969 and replaced in the first instance by a short-lived triumvirate that sought to hold together FRELIMO's disparate ideological wings. When that failed, the more militant and avowedly Marxist Samora Machel, who had led the

movement's military wing from 1966, became sole leader of FRELIMO and went on to become Mozambique's first president in 1975.

Machel was a charismatic character, whose radical discourse of racial and economic equality alarmed Portuguese settlers. Far less diplomatic than his more moderate predecessor, he had worked as a nurse in Lourenço Marques before joining the liberation movement. His first wife, Josina, died aged 25 during the independence struggle and was subsequently celebrated as a female figure of national emancipation. Machel's second wife, Graça Simbine, was Mozambique's first minister of education, marrying Samora several months after independence. Widowed by him in 1986, she would later marry Nelson Mandela, becoming the only person in modern history to have been the first lady of two nations.

FRELIMO's military struggle against Portuguese colonialism was one of the factors that led to the fall of the Portuguese dictatorship. In 1968, Salazar suffered a brain hemorrhage and was replaced as Portuguese prime minister by Marcelo Caetano. At the time, there were hopes that Caetano would liberalize Portugal and end the colonial wars in Africa that were draining Portugal's resources and costing the lives of its youth. Either unwilling or unable to do either, Caetano was ousted in a remarkably bloodless coup—the Carnation Revolution of April 25, 1974—by a Portuguese military rank and file with an agenda to develop, decolonize and democratize. They were exhausted by protracted wars on several fronts in Africa, including Mozambique, where there was no prospect of a clear victory in the foreseeable future. In the aftermath of the Carnation Revolution, António de Spínola became the president of Portugal. A high-ranking military officer and governor of Portuguese Guinea during the colonial wars, he had fallen out with the Caetano regime for advocating an end to the conflict in Africa. Conservative by nature, and not a believer in complete independence for the colonies, he soon fell foul of the more radical elements in Lisbon who sought to shift the country considerably to the left. By late September 1974, he was forced to resign. He subscribed to a federation of Portuguese-speaking nations, with Portugal still at the center, and advocated a very gradual process of self-determination for the colonies. This was clearly unacceptable to the independence movements, including FRELIMO, who were negotiating with Mário Soares, a Socialist politician and then Portugal's foreign minister, charged with overseeing the decolonization process. Soares worked closely with António de Almeida Santos, a lawyer in Lourenço Marques,

who had campaigned for democratic reforms and joined the Portuguese provisional government following the Carnation Revolution.

On September 7, 1974, the Lusaka Accord was signed between Portugal and Mozambique, leading to a Mozambican transitional government to be headed by FRELIMO's then chief diplomat Joaquim Chissano. Two days later, there was an uprising among the settler community in Lourenço Marques, who were dismayed by the lack of protection for their property rights, the imminent handover of power to FRELIMO, and the end of the world as they knew it. Their sense of betrayal was compounded by the fact that their protests over the following month were violently suppressed by both FRELIMO and the Portuguese military, who were eager for the transition to be over as quickly as possible and for Samora Machel to take over as first president of the People's Republic of Mozambique. Against a backdrop of general confusion and uncertainty, the vast majority of Mozambique's white settler community opted to "return" to a Portugal many did not know.

*Notebook of Colonial Memories* incorporates references to all these historical events and figures, but its primary narrative substance emerges from the writer's complex exercise of remembrance, reconstruction and fictionalization of her experience in both Mozambique and Portugal. As a bildungsroman of sorts, *Notebook* chronicles the expectable milestones of its young protagonist's development, such as her sexual education and learning to read. However, what both the remembering woman and the experiencing child and adolescent are most concerned with is the unveiling and exploration of the everyday workings of colonial reality, with its core principles of inflexible racial hierarchy and unquestioned white privilege. When, in chapter 14, the white girl slaps her mulatto schoolmate in the face because she knows she can be assured of impunity, her gradually accrued understanding of the significance of this act and of her motivation for committing it gives her the most visceral of insights into her complicity—into every colonist's ultimately inescapable complicity—with the structural violence of colonialism. At the same time, the narrator contrasts the experiential knowledge drawn from this and many other incidents with the widely held view of the Portuguese colonial enterprise as more benign and innocent than that practiced by other European imperial powers. This particular strand of Portuguese exceptionalism—influentially crystallized, though by no means inaugurated, by Brazilian anthropologist and historian Gilberto

Freyre under the label of Lusotropicalism—relates its central claim to the alleged propensity of Portuguese colonizers throughout history for racial mixing with the African, South American and Asian populations they encountered and subjugated. From this asserted tendency toward miscegenation between white Portuguese men and women of color—no other sexual configuration ever features in this traditionally drawn picture—the proponents of Lusotropicalism derive a wealth of symbolic and material advantages, the chief of which is held to be the absence of racism and racial segregation in Lusophone colonial and postcolonial settings.

The narrator of *Notebook* has no patience for the Lusotropicalist fairy tale reiterated by the colonists and retornados—“that old wives’ tale,” as she calls it in chapter 41. Yet she is equally impatient with the mainland Portuguese who reluctantly assimilate her family along with the hundreds of thousands of African retornados into their midst. One bravura chapter (numbered 38) pitches against each other, in a tightly woven dialogic counterpoint, the opposing perspectives and stereotypes held by the two groups, the “small and stupid and backward” Portuguese from Portugal and the arrogant retornados, “stuck-up like royalty who’ve lost their throne and expect to get it back.” Such contrastive discursive positioning of conflicting attitudes and perspectives is a device constantly in evidence throughout Figueiredo’s *Notebook*, not least in the language the text employs to express racial identities and relations. The use of the derogatory term *preto* (“darky” in our admittedly imperfect translation) signals at any given point that the narration is channeling the racist discourse that surrounds young Isabela in the colony, while the employment of *negro* (“black”) expresses the narrator’s critical, antiracist conscience taking over, though there are several instances of this distinction becoming blurred and unreliable as a textual signpost. Despite the moral clarity of Figueiredo’s anticolonial perspective, there are no neatly polarized binaries in the reality her memoir construes and deconstructs, except for the intransigent racist categorization of “us” (whites) versus “them” (pretos) exposed by her account.

*Notebook* is a political text, but its politics are intensely personal. The narrative’s central focus falls on its protagonist’s relationship with her father, a man whom she loves very much, tenderly and viscerally, and whom she betrays by denouncing his racism and by refusing to stand on his side of the inflexibly antagonistic divide that structures colonial society and its afterlife. Figueiredo embraced the domestic environment that shaped

her own experience of colonialism as the inevitable point of departure for her countercultural writing project, as she explains in an interview published as an appendix to her memoir:

When my father returned to Portugal, he brought colonialism with him and was never able to leave it behind. My father was colonialism. Therefore, my father was also injustice and violence. I may not know very well, from a historical perspective, what colonialism was—a great deal probably escapes me; but I know very well what my father was, what he thought and said, and that is a practical knowledge of colonialism that no historian can possess, except through the same lived experience. (Figueiredo 2009, 21–22; translation ours)

The writer's conflation of the political space of colonialism with the intimate sphere of the colonizer's family—her own—is the foundation of *Notebook's* complex emotional landscape, composed in equal measures of love and hate, and tempered with generous doses of guilt and regret. The latter are sometimes evoked by remembered attempts to draw affective connections with black Mozambicans, such as the janitor Manjacaze, whom the narrator imagines (in chapter 8) as her ideal storytelling grandfather, but who would never be permitted to sit a white girl on his knees in order to tell her stories. None of these desired relations are allowed to develop in the narrative, as its focus keeps turning back to the love and eventual hatred between a white father and his white daughter: "I took on all my father's words of hatred. I heard them an inch away from his face. I tasted the spit of his hatred, which is harder to take than the spit of love...." (chapter 35). And yet this is no simplistic, one-way journey—from love to hate, from trust to betrayal, from closeness to distance—because the adult daughter remains deeply in love with her dead father, to whom *Notebook* is expressly dedicated.

*Notebook's* intricate textual construction of the memorialist's split self—as an experiencing child and a remembering adult, a lover and a hater of her father, the colonialist's daughter who feels and wants to be African—is echoed by its fragmented structure, a patchwork of shorter and longer chapters that can be read selectively, in sequence or in isolation from each other. Although a chronological backbone exists in the text—following the historical events summarized above and the trajectory of Figueiredo's

life—its constitutive fragmentation does not encourage the reader to look for reassuring closure in *Notebook's* final chapter. This segment, the most lyrical of all, stages an imaginary return to Africa for its protagonist. Now addressed in the second person, she appears to assume an animal shape, or at least behavior, as she meets and sleeps with a pack of wild dogs, while the narrator's voice simultaneously celebrates and questions her newly found freedom. Before arriving at this juncture, Figueiredo's memoir has referred repeatedly to the animalization of Africans in colonialist epistemology: "They were darkies, animals. We were white, we were people, rational beings" (chapter 7). At another point, the narrator expresses her sorrow at the postindependence killing of the colonists' pets: "Of all the slaughters from that time, the one that most affected me was the pets' because they were the only innocent party in such a complicated power game" (chapter 26). Against this textual background, the last chapter's discursive literalization of the narrator's divided self—split into the first and second persons—and the fact that it occurs in the guise of animal metamorphosis open up a subjective and potentially political line of flight from *Notebook's* merciless dissection of the individual and collective retornado condition. Unlike the second-person projection of her narrator, however, Figueiredo herself has never returned to Africa.

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## A Note of Thanks

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## **Notebook of Colonial Memories**



For my father



Each time I opened a drawer or poked my head into a closet, I felt like an intruder, a burglar ransacking the secret places of a man's mind. I kept expecting my father to walk in, to stare at me in disbelief, and ask me what the hell I thought I was doing. It didn't seem fair that he couldn't protest. I had no right to invade his privacy.

—Paul Auster, *The Invention of Solitude*

Human memory is a marvelous but fallacious instrument. (...) The memories which lie within us are not carved in stone; not only do they tend to become erased as the years go by, but often they change, or even increase by incorporating extraneous features.

—Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*





Lourenço Marques, 1960



His strong and lively voice said loudly, right into my ear:

— Hello!

It was a big, authoritative hello I couldn't possibly ignore. I recognized his voice, and still asleep I thought, It can't be you; you're already dead.

And I opened my eyes.



**1.**

Manuel left his heart in Africa. I know others who left two small cars there, a four-wheel drive, a pickup truck, plus a van, two houses, three farms, and an account with the National Overseas Bank, already converted into meticals.

Who didn't go leaving their multiple hearts in one place or another? Many years ago, I switched my heart for the aorta.



**2.**

White men went after darky women. Darky women were all the same, and the men couldn't tell Madalena Xinguile from Emilia Cachamba, except for the color of her sarong or the shape of her tit, yet white men went deep into the shantytown, with or without a clear target, to go after some darky cunt. The men were adventurous. Real go-getters.

Darky women had loose cunts, said white women on lazy Sunday afternoons, chatting away under a big cashew tree, stuffing their bellies with grilled prawns, while their husbands went out for their men's stroll and left them to sharpen their tongues, since women need to sharpen their tongues together. Darky women had loose cunts, but they would say their nether regions or shameful parts or filthy bits. Darky women had loose cunts and that was why they gave birth the way they did, upside down, facing the ground, no matter where, like animals. Their cunts were loose. White women's weren't, they were tight, because white women were not easy bitches, because only their husband's thingy had reached the sacred cunt of white women, and not very often, and with difficulty, since they were very tight, thus very serious, and it was important that the women knew this about each other. They did no more than fulfill their matrimonial duties, always as a sacrifice, which is why fornication was painful, as well as avoidable, and because of this white men went after darky cunt. Darky women were not serious, darky women had loose cunts, darky women moaned out loud because the bitches liked that. They were worthless.

White ladies were serious women. What threat was a black woman to them? What difference was there between a black woman and a rabbit? What white man admitted paternity of a black woman's children? How could a barefoot black woman, who had a tit hanging out, come from the shantytown, and knew only how to say yes sir, of course sir, my money sir, who had no ID card or documentation showing civilized status, prove the boss was the father of her child?

What darky woman wanted to get thrashed? How many mulattos knew their father? White men went into the shantytown and bought beers, tobacco and yards of sarong fabric for the black woman they fancied. For better or worse. Then they buttoned up their flies and went off to their honest family homes. How could anyone know where those women were from and what they were called? White men kept their wives somewhere in the city center, if not back in Portugal. And that's where they returned.

Their sexual incursions in the shantytown cast no cloud over their future because a black woman had no power to claim paternity. No one would believe her.

But a white man could, if he wished, marry a black woman. She would climb the social ladder and become accepted, with reservations, but accepted, because she was Simões's wife, and out of respect for Simões... It was frequently the case with general-store owners and farmers far from the city, men on the fringes of decent colonial society who would sooner or later go native.

For a white woman to admit to a union with a black man meant social banishment. A black man, however civilized he was, could never be civilized enough. Even after the Revolution, back in Portugal, my father was outraged whenever he saw a white woman with a black man. He would stare at the couple as if he were looking at the Devil. I would tell him, Stop staring, what's it got to do with you? He would answer I knew nothing, that a darky could never treat a white woman well, like she deserved. They were another people. Another culture. Dogs. Oh, I couldn't understand. Oh, I was incapable of understanding. Oh, I was a communist. How was it possible I ended up a communist?

## 3.

Fucking. My father liked fucking. I never saw it, but you could tell. If you looked at him closely, his eyes smiling together with his mouth, the manly sensuality of his hands, arms, feet, legs... If you listened to his wickedly fast comebacks, if you witnessed his constant suggestive sense of humor, you would realize that giant man liked fucking. I didn't know, but I knew. When my father lifted me in the air as if I were a thing, or gave me a piggyback ride, I felt weak in the face of his total strength, dominated, possessed by it.

I never understood anything about this fucking thing until I was seven. Well, I never consciously understood. I didn't know the verb existed or what it meant, and I had no idea how people procreated. Even when I was much older, I thought children were born because men and women got married and, at that moment, God blessed women "with child." I didn't say "pregnant." I didn't know that word either. In fact, the first time I said it, my mother slapped me across the face to teach me not to swear.

My father's sexuality only became an issue for me once I was seven, and then only in the background. At some point I realized my parents closed the door to their room at night and my mother seemed to cry. One night I got up, knocked on their door, and said, "Stop doing that to mom." I didn't know what they were doing to make my mom suffer like that, but I didn't want it to happen, and certainly not at the hands of my father. I decided that whatever they were doing couldn't be healthy if it was behind closed doors.

Some time later, a thick book appeared under my parents' bed. It was by Dr. Fritz Khan and its title contained the word "sexual." When I opened it, I saw it had pictures of naked men and women with visible pubic hair and sexual organs. There were many absolutely disgraceful illustrations I will not mention. I read the book lolling over the full width of my parents' bed, with my chin resting on the mattress edge and my arms hanging over to turn the book's pages, on the floor. When I heard my mother's footsteps, I slipped the prohibited volume under the bed and pretended to be reading

any old book. I'd thought it out well, but at some point they must have realized, because Fritz stopped being under the bed, and it was quite an effort to find him hidden in the closet. Taking the book out of the closet and then hiding it again involved greater risk. But despite the difficulties I managed to read it cover to cover—my mother had so much to do out in the garden!—and I got to understand sex was hard work, possibly even smutty, although there was some interesting potential to be explored.

As I became aware of my father's sexuality, I suffered my greatest shock the day I saw him, with my ten-year-old's eyes, covet a girl who walked by, chatting her up. We were at a gas station on the outskirts of Lourenço Marques, just beyond the Matola junction. I can still see him behaving like that, next to the van, arm resting on the window, waiting his turn for the darky to come and fill up the tank. How embarrassing! My father! How embarrassing!

My mother now claims she knew perfectly well when he was hanging out with other women. But she pretended not to notice. She kept quiet. What choice did she have?!

Some years ago, she told me the police once came to our house to question him about allegations that he had made advances on a married woman whose home he was wiring. I can imagine my mother's face and the policeman's, "Look, madam, we want to ask your husband some questions about a complaint made against him." I can also see him, smiling, seductive, confident, dropping hints to the woman, who was home alone. She might even have egged him on, and then he made his move without her consent. I guess we'll never know. Worse, he made his move without being egged on. Knowing my father, that seems less likely. He liked women. He liked using wily words with them, double entendres. He took pleasure in the game of seduction, and it must have begun like that. I want to believe it must have been like that. But on this occasion, it went wrong.

I remember overhearing women talking. I wasn't old enough to understand, they thought, so they spoke about what he used to do in the native neighborhoods before my mother arrived, and the mulatto heirs he probably sired there before getting married. His sorties to the huts were most likely frequent. Because, as we already know, my father liked fucking, and because the colonists' wives, when they got together, spoke of darky bitches and the ease with which they had children one after another because they were very open and also enjoyed it... And they alluded under their breath to what were said to be the characteristics of the black man's sexual organs

and returned to the topic of how black women liked to do that... Their talk always smelled fishy to me.

A white woman would not admit she liked fucking, even if she did. Not admitting was a guarantee of seriousness to her husband, and to the whole immaculate society. Black women fucked, they certainly did, with all and sundry, with black men and with white women's husbands, for a tip most likely, for food, or out of fear. Some may have liked it, and even squealed, because black women were animals and could squeal. But most of all because black women let themselves squeal, spread their legs, and be loose.



## 4.

He took pleasure in life and liked to eat, drink and fuck, as I've already explained.

Lourenço Marques in the 1960s and 70s was a vast concentration camp that smelled of curry.

In Lourenço Marques, we would sit outside a beautiful upscale, relaxed restaurant, any time of day, savoring the best whisky and soda on the rocks, nibbling prawns, just like we now sit here, after work, at a snack bar in the Cais do Sodré lined with second-rate tiles, swallowing warm beer and picking listlessly at lupini beans.

The servants were darkies and we would leave them a tip if they flashed their teeth, were quick to serve, and called us boss. I say us because I was there. No white liked to be served by another white, if only because both expected a bigger tip.

My father, whose job was to electrify Lourenço Marques in the 1960s, never wanted white employees because he would have to pay them an arm and a leg.

I clearly remember listening to him at the table, as he chatted with my mother about whites who came looking for work and who would be a good catch, that's for sure, but their salaries would be double or triple, so no thanks, he preferred to go it alone, overseeing his countless projects where he left his countless darkies. He had a dozen in the 24 de Julho building, another twenty in Sommershield, another seven in a house in Matola... And he spent the whole day running around the city, from one end to the other, checking up on the work of that darky mass, punching and shoving them with his large hand, as well as kicking, all to put them on the right track; in sum, a pedagogical thrashing.

A white man was expensive because you couldn't beat him. He was no good for laying electric wire casings in the walls and then threading cables through them. A white man was good for being boss, for giving orders,

supervising, making the lazy bums work, as they did nothing without being forced to. At the dinner table whites would say the darky bastard didn't like working. He earned just enough to eat and drink the next week, especially to drink. Then he stayed in his hut stretched out on a flea-ridden sleeping mat, fermenting cashew or cane liquor, while darky women worked for him, with children on their backs. Whites respected these black men's wives, much more than their husbands. My father often gave extra money to the wives when he went to look for his workers in their huts and found them utterly sloshed. Some money for them to eat and feed their children.

The black man was the lowest of the low. He had no rights. He might be entitled to charity if he deserved it. If he was humble.

That was the natural and unquestionable order of things. The darky served the white man, the white man ruled the darky. My father was already there to rule so that was enough whites!

Besides everything else, white employees brought vices. With a black, no matter how many vices he acquired, they could always be beaten out of him.

36

In Mozambique there was no television, so we didn't have to put up with the drivel of the newscast, or of the morning, afternoon and night-time shows. There were radios. In Portugal, they were called wireesses. Everyone got hold of one to listen to the local station or the short-wave broadcast from Lisbon, which was much more formal and gave a different status to the listener, since you needed a better radio, not just a tiny transistor or Xirico set.

There was at least one station for blacks, which spoke their language and played their music. No white listened to it, although they tolerated it at work because the black mass would get on with their jobs entertained by marrabenta, or especially by batuque and the incomprehensible litany of spoken Ronga, while cables and wiring progressed through the buildings' entrails, as required.

In Lourenço Marques, people sat down in restaurants, preferably outside, because the fans inside were useless and air-conditioning a luxury. They would converse for hours about colonial *faits divers*. They drank the good stuff and the best, and maybe ended up fucking, at home or away, legitimately or not.

In Mozambique, it was easy for a white to take pleasure in life. We were nearly all bosses, and those who weren't aspired to be.

There were always lots of darkies, all naturally lazy, stupid and incompetent, asking for work and doing whatever we told them to without looking up. A dedicated, loyal darky, who took off his cap and bowed down when we passed, who could be trusted at home with the children and would leave our things alone, was said to be a good houseboy. A khaki uniform and slippers would be arranged for him. He would get some of our food, eat at the table in the garden or kitchen, and when the boss's clothes became shabby, we would offer them to him. No one wanted to lose a good houseboy.

From childhood, darky boys and girls would call round at our house looking for work. They would knock at the gate. We would open up, and children in rags would appear, barefoot, snotty, and starving for cassava, addressing us with the few words they knew: work, boss. Children my age or younger. I would open the door to these beggars and stare at them without a word. I couldn't understand. I would call my mother, who quickly shooed them away, "Go away, there's nothing here!" and I would go back to my room and carry on reading Dickens or whatever. I just couldn't understand it.

The pleasure of reading a book lessened humiliations. It was much greater than the pleasure of playing alone with animals or imagining wars with rosebushes. A book brought a different world into which I could enter. A book was a just land. Because that was the problem. Between the world of books and reality there was a colossal distance. Books could contain sordidness, evil, extreme poverty, but at some point they always offered redemption. Someone rebelled, struggled and died, or was saved. Books showed me that in the land where I lived there was no redemption at all. That paradise of endless salmon sunsets, which smelled of curry and red earth, was an enormous concentration camp of blacks with no identity, with no possession of their own bodies, and hence with no existence.

Whoever, on any given morning, looked without a filter, without being defensive or aggressive, into the eyes of blacks as they drilled holes into the rough walls of buildings of whites, does not forget that silence, that boiling cold of hatred and dirty poverty, dependence and submission, survival and filth.

There were no innocent eyes.



## 5.

Fucking. Now that was a discovery that soon shamed me and yet I desired.

I must have been seven or eight.

On one of the rare occasions I was allowed to play outside—my father wasn't home and my mother must have wanted to be free of me bothering her—I remember flying on an improvised swing hung from a cashew-tree branch, pushed by a young boy from the neighborhood, more or less my age. The cashew tree was next to the trenches and half-built walls of a new settler house—and it remained there, even after the building was finished. Ironically, it was Mrs. Pleasure's house. The boy was clearly white, the son of trustworthy neighbors, good folk from Portugal. We got on well. He asked me, "Do you want to play at fucking?" To play at fucking?! Now there was a game I hadn't come across. I'd never played it at school and really didn't know what it was like. What's more, little Luís only had a vague idea too, although he knew more than me. I was curious, so it didn't enter my head to say no. I asked him how it was played and he clarified succinctly, "We get undressed and I lie on top of you." It didn't seem very orthodox to me, "get undressed," "on top of me," but I agreed in any case. I was really rather curious. I sensed it was something you weren't allowed to do, so it must be great and I wanted to try it out. I was curious, adventurous, I was a girl all on her own who only played with ants.

Little Luís warned me it was better to go into the house to do it. But the house didn't yet exist, just a few bricks laid to the height of what would become the windows, no sign of a roof, just a floor of red earth. Inside this structure under construction, the rooms were already marked out. We chose the space that would become the bathroom. It must have seemed appropriate to the physiology of the act. It was a small space that looked out to the back of the future house. We chose this smallest of spaces on purpose, to be more hemmed in, more intimate, because neither of us quite knew what we were doing, what fucking was all about. But we had our intuitions. And it

was very easy. We got completely undressed, I lay down on the ground, exactly how they taught us we should go to sleep, arms and legs quite straight. Little Luís lay totally naked on top of me, exactly how they taught us at school we should go to sleep, and there we remained for a few minutes, a difficult balancing act, talking and “fucking.” I was underneath and could see through the opening where the windows were yet to be installed. And, in a flat second, I make out the shape of my father, oh my God, my dad, I can still see him to this day, bending over that opening with his forearms leaning on the bricks, looking down, observing the scene, taking stock of what was going on and disappearing in an instant. I understood everything. In that fraction of a second I got up, knocking over little Luís, and grabbed my clothes. As my father turned round outside the house, stormed through the door, and seized my arm, little Luís was still stark naked and I was half dressed. Seconds before the beating started, I was already absolutely certain that fucking was utterly forbidden.

40 For a long time, I could feel my father’s violent slaps burning on my cheeks and the blows he rained down over my body: my face, arms, buttocks, back, legs. Wherever he caught. He was violent. Then he grasped my arm with his powerful claws and I flew into our garden, where he let me go so I could flee to my room, holding back the tears, burning, humiliated, thinking my life was over there and then. Worse than the pain from the beating was the humiliation of him having seen me fucking, him having caught me in the darkest of sins. I thought I could never look him in the eye again, nor he at me, that I couldn’t even leave my room. Later, I heard him telling my mother, but I can’t remember how she responded. Never again, throughout my childhood and life, did either of them speak to me about what happened that day. It’s something that never existed.

In that far-off day in 1970, I lost my innocence, discovered sex, and began dreaming I was fucking Gianni Morandi as he sang to me *Non son degno di te, non ti merito più*.

## 6.

He liked life. Nothing scared him. With him, everything was possible.

He had a white Bedford van, in which he transported his electrical stuff: cables, tubes, machinery. At the time, only those who lived in the wild had jeeps.

Whenever he decided we were going for a drive—and he decided it often as it was what he most liked doing—my mother shuddered. It was a foregone conclusion that our outing would end with us lost or injured in some far-flung place, having to search, on foot, for a store or huts to ask for help. We would sink into sand or the car would conk out crossing a brook or crash into a rock or a deep hole, and the axle would break or gas would run out... My mother and I would tell him, “It won’t move!” and he’d say, “You’ll see!” And we would see! From wherever we were stuck we would see hours of scenery! My father would disappear into the wild and get someone, from some hut, to come and give us a push, get the white man out of trouble for a tip. I always thanked the Lord for those people recruited by force, who to my mind emerged from between the trees as if they came from heaven.

Once you left the city, the place could turn wild and uninhabited for miles and miles. My mother and I feared the night, and our only thoughts were how to get out of the mess my father had got us into because he’d discovered a road that “must lead somewhere for sure.” Not only did we rarely reach wherever that somewhere was, but we would usually get in a tizzy and end up not enjoying the landscape with the level of enthusiasm expected.

It was Africa, burning Africa, sensual and free. You could feel it growing under your feet. It was red. It smelled of wet earth, churned earth, burnt earth, and it always smelled.

Although I appreciated my father’s outings, children don’t really get the spirit of adventure. I was afraid. I wish my father had lived long enough for us to be able to repeat it all once I’d grown up, but I don’t know if he

could have returned to Africa, despite it being the only land he loved. The days before his death, he still dreamed of going round wiring some Somersfield buildings.

In my dreams, too, there are still red dirt roads.

7.

The mangoes weighed down the trees, hanging by green threads. Very fat and pinkish, they weighed a lot, leading the branches to touch the ground. Thick drops of transparent resin oozed from the mango to the stem that sustained it.

In Lourenço Marques's market, darky women sold mangoes on the ground, in rows. Darky women sold everything on the ground, anywhere. They laid out an old sarong and made little piles of tomatoes, root vegetables, mangoes, or peanuts.

Everything darky women sold had come from the lands they tended but didn't own, and everything was delicious. Darky women sold so that they and their children and the men, who are never anybody's but their own, could eat.

A white and a darky were not just different races. The distance between whites and darkies was equivalent to what exists between different species. They were darkies, animals. We were white, we were people, rational beings. They worked for the now, for today's sugarcane liquor. We worked to be able to pay for a better urn and a better ceremony on our funeral day.

A white woman didn't sell mangoes unless it was wholesale, for other whites to distribute. A white woman didn't sell mangoes on the ground or door-to-door. But I was a darky little colonizer, daughter of whites. A blond little black girl. And the black little colonizer I was sold heaps of mangoes at the gate of our farm. Three mangoes with a fourth perched on top. Four mangoes—fifty cents. I knew it was cheap, but it helped overcome the suspicions of the blacks who walked by, on their way home from work, and stumbled across a little colonizer girl sitting on the ground, legs crossed, overseeing the retail of mangoes she placed on an upturned box, which served as a counter for her business. The price had to be very attractive so they dared overcome their fear and approach the black-white girl who was like them. "How much?" they would ask from a distance. "Fifty cents," I would reply. And then they would come over, hesitant, surprised, but

smiling. I can remember the big smile of blacks. And they would buy. They were the best mangoes from my tree, bulging with juice and flesh, very colorful pink and salmon. Just fifty cents. For four.

Selling mangoes at the gate, hidden from my mother, was the act of disobedience I most liked.

## 8.

The darky was called Manjacaze. I don't know where he lived, if he had a wife or children, but I guess so. I suppose he lived in a hut two or three hours' walk from Lourenço Marques. I guess he left his hut at five to get to Lourenço Marques by seven in the morning. And he trekked the whole way, breathing in the early, milky mist that crawled over the ground, then the fierce but fresh sunrise of that time of day.

Manjacaze was the janitor in the Lobato building.

He brought down all the trash from the building's seven floors, in huge old gasoline drums. I don't know where he took them. We didn't want to know. We were white, why on earth should we want to know what the darkies did with our trash, as long as it disappeared.

Manjacaze was well liked by the tenants. My parents always gave him leftover bread from the day before, what was left from dinner, torn, old clothes that were no longer any good. Occasionally—at Easter, Christmas or Carnival—because we were Catholic and good, he'd get a bottle of wine or liquor and some of my mother's fried specialties. Food, drink, objects that were given altruistically to the good darky, to the darky who bowed right down to the ground when he saw us, and who was simply good, a good darky.

I can see Manjacaze quite clearly: his dry, calloused hands in front of his legs, his fingers crossed, as he expressed his gratitude, thank you very much sir, thank you very much madam, thank you very much miss, as he bent over.

Manjacaze was good. Manjacaze's eyes, slightly yellowish, were good. He never raised his voice. He never changed his tone. He always smiled. I can see him taking out the trash drums from the service elevator. I can describe how he rolled them, making them spin outside, advancing them toward the street. Always from the service elevator, the only elevator in which he went up and down, although he was the one who repaired them all, who fixed the problems on the seven floors of the Lobato building.

Manjacaze, come upstairs, we have some things for you. Thank you very much, madam. Never a bad word. Manjacaze helped me believe in the human species, in those who retained their dignity in all things despite their humiliating position and valued that dignity as an invisible, sacred possession.

At the time I still believed in everything and couldn't foresee ending up with nothing, or failing, especially failing others as became par for the course, year after year, as if I'd been born invisibly stained.

Manjacaze had the air of a grandfather. If only I could sit on his lap and listen to his darky stories, as if that were possible in this life! Because a black man didn't touch a white woman even as a grandfather. It was taboo. That's why we just smiled at each other. We didn't say a word.

## 9.

On Saturdays, work was done, and my father paid for the week at the end of the afternoon. On Saturdays, there was *milando*.

We lived in a terraced building on the 24 de Julho. The concrete rectangle that made up the elevator shaft ascended bare above the ground, like some sort of surveillance tower. We would go up six very steep steps to reach the door of this terrifying construction.

On Saturdays, at the end of the afternoon, my father would arrive at the terrace with all the darkies, the nimble, the slackers, and the so-so. They would sit on the steps leading to the elevator shaft, making up an amphitheater of wage earners. They spoke their own language among themselves. Rarely Portuguese. They would talk to me or they wouldn't. They would ask me to ask my father this or that. They would ask me for glasses of water. Sometimes, my mother would give them sandwiches or cookies. If it was the night before a significant day, my father might decree that glasses of wine or beers with meat sandwiches should be handed out. Those were good times.

My father sat at the head of the living-room table with notebooks and pads where he'd jotted down each one's work, and inserted the notes and coins to be paid. Sometimes there was an argument between my mother and father about how much was to be paid, and she would try to calm him down. She'd say, "Don't do that." She'd say, "That's not right." She'd say, "You're just going to cause problems."

I remember they were all golden evenings, cheerfully serene. It was beginning to get cooler. Bodies shed the slavery of work as if shedding old skin. The next day was Sunday and on Sunday you didn't talk of work. You went out, you ate, you drank, you stayed in the shade and listened to the radio. Yet despite it all, at that time on my terrace the air trembled with fear and uncertainty.

I liked to see my father's darkies there. All together they were a crowd. They rested a little. They were men who were different from each other.

Some were younger, others old, with their fuzz whitening. Some quiet and serious. Others smiling. Some afraid. Others, chattering on. I lurked around them, observed them, as my father did his accounts. I would go inside to check if he was still there, annoyed, cursing. I would return to the blacks' amphitheater. They were growing impatient. The accounts were taking ages. They wanted to go, he was taking ages. I would go back inside, You're taking ages. My father all tense, They can wait. I would run to the amphitheater, they had to wait. The golden evenings frayed everyone's nerves.

At a certain point, my father would begin to call them, I don't know in what order. It could be the order in which he picked them up at the gas stations of Xipamanine, on Monday mornings, or it could be random. The procedure was simple. The blacks went into the room, and my father handed over their money. Sometimes they counted it and complained. My father would shout at them that they had ruined a cable that week or arrived late or dawdled, or looked at him the wrong way, or it was just because he felt like punishing them for whatever popped into his head. I don't know, everything was possible. As well as being bad-tempered, he had his favorites, and his favorites he always paid whatever had been agreed without any docking. Then there were the youngest ones, the recently arrived, or those my father didn't trust. And with these, there was often a milando, meaning a confrontation. They still hadn't got the rules, which were just two: take the money and shut up. No need to say thank you. But if they did say thank you, they would start to climb up the league table of favorites. The only way not to start a milando was to put the money they'd received in the pocket of their torn pants and leave, head down. If they complained, there was a milando, and more than a few times they would leave the room with a punch to the jaw, or a good old shove. There was a heated milando. They threatened my father, which annoyed him even more. They were expelled. My mother and I shuddered. A tense silence grew among the blacks still waiting for their pay. Then everything moved along very quickly. My father called out the rest of the names, paid them, and sent them on their way. Afterwards he would feel ill for the rest of the night.

My father had a gift for changing golden Saturday evenings into a dark well of fear and rage.

**10.**

There was the son of the darky neighbor who'd bought the house next door to us in Matola, the one with the manfurreira tree in the back corner, overlooking our garage roof.

I used to climb up the old lemon tree to the garage roof to get away from my mother, to talk to myself, play with the cats, and dream up new worlds, a different world.

I almost became pregnant by the darky neighbor's son. I was ten and the fear of it made me ill. I was saved by a whisker. God had protected me. The little black boy, seeing me on the garage roof, climbed up his manfurreira to talk to me behind my mother's back. He was the only one with whom I had a deep relationship. We got as far as touching hands when he passed me over the cats that had fled into his garden. His hands were the same as mine. His palms were pink-yellow-beige, but a darky's. We talked about school. About games. About creepy-crawlies, especially snakes, because there were lots of them in the wild of his garden, and he loved to scare me with them. He showed me their corpses. I remember the day I told him, "My mother doesn't let me talk to you." I also remember telling him, "I have to go, she's calling me." She would call me furiously, totally enraged because she couldn't get to the roof and spank me with her slipper. She was afraid of my conversations with the black. I was afraid of the mulatto child that must already have been growing in my belly, for sure. I liked the boy and had worked out by then that when a man and woman liked each other, a child was born. If I was pregnant by a darky, my father could kill me at will. He could thrash me to within an inch of my life. He could throw me out of the house, and I would never be accepted as a wife for anyone. I would be a darky's woman. And I was petrified of my father. Of his power.



## 11.

I didn't like rings. Darkies didn't wear rings. They wore heavy earrings that tore their earlobes. On their necks they wore strings of red seeds, and colorful ribbons on their wrists, ankles and arms.

I had to wear a gold ruby ring. It was ugly and felt heavy on my finger. Blacks bore nothing heavy, except for the work whites gave them. Serving the white man was heavy enough. That's why, on Sundays, blacks drank the cashew wine they'd left to ferment during the week.

The wine was white and cloudy. It was a dirty wine, with bits of fruit pulp and peel floating in it. It was made in Laurentina or 2M beer bottles, always the king-size kind—gutsy, bazooka bottles.

When cashew fruits were squeezed like a mop, they released a sweet, sharp milky juice that made blacks happy. Yes, on Sunday afternoons blacks were happy with their cashew wine. Sunday afternoon, blacks weren't black, they were nothing at all. They were like their white bosses, happy and able to laugh and fuck, sing, stumble, and sleep. Sunday afternoon, blacks were almost white among themselves. And everything ended Monday, before sunrise.

Sunday afternoon, Nelson Ned sang "Sunday Afternoon" on the radio. Sunday afternoon, we went to the movies. The cinema in Machava played a double bill, with a half-hour break in between, when black kids wearing shoes came in to sell Quibom ice cream to the whites and pyramids of lollipops to the whites' children. The Machava Cinema's huge auditorium was divided into three well-defined areas. Backless wooden benches took up the front half of the room. Upholstered seats filled up the back. And perched four feet above the last row of seats were the boxes, their walls lined with red velvet, the height of luxury. They only filled up when the movie was really popular and swelled the audience. Films like *Fado* or *Mad Moll from Arroios*. Cantinflas, Jerry Lewis and Trinitá also filled the boxes.

Some blacks did go to the movies. They wore shoes and patched-up European clothes. They sat on the benches in front and sometimes, when the theater was half empty, in the first row of seats.

It wasn't written anywhere that blacks couldn't sit like anyone else in the section with cushioned seats or the balcony, but I rarely saw them there. A tacit understanding—not quite an agreement—was in place. Blacks knew they were supposed to sit at the front, on the wooden benches. The whites expected the whole darky crowd to gather up front, talking that language of theirs and looking over their shoulders to ogle white men's wives, but duly seated on the benches where they belonged.

According to the whites, a darky over in the front section never looked back with good intentions. He either gawked at white women, against the laws of nature, or looked for something to steal, or exuded hatred. Generally speaking, whether in or out of the movie theater, a black's gaze was never free of guilt to the colonists. To look a white straight in the eye was a direct provocation. To lower eyes amounted to an admission of guilt. If a black ran, it was because he'd just stolen something. If he walked slowly, he was looking for something to steal.

Sunday afternoons, we went to the movies. I wore a ring. I didn't like rings.

The seats section in the Machava Cinema was pitched at an angle. Everything that fell to the floor there rolled down to the section with the benches, and nobody would go to the front of the room to get it. There was no point. It was darky territory.

I was seven years old. I was wearing that ring. I hated it.

I imagined myself free of that dreadful bauble and came up with a fool-proof idea I carried out the first chance I got. In the darkened cinema, in the middle of the movie, when something particularly noisy and tense was going on, I took the ring off my finger and threw it as hard as I could down under the seats, so it would roll, irrevocably, toward the benches and disappear forever into the hands of the blacks who were sure to think it a great treasure.

I did it, one Sunday, and breathed a sigh of relief. Good-bye ring. Good-bye torture. Good-bye, forever. I was going to say I'd lost it. It was loose and I didn't notice when it fell off my finger. And then, we can't do anything about it now. A ring was expensive, really. But oh well. I was so careless!

That Sunday I ate a Quibom during the interval. I was pleased with myself. No one noticed I no longer had the ring, even when I forgot to hide my hand.

That day, when the interval was almost over, an utterly bizarre scene transfixed the audience in the seats area. A black left his place down below and came up the left aisle, asking something, row after row. What did this guy want? He was asking for money, of course. And when he got to our row, no one would give him anything, that's for sure. Let him work. You didn't give blacks money, unless they worked, and then you didn't give much, to avoid creating bad habits.

When he reached our row, we could make out between the finger and thumb of his right hand a tiny golden ring with a red stone, as he asked, "Does this ring belong to anyone here?"

My mother still has that ring, in her gold-jewelry box at home.



**12.**

We had some houseboys who brought our groceries from Lousã's store in cardboard boxes. They crossed Lourenço Marques on foot when they had to, with the boxes on their heads or on their backs; it was not our problem how. They just had to carry them. They were coming on foot anyway from wherever they were sleeping, which had to be an illegal hut somewhere we didn't care about, as long as they didn't bring fleas or lice or those parasites that burrowed under your skin with them.

When we didn't have servants, Lousã would send his. We didn't need plastic grocery bags.

But I think that was only my family, those bastards, because as I discovered many years later, other whites who were there never practiced colon..., colonism, coloniamism, whatever you call it. They were all so kind to darkies, paid them well, treated them better, and were terribly missed when they left.



## 13.

Ernesto hadn't come to work for three days. He was a darky, and darkies were lazy. They wanted to spend all day stretched out on a mat, drinking beer and cashew wine, while darky women did all the work in the peanut fields, in the sun, sweating away with children on their backs, or suckling on their breast, as their hoes went up and down into the earth.

Darkies needed to be taught to work, for their own good. So they could evolve as they recognized the value of work. Working, they could earn money, and with money they could prosper, provided they prospered as blacks. They could abandon their huts and build a concrete house with a zinc roof. They could wear shoes and send their children to school, where they would learn jobs of use to whites. There was much in need of doing for the black man whose animal nature had to be obliterated—for his own good.

So sometimes, Saturday afternoons, my father had to go to the shantytown and look for Ernesto.

The shantytown was over by Xipamanine, or the airport, or far, far away. The shantytown was like Minotaur's labyrinth, and my father was the Minotaur who entered and left it at will in order to mete out his justice.

The shantytown was crisscrossed by narrow paths indented by gateways into clusters of huts, where there were women talking, children crying or playing, mangy dogs sleeping, goats chewing on grass, pestles pounding corn, loud voices, cans of food steaming over hot coals—in essence, life. The shantytown was made of wicker reed canes that were either old and greyed or fresh and colored like very milky coffee.

My father led me by the hand, and I felt portable, like a light backpack. I almost traveled by air. The earth was red and there was a pink dust over everything. Once in a while, my father would stop and ask, Where does Ernesto such-and-such live? Ah, that's further ahead, close to a big tree, to an old general store, to a crossing where there's a new hut, and then he went further and further, and kept looking. My father would ask and I

would follow him, flying over the red ground, spying through the holes in the wicker walls that concealed lives of blacks, lives of those from my land who couldn't be like me. They were darkies. That was their crime, being darkies. Then my father would find the place, Is this where Ernesto lives? Where's that lazy bum? A woman would point to a hut. My father dropped my hand and went in while I stayed outside, wrapping my arms around myself, among the chickens, the barefoot darky children, the darky woman, all the other darkies from the neighborhood who had seen the white man and came to find out what was going on.

My father shouted inside and then punched and shoved Ernesto out of the hut, both of them dazed. Monday, you're going to work, d'you hear? Monday you'll be at the pump at seven. You'll work for your wife and children, you lazy bastard. What are you doing with your life? Shove. Punch. And the wife and children and whole neighborhood, and me—we stood still, paralyzed by our fear of the white man.

And now the white man puts some cash into the black woman's hand and says to her, Go feed your children. Then he lifts me up in the air, in his coat tails, held firm, while he yells to the black man, Monday at the pump, or else!

And we both fly out of the shantytown. From all around us people come out and gather, along with dogs, chickens, and frightened goats. There's a nervous kid among the wicker: The whitey went in there, kicked Ernesto's ass, now he's leaving, the whitey brought the girl, she's whitey's daughter.

And the white man who carries me flying by the hand crosses the shantytown swiftly, locates his Bedford van parked outside, takes a seat, starts the engine, gets going, looks at me, So, are you tired, d'you want to go get a Coke? Want me to let you take a sip from my spritzer? I look at him but don't answer. That white man is not my father.





## 14.

I'd never hit anyone before, but I slapped her in the face because she annoyed me, because she disagreed with me, because I knew and I was in charge and I was right, because she'd told a lie, because she'd stolen my eraser, how the hell do I know now why I slapped her!

But I did slap her, during the morning recess at the Charter School, against the back wall of the fourth-grade classroom. It was a white wall. Her name was Marília.

It was premeditated. I'd thought earlier, If she annoys me again, I'll hit her. I could hit her with perfect and complete impunity. She was mulatto. And the girl took it and stood there, motionless, her hand raised to her face, saying nothing and looking at me in a strangely wounded way, with no hint of retaliation. I told her, You got what you had coming, and I went off into the playground, totally aware of the infamy I committed, that act of power I didn't understand and didn't agree with. Not because it had been a slap but because it had been Marília. Marília was a weak target. She could do nothing against me. She could have complained, but so what? I was white. Who else could boast of victory ahead of the battle?

I felt awful. Later on. It had been a bitter experience. To beat up those weaker than ourselves was not a Christian thing to do. Jesus wouldn't have done it.

I haven't forgotten the slender face and the lovely kinky hair of the beautiful Marília. She was mulatto and couldn't hit me. I don't remember if I ever told her I was sorry. I don't think I did.



15.

Outside the kitchen door of our house in Matola, my mother had grown a row of chili pepper plants that reached my forehead and bore gorgeous fruit all year round. I practiced my courage and capacity for resistance with them. I yanked at the peppers, picking the reddest and plumpest ones, pulling them off the branches, and I ate them raw, chewing hard and suffering fiery torment on my first attempts, but later trying to distinguish patterns of spiciness depending on the color, size or shape of the pods.

I wanted to become strong. First eat one chili without grimacing, then two, three and four, no limits, until I could win a gold medal in the hot-chili-pepper Olympics, which in fact took place often and without warning among the kids of my neighborhood, Unit F of the Doctor Salazar quarter in New Matola.

Who would endure the most? Who would resist without choking up or making faces? I was going to beat the neighborhood boys in every competition, but most importantly I was going to break my own record. Be strong like my father. Be strong like my father wanted me to be. And like darkies—who ate peppers without grimacing. Or like Helen Keller—who didn't eat any peppers. So I practiced in two stages every time I left the house through the kitchen door. First, the chili row, peppers in a tasting crescendo; second, running around the house to build up resistance, lap after lap, so when I managed six without stopping seven would quickly follow, then eight, and athletic heaven. Be strong. I was going to withstand everything without quitting. I was going to be like Helen Keller. Like my father. Like darkies. Life would not catch me off guard. I was going to live it all, live better and well. I wouldn't be an earthworm, a jellyfish, an amoeba. I wouldn't be a patsy like other women. Oh no, I wouldn't give in. I was going to be like Helen Keller. Or my father. In this, darkies no longer figured.

I remember: I had to defeat the fire and pain.



## 16.

My father's shirts were always white.

It was Saturday afternoon. My mother was slaving away in our kitchen garden. Taking care of rabbits with scabies. Transplanting turnips into the furrows she had dug out on her own, as if she were a black woman.

It was Saturday afternoon, after lunch, which her alchemy had conjured.

It was after she'd dressed me and my father in freshly laundered clothes. Like she did every day.

Saturday afternoon with a golden glow over the shoulders, easy sea breeze blowing through your hair. Ninety degrees or so. Your chest moved sluggishly. Your nostrils opened and closed, slowly. Because it was the south. You breathed in the air.

It was in the white Bedford van my father was driving on Matola highway, toward Lourenço Marques, that a ripe tangerine burst open in my brain.

A revelation, a miracle—in a flash, with no explanation or pause, I read out loud all the advertisements painted on the side walls of the buildings we passed: “Singer, a sewing machine in every home; Always Coca-Cola; Tudor batteries; With Lux soap, once is never enough; 2M beer is all we want.”

The juicy tangerine, an open flower in my brain, was sweet. I said to my father, “I know how to read.” He smiled at me: “You're my treasure.” He didn't say, but he thought, “You're everything to me.”

My father was wearing a very white thin cotton shirt. Beautifully washed and ironed with devotion by my mother, with buttons bursting open at his belly, almost popping off. My father's sunburnt skin was glowing, radiant. And his eyes, radiant. My father's smile smiled all by itself, hiding nothing. At night my father would come home with his shirt filthy black because he touched and let himself be touched by dirt, by charcoal, by oranges, by me. Now he was flawless. On his shirt pocket there was a barely noticeable remnant of an ink stain from a broken pen. Nothing, really. A fraction of an inch. Flawless.

It was a happy afternoon. We'd walk to Zambí restaurant, maybe we'd have some yogurt downtown or go snacking on gizzards at Sabié. He would let me sip from his glass of beer. Or from his cocktail or wine spritzer. He would let go of my hand, and I could run around and breathe alone a little, without being hemmed in—breathe deeply, breathe the air bittersweet with the smells of darky sweat, pollen and peanuts—because with my father by my side no darky would dream of stealing me. That fear. No one would steal me or molest me, that guilt of which I would also be guilty because my smile was too pure. My father was there and his hands were like bear paws. He would tell me stories from when he was young, back in Portugal, like the one about the soaking rain cloud he was trying to outrun on the road from Óbidos to Caldas, and which ended up staying over him because he ran at the same speed and in the same direction as the cloud, as he finally understood when he stopped, with his lungs bursting, and the cloud passed over him. His memory. No, mine. The ridiculous stories he told me so I would laugh and unwittingly learn how sweet it is to be ridiculous, to be nothing but a ridiculous person, a stone, a freshly baked loaf of bread. Noble and ridiculous.

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I told him, “Dad, I now know how to read,” and leaned back in the seat, my head against the cushion, eyes closed, as I took in the smell of the sea coming from the right, from the marshes by the SONEFE power plant. My muscles, always tight, relaxed. There was no more war in me and I could rest. The rules of reading made sense in an instant, simply because the obstinate tangerine had decided to open up completely in my brain, like an octopus spreading its tentacles. There, inside the van on its way to Lourenço Marques, near the power plant, like a first menstruation.

I could read. It had been difficult. But now, this miracle. So fast. I could read. I opened my eyes again to make sure and read, as if I'd done nothing else all my life, “King-size LM cigarettes, a modern life for the modern man.” I didn't understand how it happened, but I could read.

This miracle of reading, this magic working so fast in my brain, as if someone waved a wand from a distance or spelled out mysterious words, broke a spell over me.

From that Saturday afternoon onward, although my physical prison didn't change and the walls and iron bars still grew tall all around me, I became freer.

Sentences could steal me away from any place and transport me into diverse minds, to listen to what they thought and didn't say—the minds

of good people, bad people, and so-so people, which was most of them. I could sit in lost ships, hover over volcanoes, and sleep in gardens filled with roses and delicate lilac shadows.

That was when I slowly began to turn into my father's worst enemy. An enemy within, a silent one. An enemy who sees and listens, and who doesn't even ask for permission. It was when I began to turn into a mole.

Not until many, many, many years later did I understand that being able to read, having access to this key to decoding secrets, had transformed me against everyone's will into the mole that would gnaw at all their roots, slowly, one at a time, until only dust remained.

My father had a white shirt, and I, his life and treasure, stained it with dirt forever.



## 17.

During Marcelo Caetano's rule, ships arrived full every week. Colonists came together with soldiers and stayed, rented houses, settled, enrolled their children in high school, business college, or vocational training, hired a recommended houseboy or took their chances with someone who knocked on their door. A few would buy a general store, nearby or far away, three or four hundred miles from the capital, where they sold charcoal, gas, flour, dried fish and beer to darkies who came out of the wilderness and didn't speak Portuguese. They learned to speak all kinds of dialects. They served as middlemen. They got ahead. But most stayed around the city.

The troops went north and were matched up by radio programs with war sweethearts to whom they could send aerograms. I wanted to be a war sweetheart. If only I were fifteen... War sweethearts were girlfriends of sorts, but only by post, so no kissing on the lips, and I liked to listen to the broadcasts that featured their messages: "Maria Albertina Santos sends greetings to corporal Diamantino Russo, stationed in New Viseu in the 3470 company, on behalf of herself and her family, along with best wishes for a return soon in good health and high spirits."

We knew as much about what the troops were actually doing as we did about our country's politics. We knew zilch.

I'm not unaware there was a war going on in the land I'm describing. There was a war, but it wasn't visible in the south. We didn't know how it had started or what it was for, exactly. Before the Revolution of April 25, at least, the subject wasn't talked about in front of me. Nor was it avoided.

There was a war because there were terrorists. There were terrorists because human nature was spiteful and dissatisfied. Evil existed everywhere, and we had no choice but to fight against it.

The war was in the north, but we weren't aware of its seriousness. We didn't talk about soldiers on our side who got killed. The vocabulary we now know didn't exist to us back then: ambush, guerrilla, all kinds of

mines. We thought they were there in their barracks, doing military service, some propaganda campaigns. Prodding blacks who were misbehaving, as was normal with them. Or bumping them off if they were stubborn and didn't obey, which was unlikely. That's what my cousin must have been doing up in the north—prodding some blacks.

The north was really far away. It was up there in the lands of the Makua and Makonde. The terrorists, all thieves, wanted to steal land from the Portuguese. They came from Tanzania with their very black and spiteful skin. We had to defend our land, and that's why soldiers were coming from Portugal. There were black soldiers, too. These were put into our combat units, so they would be the frontline and die first. It saved white lives. Darkies dying in the war was a lesser evil. It was their thing, between them.

**18.**

My cousin was born in Lourenço Marques and never uttered the three very difficult syllables of the word Maputo. Ma-pu-to. The five syllables of Lourenço Marques flowed off his tongue. Very white.

Maputo was a darky name. A darky, a wilderness, or a river could be called Maputo, Incomati, Limpopo, Zambezi. A darky village could be called Marracuene, Inhaca, Infulene, Xipamanine. A white city, no. Had to be Lourenço Marques, Beira, Mocímboa Beach.

Xai-Xai was for darkies. Ponta do Ouro was for whites. No white person who had left Lourenço Marques could get used to calling it any other name. Like an icebox. A white person even today thinks icebox and catches themselves, in a fraction of a second, to say refrigerator. Thinks hen and corrects to chicken. Thinks Lourenço Marques and says, with gusto, with vengeance, as if to hold on to a name were to hold on to what the name denotes, Lourenço Marques. Says it slowly and savors every single syllable. Lou-ren-ço Mar-ques.

Life in Lourenço Marques was placid, tepid, sibilant, and very fluid, like its name.

When my cousin managed to leave Maputo safely, he looked behind him on the road to the airport and said, "I'll never come back to Lourenço Marques." He kept his word.



## 19.

After he left for Portugal, we buried his machete, his gun, and his uniform. He had been in Niassa with license to kill darkies, and all his stuff smelled of blood and went on smelling for many years, even as it remained buried in the fertile, insecure soil of Matola, until he blew his brains out. By then he was living in Xabregas, having burned out all his veins, robbed jewelry stores on Almirante Reis, and murdered blacks in Damaia by shooting them in the back.

Apart from all this, he was my first cousin.

It was easy to die in the former colonies. You lived, you died. There were hunting accidents, accidents in the wild, work accidents, traffic accidents, accidents. Fingers were cut and then healed, washed with cold water. Flesh grew in the same place. If it didn't heal, an arm could be amputated or you died of septicemia. Just like that.

A darky's life was worth the price of his usefulness. A white's life was worth much, much more, but still wasn't worth a lot. The life of a Saffer, one of those who came from South Africa sporting Mexican sombreros to sun themselves at the Polana Hotel, that was the life, yes indeed. They sure knew how to deal with darkies, kept them on a tight rein.

During Caetano's rule, killing a darky began to be a hassle. If the police found out, they would come asking questions: "Now then, Rebelo, you didn't see the pedestrian and killed him?"

"Not me, Officer Pacheco, it was night, there were no lights on the road, the guy was drunk and threw himself on top of my car, what was I supposed to do?!"

"Man, you should've stopped to check the darky was okay!"

"I thought I'd only knocked him about a bit, that he'd wake up sober in a few hours, head on to his hut, and remember nothing about it. That's dar-kies for you. They drink till they collapse and then they screw up our lives."

"I'll let it go this time, Rebelo, but make sure it doesn't happen again, we now have orders from Lisbon..."

From a certain point on, killing a darky became a real hassle.



**20.**

In Maputo, after independence and even before, some soldiers demobilized from the Portuguese army who didn't go back to the fatherland because they were Mozambicans, black or white, were persecuted and murdered. Whites would say it was FRELIMO's revenge for the war. There were neighborhood committees. Commissions were formed. Homes were visited and searched. Everything was possible in that lawless time.

It was always easy to die in that land, before or after.

My cousin had been raised to feel the most profound contempt for blacks. When he turned nineteen and was sent to Niassa, he was happy to go. He was going to fight for the Portuguese California.

He came down to Lourenço Marques every nine months, but had changed. He let his beard grow. There was a war, yet my cousin never spoke about the war. No one spoke about the war. I guess war is not to be spoken about, ever.

"So are they real hardasses, those guys up north?" He smiled and didn't answer. "But you take care of them, right? They'll soon see who gets to keep this." My cousin said little and avoided his friends. He stayed in his room, smoking, and shut up forever. Even though he said the odd thing afterwards, "Yes, no, maybe, I don't know," he never spoke again. He was ashamed, my cousin was ashamed. He looked at me with eyes wide open and was ashamed of me.

He was a darkly handsome man. I was a fiery ten-year-old, secretly in love with him, and, although I had no clue about sex, I dreamed of living out intense erotic adventures together. I spied on him in his room, always kept in near darkness, where he took refuge and smoked a lot. He didn't know what to say to me. He was ashamed of me. I closed my eyes and fantasized about us being tied up together, in each other's arms, and being thrown into an ignited pool, where the pleasurable intensity and violence of what was happening burned us up. My cousin awakened my first strange desires and, a few years later, killed himself.



**21.**

My father was chatting with some other men in the street. As usual, I was swirling in his orbit, listening to the distant buzz of their conversation.

It was the day of my first period. I was wearing a short, belted, plain white poplin dress with lace stockings and flat patent-leather shoes. Everything was white because they always dressed me in white, like a lamb for the slaughter.

My shoes were too wide, gaping, and I tripped on the stairs, exposing my blood-stained panties. I knew they were soaked, since I hadn't used a napkin, and I slowly died of shame, imagining all those men had seen my blood. Among them my very young, very cute cousin, about whom I secretly dreamed. He had seen my blood-sullied panties.

Thanks to that embarrassing memory, I can date my first period.

It was January, then. It was the day of my first period. I was eleven, and we must've been returning from someone's house, where I must've listened to adult conversation for hours on end. A noise that meant nothing to me. "Yes, I'm listening." Indeed yes, I was listening, I would tell them. Yes, I listened. I thought. I watched. I observed the animals, the trinkets, the spines of books from the Elementary Short Library, the houseboys who scrapped the floor and then washed it with turpentine, and polished it with wax, and buffed it up with half a coconut and a fleece mop, until you could see your face in it. These enormous, glossy-black men fascinated me, bent over on the floor, cleaning what we dirtied, serving us seafood delicacies the shells of which they might be able to suck, licking their fingers, as they washed the dishes. And they were so like me. They had a mother, a father, cousins... Their eyes were as sharp as mine. They smiled at me. They spoke to me when their bosses were not around.

I liked to talk to the houseboys. The houseboys treated me well. They carried me piggyback. My mother was afraid the houseboys might hurt me or steal me. Or she didn't trust me, surmising my darky soul.



**22.**

I found out about the April 25 Revolution on the twenty-sixth. My father was told in the late afternoon, while we were in the small square opening up onto Latino Coelho Avenue, in Lourenço Marques. I know we were in the small square opening up onto Latino Coelho Avenue because I can see the buildings and men standing in a circle in their blue, grey and light-brown tunics, exchanging opinions while I roamed between them and the curb, on which I would balance for fun as I listened to them. Sometimes I would grab hold of my father's hand, twirling around him, pulling his arms. He was getting worked up in his conversation with the other men, and I was listening, indifferently, to the disturbed noise of their voices and the emotions they contained. I heard from afar. I couldn't hear. Only my father was of interest to me.

I wore khaki shorts and flip-flops, bought from the Chinese downtown. It was hot. It was the late afternoon, and that humid shadow was already rising, and the smell of the trees and the earth, tired of the daylight. But the day hadn't been that hot.

My mother had gone up to prepare dinner.

But that can't be right because we only went to live in the small square opening up onto Latino Coelho Avenue after the massacres of September 7 that year. Maybe we had gone to visit someone. Maybe my godfather, Joaquim, the insane, who had put up some buildings there, or rather, my godfather Joaquim's darkies had put up some buildings there because my godfather understood nothing about construction, although he knew how to give orders and shout he wanted everything done by the following day, and that the plumber and electrician were coming... And he also must have known how to give orders to the plumber and electrician because my godfather was essentially a suicidal poet, an exploiter of women, and a liar. And a spiritualist. He had a buzzing in his ears and could see strange things. The man might have been clairvoyant but definitely not a builder. That I can guarantee.

I can remember another conversation about April 25, also in the late afternoon, downtown, outside to the left of the building housing the bazaar. A group of men, as usual, me being the only girl, just because I was with my father and took part as an irrelevant witness to his public acts. I was the electrician's daughter. Your daughter's all grown up. What grade are you in? And little else. I listened.

The conversation in the small square opening up onto Latino Coelho Avenue took place at sunset but not so late. The light was whiter. This time, the light fell more subtly, more orangey. It was the orange light of the Indian Ocean, the same color as the earth at the Zambi restaurant, at the Sun Coast, at Red Point, which is not red, it's a strong orange like dark saffron.

Which of these scenarios is the real one? Did the conversation about April 25 take place up in Alto-Maé or downtown? Was it the same conversation? Were they different conversations about the same thing? I prefer the second scenario. Perhaps both did occur. Temporal coherence, at a great distance, is lost. "It was like this," "I've got this idea." One thing is certain—it happened.

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A revolution had happened in Lisbon. The previous day there had been huge commotion. Marcelo Caetano had fled to Brazil, the country was without a government, there were troops in the street, it was a banana republic, and what was going to happen in the colonies? Yes, there had been a commotion, and then what? The government had changed hands, and just as well, those who'd been in charge robbed us every day. It had been soldiers. It was a good thing for us?! They'd grant independence to the colonies? Oh, at long last, Africa would be ours! At long last, we were going to stop paying taxes to the idiots in Lisbon! Now we would be able to prosper and turn our land into a California. That is what our land was going to be: California. California, but like South Africa. With the darkies in hand, controlled, or they wouldn't get any work done. April 25 would hand Africa over to the whites, and then we were going to be happy.

## 23.

White heads dribbled across the soccer field gradually lost their faces, skin, eyes and brains, and what was left of their battered flesh and broken jawbones.

The black players patched up the balls with blood-starched rags torn from corpses, and that's how they kept together the shape that came apart with each kick, until nothing remained except a handful of mushy, ground bones that was booted into the wild, behind the reeds. Then another rotten head would come along, until it was softened up. It was the end of the afternoon. It was growing dark quickly.

They gave me the message on the way to the airport, after the high sandy track that came from the bowels of Matola, doing 90 an hour until we got to the tarmac. They repeated it to me. "Don't forget to tell them."

As the van moved forward, a cloud formed on both sides, and behind us for anyone following. It was thick with bloodthirsty dust that penetrated our bodily textures and the clothes we were wearing. It dried your throat, your nostrils, your eyes.

"Now, over there, they're really chummy with darkies, but you're going to explain to them that it isn't how they think it is. They defend darkies, but no one talks about what they're doing to us... You tell them every gory detail of the September massacres. Tell them everything that has happened to us. And to Candinha..."

On September 7, my father arrived home euphoric. Things were going back to the way they were. "This is going to be ours again; everyone's at the Radio Club, they've occupied it, the blacks are finished, it's their day of reckoning. We really are going to win this."

I smiled. What could "win this" mean?

I let myself go. I often did. It wasn't relevant at that moment. The days were slow and good. If we won, who would win, precisely? What was winning? My father was happy. I was happy.

I smiled because I was his. I knew who he was. I knew in part. I smiled because knowing who he was, I was his, still.

He plucked me off the ground and carried me piggyback to the Radio Club station.

A white crowd was in front of the building. Mostly men. Also their wives. I could hardly see the building from one of its corners, the one on the right. I know it was the right corner because I can see that sliver, I know I'm crouching slightly to be able to glimpse it. Just a building. The same Radio Club as always, where they made the variety shows we listened to at night.

But for my father and all those whites, at that moment, the Radio Club building was a symbol of hope, and they gathered anxiously, as if worshipping a political god at a pagan temple. It was an invisible hope but strong, as hope is, rendered there a solid, palpable rock. Something tangible.

A nervous noise could be heard.

The late-afternoon air seethed with virile energy, with desire, with fear. An empty noise, discharges of jarring voices, but deep down, in their chests, an enormous silence that shuddered, devoured, a punished hunger that couldn't survive the striking of a match.

All I know about September 7 is this: Whites were winning against darbies, maybe there would no longer be that independence that was talked about, so feared by whites. Nothing else.

## 24.

Hand in hand, we went downtown for a snack somewhere, talking non-stop. Maybe gizzards, clams, cockles. A steak sandwich. For my father, an alcoholic drink mixed with a soda. For me, a soda mixed with my father's mixed drink.

He was too soft on me. Much too soft. Without teaching me, my father initiated me in the pleasure that had already ignited with my godfather's strange fire. I liked to be in his presence, to go on walks with him, anywhere, hand in hand. He didn't speak of responsibilities to me. He didn't comb my hair or straighten out my dress collar like my mother. Instead, he talked to me like an adult. We would talk about what the day brought and took. And he was at ease with me, that thing of his, part of him, the same as him.

He was very big and very powerful, like a giant-king, and his presence protected me from every irrational fear. I don't think I was ever as happy as in those moments when he took me by the hand and walked with me through the streets of Lourenço Marques, to the Scala and even beyond the Scala, seeing shop windows, people, sensing the smells coming from all sides as evening fell and the street lights and neon signs gradually lit up. And he would explain to me, "Now they lit them in the substation at..." All my senses were awoken during those evenings.

I felt I was a person. I felt I was a woman. His soul mate.

There was no man as capable of freeing me, breaking me in, giving me life just by existing. Just by being there, smiling at me, giving me strength. Holding my hand. Holding me. Listening to me. That father I betrayed.

That day, on our way downtown, he asked me what I wanted to be. A typist, perhaps, I replied. I liked typewriters. My father explained to me that wouldn't guarantee a living. I could be an agronomist. That earned a fair amount. Mozambique was a fertile land where whatever was planted grew, and it was going to need agronomists in the future.

What was agronomy?

For my father, the most important thing was my independence. I had to think of assuring my independence. Of having the means to get by without depending on a man.

This conversation is still very vivid to me. We talked next to Vasco da Gama gardens. “You must have a profession that lets you live your life, with or without children, without relying on any man! Without living off anyone. You must be the mistress of your life. You must be free. Do you understand?”

“I do.”

“So, you must study, you must go to university!”

“Yes. I will.”

25.

After April 25, you could hear the war being talked about freely. If only because the terrorists came right into the city and it was necessary to explain where they came from, who these invaders were, full of power.

I understood the colonists wanted independence but under white power. Possibly a division of administrative duties with one or two courteous, malleable mulattos. FRELIMO was not desirable. That land, they said, wouldn't be for blacks or Portugal, but for the whites who lived there. It would be a white independence. The idea was to build a Portuguese California-cum-South Africa.

Even today, I can still see them wrapped up in the same nostalgia. "Independence was done badly, and Mário Soares and Almeida Santos are to blame. They sold us out and handed everything over to the darkies." I translate: "What they handed over to the darkies they should've handed over to us, and we then would've sorted out the black mass." When they confess, with sincere tears, "I left my heart in Africa," I translate it as "I left everything there, and I had such a great life."

My father, on the eve of his death, dreamed he was doing an installation in Sommershield and I had gone with him in the van. Then we went for a snack at the Sabié, a steak sandwich. For me a Coca-Cola, for him a spritzer. I can see my father smiling. "Do you like it?" I smile. "Yes."

We need time to understand. To kill. To be able to look them in the face again with the same love. To forgive.



## 26.

In that other, faraway life, I had a cat called Bolinhas. Every now and then, it would flee through the kitchen window and disappear for a few weeks. It would return gaunt, dirty, bloody, without an ear, missing claws, with its tail chopped, singed and squinting. It would meow at the window through which it had left. We would open it, and it would plod in, on its last legs, to our disbelief. It would take some time to recover. When it went, we didn't notice its departure, nor did we know whether it would return. We never knew, and that's how it was for years.

There was also Gimbrinhas my father had brought back from the outback one day, saying, Be careful, it's wild. Gimbrinhas was huge, striped, and never flinched. It would stretch out on my father's desk on top of mounds of contracts. My father wouldn't brush it off. At most he would tell it to budge over, proudly man to man, and Gimbrinhas moved, retaining its role as reigning spirit of the house. Was Gimbrinhas wild? A little. It scratched my face just because I wanted to kiss its nose. It really couldn't be bothered with children. It was a very noble, very regal cat. I respected it and preferred to grab hold of sweet Bolinhas, who was neither striped nor wild nor had come from the outback nor showed the slightest sign of any pedigree.

Then the war arrived, or rather FRELIMO, and the cats were abandoned in Lourenço Marques. I never managed to understand why Bolinhas and Gimbrinhas were left behind. I didn't buy the excuse they'd been dropped off at someone's house and fled from it. Nor that the cats couldn't be transported elsewhere. Or that the cats had to stay behind. I don't believe they fled. They said the darkies ate them. The cats and dogs left behind by whites, unlike the containers with blackwood furniture, or pedestaled rosewood ashtrays, or ivory tusks, were all eaten by darkies, chinks and Pakis.

At the time, you couldn't get out alive from anywhere. There was the illusion of life in Portugal; of starting afresh, escaping the chaos, the slaughter. The duped were soon unduped, educated by their uprooting.

Of all the slaughters from that time, the one that most affected me was the pets' because they were the only innocent party in such a complicated power game.

27.

They were saying I was a woman now.

In the Bedford, between the pair of them. The car sped along. We were late. They'd stopped talking.

I was passing by places I knew well, and I knew it was the last time. I gazed with indifference at the big, colorful trees, the shadows, the ammonia-colored afternoon light, the dirty street corners, the dull reed on both sides of the road to the airport. It wasn't worth fixing an image. Everything would soon be extinguished. I wouldn't return to the place that was my homeland but didn't belong to me.

From then on, my homeland never again was a piece of actual ground—a plot about which I could say, “I belong here.” Or, “Can you see that window on the fourth floor, that's where we lived”; “Where that building's now, my mother...”

My homeland would have to be a story, a language, an idea mixed with some culture and some memory, a non-belonging to anything or anyone for a long time, and at the same time a being able to be anything and anyone's, if they wanted me, so I could deserve to be loved. What was love's price?

My body gradually became my land. I materialized myself in it, and every day I would return to my land at nightfall and leave it in the morning.

By the time we stopped at the airport, the message I was bearing had been repeated to me countless times.

The message was important. The darky masses, at that very moment, were killing at random. They captured, they humiliated willy nilly. We felt on our very last legs. Power was no longer even mentioned. We were afraid. And that was the truth. The truth of the end.

A white's life in Lourenço Marques had become a game of good and bad luck.

I played this game, without great losses, a few weeks before my departure, as I waited for a lift from my father on one of the corners of the 24 de

Julho Avenue, the one by the Charter School. That corner was a very fresh spot with a lot of shade.

I was wearing brown Lycra slacks bought in South Africa.

A black youth was moving quickly in my direction, without any obvious intention. When he got near me, he grabbed me with his left arm, squashing my body against his and gathering up my mound of Venus in his right hand, squeezing it hard as if he were juicing a cashew fruit. He looked me in the eyes, very close, without fear or guilt. He let go of me without a word and carried on his way quickly, without looking back.

I froze, paralyzed, mute, my eyes wide open. Tiny flashes of light were bursting around me. I didn't look for anyone. I didn't see anyone. I don't know if anyone saw me. I don't know if there were people on the street.

I don't know if my father arrived straight away or if he was late. When he arrived, I got quietly into the van, and he took me where he had to take me. I never told him what happened, nor my mother. I had to spare them. To avoid complications. It could be a fuse. With my father, you never knew. They had to avoid getting into trouble at that time.

The time of whites was over.

Something like what I've just described, in plain daylight, in the middle of the city, would never happen in the time of whites. If it did, it would guarantee a summary lynching within hours for the youth in question. They would have found him. He would die, or someone who looked like him, but in any case there would be a death.

He knew it. Now, nothing could touch him. Because he knew, he had dared to do it, looking me in the eyes the whole time, victorious. Anything was possible then. But what most mattered was that his time had arrived, coinciding with the end of mine. I was a figure of the defeated land to be plundered.

"Blacks cutlass-slashed to death Conceição's husband and children, in Infulene. Remember that, they dismembered him completely, he was splattered all over the corn field... It was your father who came across his bits!"

"You're a woman now, you have to tell them what they did to Joaquim's Candinha, with a stick... that they all used her and then they skewered her with it from below until it came out of her throat, until she died like Christ."

But in Lisbon no one knew what a cutlass was. You would have to describe the characteristics and capabilities of the weapon. Only then could you tell the rest.

Big like a meat cleaver, most of them, but longer, with wide blades, slightly curved or not, depending on the make. Heavy, sharp, granite-cutting. They opened up bush, they gelded, they disemboweled, they severed, they chopped.

Cutlasses were tame in the hands of blacks. And cold. They washed them carefully with saliva, licking them and wiping them clean on their dirty vests. A cutlass was worth its weight in gold and had a life of its own. And a soul. There was a soul in every blade.

A cutlass could change any living body into a random, shapeless mass of organs. In seconds. It was an instrument of death and power like no other. I wasn't afraid of firearms, because death was hidden within them. But a cutlass showed uncovered entrails. It shone. It had stains that would never come out. A cutlass was the mocking ugly mug of death, with its lips painted red.

In the days following September 7, the black mass lost their restraint, and in Machava, in Infulene, in Matola, in Malhangalene, and everywhere, they blindly butchered everything white: the farmers and their families, cats, dogs, chickens, parakeets, white cows, all of which they left in agony on the ground, soaking it with blood. Kaffir chickens with featherless necks were spared. So too were black cats.

“When you saw them playing soccer with heads, on the road to the Zoo... you tell them everything... all they robbed, plundered, broke, burned, occupied. The cars, the houses. The crops, the livestock. Everything left to rot. You're going to tell them. How they provoke us every day, and we can't answer back without being hauled before a committee. How at the checkpoints they insult us, humiliate us, spit on us. How they don't let us go to church. How they arrested the priest and Adventist pastor because they refused to stop worship.

How we never know if we'll make it home. How it depends on their whim. They think they're kings, that it's all theirs, that they're in charge. As if they'd built this city and everything there is. This everything that's ours.

Tell them how they detain, torture, kill without even looking who. How there's no food, how everything that arrives in international aid is for FRELIMO bigwigs, how it doesn't reach the stores. Tell them how many hours you stand in line for bread, only to come home empty-handed.

Tell them that everything they hear over there on the news is lies, that Almeida Santos and Mário Soares are dogs who are selling us out for a pittance. That they should bring in Spínola. He's a leader. He's hard. Bring us Spínola.

Tell them we couldn't get visas for South Africa, or Rhodesia. That we tried everything. That we will come back. We have to arrange passage on a ship so we can bring the furniture, and that's only done through connections.

Tell your grandmother... Some large boxes, in the mail... I bet they'll arrive with everything inside smashed to pieces. Blackwood, that'll be worth a good sum over there. And the silver coins, their weight in silver. Tell her to put these things away where she has space. Your Debbie books. The big fan. The lamp from your father's desk. The typewriter. The Raul da Bernarda china vases I brought in my trousseau. The tea service. The sewing machine. Papers, photos, the certificate of your first holy communion. The Chinese tea service."





## 28.

On September 7, Domingos escaped by a black neck from being cutlashed to death and fled with his wife and daughter to the city.

Domingos raised pigs and chickens in the Infulene valley. That is to say, Domingos's darkies raised pigs and chickens for him while he fornicated with the widow from over the road.

His farm must still be there, at the side of the old Infulene road, lined on both sides with reed, on the right for anyone coming from Maputo to Matola, at the crossroads with the sandy track leading to Cândido's lands.

Domingos didn't have electric lights—he wasn't brought up with them in Portugal, so he didn't need them. Consequently, at night his house filled with the pale light of gas lamps that shimmered through the mosquito nets on the open windows. At night, in Infulene, you couldn't breathe because the mosquitos would stick to the walls of your windpipe.

Domingos's walls, I remember clearly, were painted from top to bottom with the ruddy, dry color of long-squashed mosquitos. As if covered with ornately patterned wallpaper. This painting was gradually done over the years. It was common in colonists' houses, especially away from the cities. And Infulene was a swamp.

At night, there was nothing to do in Infulene. I liked sleeping over there with Domingos's daughter, who was my best friend. We listened to quiz shows on the radio or music on the record player. We would read Sarah Beirão. That's a lie. She would tell me the story, except for the ending, and then, yes, she would lend me Sarah Beirão. We would talk about boys. She would talk. And we laughed.

Domingas was older than me. We bathed in a tub together. I thought she was big and beautiful because she already had breasts and pubic hair, but in fact she was just big.

It was Domingas who masturbated me for the first time. First thing in the morning, with the tub full of lukewarm water, she stretched out her leg

between mine and searched with her foot for my vulva, which she rubbed gently, staring at me mockingly and laughing. She knew it all. And I stared at her and laughed, and I let myself keep looking at her, laughing and enjoying, in equal doses.

I wanted to bathe with Domingas for the rest of my life, but then September 7 came along, the insurgents smashed up the bathtub, and we had to deprive ourselves of such hygienic and marginal pleasures.

On September 7, Domingos saved his wife and daughter, nothing else. His house in Infulene was broken into, plundered, burned down, his livestock taken or killed. Domingos's blacks were sick of carrying sacks of flour, corn and bran that were never for them. Domingos was lucky because Cândido, from the farm far down the sandy track, who like him bred pigs and chickens, was killed by a cutlass, as well as his children, along with anything that was white and moved: dogs, cats and parakeets. Their bodies were chopped up and scattered all over the farm. No head rested anywhere near a leg. Cândido's wife, who was in town that night, later went to see what was left over. As nothing was left over, except for rotting white stumps, she asked the FRELIMO men to dig a grave for her, where she would bury the collection of her husband, children and animals, all unrecognizable. It didn't matter who was who. Life must go on, and it did.

A few months later, the committee announced that plundered and abandoned houses would be occupied by the hut-dwelling population if their owners didn't return. For whites, there was nothing to return to. Apartments for rent in Maputo had run out. They didn't want to lose their properties—at that time, at least, they still thought they could hold onto them—but they were afraid to return. So, Domingos justified his house by negotiating with the committee literacy classes for the people, to be given by his daughter, who was in high school. His daughter called me to be her assistant, and on Wednesdays and Saturdays we spent the day in their burned-down house, teaching the ABC to the children of those who had murdered Cândido. There was no furniture, only the floor and cement walls licked by the flames. The black kids arrived at three in the afternoon, sat down without any semblance of order, in the middle of the room or leaning against the walls. They came barefoot and in rags, as had always been the case. They came with their arms and legs white and red from dust and earth, their faces snotty and their eyes bleary. Domingas and I, very white, very clean, very well-heeled, very polite, drew the alphabet, in chalk, on the burnt wall, which

we then washed so it would dry quickly and be of use again. We brought pencils and exercise books, where we drew rows of i's and u's and p's and r's for them to copy. They couldn't speak Portuguese, except for the bare minimum, but they understood everything we explained to them. And at the end of the afternoon, when the mosquitos began, the children of those who killed Cândido went away happy for having learned many letters. That was how for twelve months Domingas and I taught literacy, with the committee's approval, to the black kids from the Infulene valley.

Then I was sent to Portugal to be a woman, and Domingas carried on, all alone, assuring her father's legacy, which was never theirs.

As for the pair of us, the war robbed us of our pleasure. It always does.

When we grow up and life corrupts us, we can never to return to our first ABCs, those lessons that naturally know no corruption.

But that was another life.



29.

1975. November. TAP flights sold out for months, to any destination.

The preceding days had been tumultuous. Suitcases. False bottoms. Lettuce-green and canary-yellow slacks of la finesse fabric for the Portuguese winter, so grey and brown and dark blue.

Socks. Panties. Bras. Modess sanitary napkins. Long-sleeved sweaters. A heavy, light-colored wool coat, unfashionable, hurriedly taken in.

The whites of Lourenço Marques, rich and poor, were clearing out from long before independence.

We had stayed to the end. My father believed in a turnaround, in a white Africa in which blacks would be assimilated, wear shoes, go to school and work.

Blacks would smile at us, always, grateful for what we had done for their land, that is to say, for our land, and would serve us, of course, because they were black and we were white, and that was the natural order of things. Isn't it normal to get dogs used to their collar and leash, or to slaughter and roast a baby goat? Well then, that was the order of the world.

My father believed in one white movement, and then, after September 7, in another white movement. One that would really win, that would be bankrolled by South Africa or Rhodesia. We would expel black power from the cities, send them back to the wild from where they came, where they belonged, and we would tame them or slaughter them. One thing or the other, depending on what they deserved. An Africa of whites, yes, an Africa of whites, we would repeat.

Because that land, ladies and gentlemen, was my father's. My father was the whole of the Mozambican population. He felt strong and enraged and he frothed to his last day, refusing to lower his voice in front of a black man, to show him his documents, travel papers, to address him respectfully, to offer him his hand as a sign he accepted his authority.

With or without independence, a darky was a darky and my father was a colonist to his dying day.

On the eve of his death, when he no longer ate nor drank, he dreamed that darkies had put his cables in the walls all wrong, and he shouted at them. He was wrapped up in all that. He suffered. I asked him, “Do you still remember much about Sommershield?”

He did remember. He knew by heart the names of all the streets, the location of the buildings, proper business names of the stores, on each corner, and even the full names of the builders in charge of each job. He remembered each one of his favorite darkies: Samuel, Ninhanbaka...

“We would have made that into America... if those guys... and this lot...,” and he would shake his head, let out a squeak, close his eyes, shrug his shoulders right up to his neck, quiver as if he wanted to let his thoughts go: “Damned darkies.”

In 1975, there was no longer any construction in Lourenço Marques. Everything had stopped. There were no more works through which to pipe electric cables, and even if there were, they would be handed over to Soviet, Cuban or Baltic aid workers, not to an undesirable colonist with a bad reputation, a tarnished past, hanging by a thread.

100 Little by little, my father’s blacks disappeared into the shantytown because there was no longer any work. Not one was left. I never saw my father’s darkies again.

At school, the French teacher was a darky. *Il était du Sénégal. Noir. Le français au noir!*

History was all about the kingdoms prior to Ngungunyane, his ethnic group and others. There were lots of them. And the wars they fought. The Bantus, the Shona, those from Mutapa. The Nguni, then the Zulus.

Whites would laugh. That’s darky history! Darkies think they have a history! “A monkey history!”

In Portuguese, we wrote poems about colonialism, the exploitation of man by man, the armed struggle, the end of bride price, and the black market; FRE-LIMO as a religion, the people’s saviors, Samora Machel, Graça Simbine, Eduardo Mondlane. Mondlane was okay since he was “married to a white woman, because he’d been educated in Europe. He wasn’t really black at all, more like mulatto”—which was “where the shoe really pinched, that’s why they murdered him. Samora did it.” As for Chissano, he was “as false as Judas.”

In Art, we did collective projects: murals on the revolution, posters on the revolution... But that wasn’t really schooling. So, I had to be given a destiny. I was white. “I was already a woman. It was dangerous.”

On around the twentieth, my cases and bags were packed, and I said nothing because a daughter “didn’t have wants, didn’t have a say.” At the eleventh hour, they were thrown into the trunk of the Bedford, on top of tubes, cables, sockets and plugs, switches, and assorted voltage-measuring devices, which by then had fallen into disuse. My mother yanked a comb through my hair, as always, and told me, “Today, you’re wearing this suit. You’re going to Portugal.”

I got into the van carefully to avoid getting dirty. They hadn’t told me to—I just knew—I could never get dirty. I’d used up that prerogative at birth. That’s why I was always getting dirty, before all else, as a matter of urgency.

On around the twentieth, all three of us got into the Bedford in silence. Me, in the middle. Them, on either side, and they drove me to the airport, on the track that went from New Matola—the Salazar quarter. My father called it the Salazar quarter.

It left us with red dust in our throats. We were in a rush. Late.

I think it was the last time I was in the middle of them. Between them.

In the silence, I went over my homework.

I was the bearer of the message. I carried with me the truth. Their truth.

Mine, too, but they couldn’t imagine I might have a truth that was just mine, without the shadow of their hands.

And so I went over the homework.



## 30.

My father drove his white van on the track that crossed all New Matola up to the tarmac road connecting Lourenço Marques to Old Matola, further down. And I wasn't dressed in white. He was driving too fast because we were late for the flight. That day I was going to Portugal. My flight was in the late afternoon, and it went without saying that you needed a good few hours to comply with all the customs formalities. Document checks. Rum-maging through suitcases. Going through a metal detector, a pat down.

I could hear the crashing of electric cables, jolted by the track, in the van trunk, in the back, that place I was going to leave behind, behind. We passed by the general store, on the right, where blacks waited for rides and sold everything: firewood, piles of charcoal, chickens, baby goats, sarongs, and roots to chew. That was where I used to ask to be sent to buy bottles of Laurentina beer or 2M or Seven Up, or blocks of ice, or sulfur, or olive oil, or anything else my mother had forgotten, when there was no alternative because my father wasn't around. I could take my shoes off when I was out of sight in the wild and go secretly barefoot, to see if I could get my feet to be like blacks' feet, with their toes spread out and a hard, cracked sole. And I waddled like a darky girl, to see what it felt like to be a darky girl. And the mommas passed me by and laughed, as did the black men. And they said things to me I didn't understand, they laughed, white girl, white girl, the electrician's white girl. And I would laugh. They had noticed me. I was like them. They had laughed. I went barefoot. I wasn't allowed to.

That's where we were going along, in the middle of the road.

As the van passed, a cloud of red dust was whipped up, falling on the darkies' fuzzy hair and the darkies' brown skin, making them unreal, such extraterrestrial, intense, prohibited beings. So mysterious. I know I wasn't dressed in white, because it was the day of my departure for Portugal, and I'm sure I reached Lisbon in navy-blue terylene slacks. And it was next to the general store, that old general store, where my father had to turn

back. He had forgotten something that was part of my luggage. My aunt's emerald ring I would have to pass through customs on my middle finger. It was very big. They weaved thread around it to make it thicker and secure it to my finger. Even so, it was big. It was made of white gold with stones I considered worthless. I had a different idea of what an emerald should be. My aunt, whenever she returned to Portugal, wouldn't have enough fingers for all her rings, which is why she was handing them out.

All this really annoyed me. Not the ring. The turning back. Losing twenty minutes. I would wear what they asked me to, I would put on my fingers the rings they gave me to carry, I would even swallow them if they wanted me to, or squeeze them under my breasts, as was done with notes, silver coins, and really precious gems. I wanted to get out of there as quickly as possible.

I'd been delighted when I learned that departure had won the day in the final decision about my future. Had there been a decision? It doesn't matter. It had been decided I would go away on the first available plane. Any excuse would do—study, security, my virginity... Out of there. Go. Quickly. Like a war criminal, I wanted to turn my back on all that schizophrenia that didn't let me legitimately be who I was or live with what the rest of them were. I needed an identity. A grammar. Or rather, I needed to be able to show my identity and my grammar without fear. I'm this, okay, I'm this, that's it now, look, deal with it.

They would dress and shoe me in white, send me to walk on that damn land so black and humid that it squeaked under my feet, or so red that the varnish or leather were painted like a watercolor in clear blood. There was no way of sparing my body from the stains of the earth, but even so I was forbidden from being dirtied by it. There was no way of freeing myself from the need to remain immaculately white. In my memory, I'm always dressed in white, worried about not getting dirty. The white dress I didn't wear that day is the loudest metaphor of my life as a little colonist—a white in white, clutching at the skirt she can't dirty, looking down at the white shoes she can't cover in dust. That's how I see myself, in the front of the white Bedford, shrinking under my clothes, worried about dust coming through the windows.

In the driver's seat, my father. You're going to my place. You're going to like it. Ask your grandma to make you bacon layered with white cabbage. In the passenger seat, my mother. Don't get dirty. Comb your hair. Always unkempt. Be careful nothing arrives broken. Watch your godmother's ring.

Yes, I'd watch everything. To whom did I hand over my godmother's ring?

It was November, it was very hot, and I was wearing a white crepe dress. I couldn't get dirty. All this seems right but is a lie. I was dressed in navy blue.

Now, quickly, to the airport. Life in the colony was impossible. You were either a colonist or you were colonized. You couldn't be something transitional, in between the two, without paying for it with madness looming on the horizon.



## 31.

Outside, in what is now a long night, men riding camels approach the plane to lend technical assistance. I can see them passing under the wings, some stopping.

The image is unusual and therefore strange. It's night, and especially lonely. The first night when no one has told me to turn the light off, and when I start making my way toward the woman who's writing these words. The same woman, still a girl, the same hair and light eyes, vacant from shortsightedness, hands with heavily lined palms, fat thighs that keep ripping the pant seams between her legs. The same person, how can I explain it better—the same person.

In the night, the slow, clear shape of camels mounted by turbaned men. All around, an apocalyptic darkness. Not a single light. It was thirty-plus years ago.

It's Dakar airport. We'd just made a stopover in Senegal for technical reasons. We're not getting off the plane. We can't leave our seats or unbuckle our seat belts.

I remember it's Senegal because at the time I thought, This is the place margarine comes from. There was a very good margarine from Senegal that we spread on bread. I don't remember whether we stopped over in Johannesburg or Luanda. Perhaps we did. I just remember margarine from Senegal and turbaned men on camels, surrounded by the deepest darkness.

I tell the flight attendant I need to find my godmother's emerald ring I had on this finger, it came loose in a moment of distraction, I didn't notice, it must have rolled under the seats behind me or in front. She tells me I can't get up. I'm desperate, it's an emerald ring, it's not mine, I have to hand it over to someone, later, I don't know when, it's too big on me, it fell off, I have to get up and look for it. She says no. Only when we arrive in Lisbon. I have to be patient.

The way we looked at our hands when we were ten and the way we look at them now doesn't change. I'm looking at my hands now. The same

hands. How can they have aged and still be the same? Identical fingernails, knuckles. The same eyes. The same thinking when we look, with the same eyes, at the same hands.

Our identical reactions to events, the expression of feelings, such as joy but above all fear, don't change significantly with the passage of time. From a certain age, very early in childhood, we are who we are, and that will pursue us always.

I don't remember flying over Lourenço Marques. I didn't see the bay of Lourenço Marques for the last time. That's a lie. I did see something! The deep wild down there, while the plane was climbing. The hot wild. Nothing else.

When we left, very late in the afternoon, Lourenço Marques remained behind the sunset, very sweet, very ripe but already remote even as we were taking off. It was a place I'd never go back to. I knew it. Now I had to prepare to be a woman, begin a new life, get everything right. I knew it would be difficult. That I was marked by a vast, invisible loneliness. I didn't know how it happened or why.

I know it now because I recognize my thinking as it moves along the same pathways, molded into the same shapes. Because I am the same. I remember how I thought.

I'm here now, yet I'm still there. In reality, my entire past, present and future merged in that journey, and I can only speak using words from borderlands, words of transition, stained and dual words formed then and there.

At Lourenço Marques airport, before going through customs, I remember a glass door. Once through it, there was no turning back.

I could see those who had gone in, already divided up into lines. We'd arrived late because my father forgot my godmother's ring, the one I lost on the plane, and we still had to greet all those whites who came to say goodbye to the electrician's daughter, bringing messages, letters, small parcels I ought to fit into my hand luggage, warnings about how I should tell it all back in Portugal, the same story over and over, you tell them everything that's been done to us, say we lost everything, money's worth nothing, there's nothing to eat, they killed the Monteiros, Sousa's daughter and her husband were arrested, tell them we're almost on our way. Say they're bound to start killing each other here. They don't want to work and will starve to death. Africa without whites is doomed. They'll cry and beg us to come back!

But go now, later we'll meet up there and talk. We're going right after you. Now go, it's getting late, go, go, and at that moment when everything's lost, when there's no way back, when I go through the glass door, after formal kisses, a strange feeling I'm unable to control, a void, an I'm-never-coming-back, something that's lost, a void, and that love so hidden and so obvious for my father, which drives me into his arms, against my will, like a bullet that pierces him and bleeds him dry, I can't stop crying, I can't let go of his body, his huge arms, his huge body, his huge hands, his huge flesh I kiss and don't want to let go of. And I turn round, still crying, I clutch at some part of that sacred body, crying, crying for it, scratching it with love, as if the world were ending there and then, and it was ending. Then my mother shook me, embarrassed, both of us embarrassed, all these people, don't cry child, look at everyone here, don't cry child, now go, it's getting late, and my father's sweet body, sweet and sour and sweaty, my father's beloved body, his white shirt, sweet, sour, and sweaty, drenched with the tears I couldn't understand nor control. Now go, now go, and he threw me through the glass door, threw me from his arms through the glass door, and I looked back and saw his remorseful face, already on the other side, both his hands pressed flat against the glass, his smile mixed with tears. Two hands just like my hands. These hands of flesh and bone that are writing this sentence. The same hands.



## 32.

“Over in Portugal, they’re such great friends of darkies! But let them see who darkies really are, and how they’ve repaid us for everything we’ve buried here that was ours: this city, work, where their food came from. It’s through you they’ll find out. You have to tell them. Tell everyone.”

When I got out of the van at Lourenço Marques airport, and it was for the last time, I was all dressed in blood—red dirt but in truth blood, which kept coming off me during the flight, a flight that was scheduled during the night, not so you could sleep but out of shame. Out of embarrassment, in silence.

“Put your godmother’s emerald ring on your finger. If they ask, tell them it’s yours.”

“Explain we’ll follow soon, your father will set up an electrician’s shop... Look around for cheap places to rent... Tell them we’ve lost everything, we’ll start from zero.”

The airport was full: noise from people and things, a smell of sweat, anxiety, fear, loss. Messages, letters, small objects to give to someone. “Don’t forget what you have to tell. You’re a woman now. Everything’s in your hands.”

“Be brave. Don’t forget to tell the truth!”

Without a word, unable to move, ignoring them, ignoring their truth, I cried.

I cried because I’d got to the end—to the point where you sense you’ll never come back to the lilac, to the orange, to the smell and life of these colors. I cried hugging my father, just one more time, my father, then—“Don’t forget, girl, you’re going to learn how to be a woman”—and then, having returned to my father’s arms to cry over what only he could understand, I said good-bye to him until another life.

And in that moment a time vacuum opened up, in which we weren’t people, we had no guilt or pleasure, nothing human—just us. I sensed from a distance the smell of his perspiring flesh, the sweet and sour flesh that was mine, his shoulders and face, the embrace we could never unclasp, not

to this day, never and nowhere, because it wasn't just a hug but an invisible and silent alliance we kept, which I faithfully upheld even when I betrayed him right afterwards. All that matters to me is being faithful to him and doing justice to that moment of void in which we weren't human but only dual, one of the other, with no time.

When we next met, a decade later, we'd already said good-bye far too much. Why do it all over again if our time had run out?!

It was final call, final call, and he pushed me toward the boarding gate. I looked back, crying, before I went through. I had to go because I was carrying the emerald ring, letters, parcels, messages about the truth. I had to go.

I picked up my small travel bag, a cream-colored *necessaire*, because every woman had a *necessaire*, and I was, they said, already a woman. I turned around, stopped crying, and left.

I'm still crying. I'm still looking back. On the other side of the glass, together, waving, they're still there. Far off, there. There, on the other side. My mother in a dark-blue dress with the collar embroidered in white. My father, dirt-stained white shirt, pants hanging low, belly out, disheveled. Tanned like a colonist. The smile in my father's red eyes. My father's crying smile. His hands just like mine glued to the glass door.

As the plane gained altitude, a deep silence overran the cabin above Lourenço Marques bay, the suburbs, huts, farmland, the wild I saw as we were taking off.

In silence, but an even deeper silence because after all I was now a woman, I cried again over what I was losing and would have to pay for. Someone else's debt that would become mine.

I never delivered the message I was given to carry.

## 33.

The lights go out in the plane cabin. It's still hours till we land in Lisbon. We can rest with our heavy colonial remains if we manage to shut our eyes for scant minutes.

I don't know her. She's a dark-haired woman, tanned, tall and majestic. She's wearing a close-fitting skirt suit of white serge and enormous white-framed sunglasses.

Leaning back in a white stuffed chair, she carelessly lets her breasts sag and parts her legs slightly toward the enormous windows that are letting in a cheerful spring breeze. White fine sheer-cotton curtains flutter like in a summer house by the beach.

Caramel hands with impeccable white-polished nails, elbows lightly touching the chair's arms. Like someone who puts herself forward to receive an invisible gift.

I've just arrived from abroad, from far away, where it turns out I'd always been. I enter the immense white room and observe her profile. Children are running back and forth around her, noisy and restless. I don't know them. The woman, like a turned-off robot, isn't disturbed or startled.

The voice of another woman, who crosses the room hastily, carrying on her hip a bundle of dirty laundry, tells me casually, "This is your father's daughter." I hear her and immediately make a correction in my mind: "This is my father's other daughter." I recall infidelities my father never admitted to and add, for my ears only, "It could be true!" Activated by the voice that went by, the imposing woman stands, smooths out her skirt as she straightens up, turns to me and extends her hand, smiling and looking at me above the rim of her glasses. She's pretty, darn it.

She's an enormous woman, a complete one, with long and thick dark hair, long and shapely legs, like a Miss Mozambique from colonial times, an Ana Paula Almeida, a Riquita... I feel insignificant as I face the sensual splendor of this daughter of my father's.

As she extends her arm to me, her jacket, unbuttoned but still molded to her chest, falls completely open, revealing her entire upper body, and I see her naked from the waist up. She extends her hand but I can't reciprocate with mine because now I'm just staring at that naked expanse, all the way down to the pubic contour exposed by her low-waisted skirt. A sculpted, marble nude. Her full, well-developed breasts, pointing in my direction like arrows. Her small, taut nipples colored pinkish brown. Her tight, muscled abdomen. Her smooth belly, her perfectly curved hips. And it's as if her skin, having become self-conscious of so much glory, had wished to become unreal, because it's all glittering over the tan, intensified with light. The thinnest layer of silver powder covers her neck, breasts, abdomen, belly, hips, every inch of her generous skin. It paints her. It dresses her nude. And nudity is her treasure. Her arm remains extended in my direction. She's still smiling, still looking at me over the rim of the glasses she still hasn't taken off. She wants to be my friend, although she hasn't told me so. She'll say it now. We haven't exchanged a word. But she'll speak now.

I feel afraid. I feel very afraid of my father's daughter.

And then we arrive in Lisbon.

## 34.

I'd been stealing from darkies. Did I think they were going to wash my dainty feet with rose-scented water?!

This wasn't Africa!

"Oh, you don't like rice with lungs? You went round stealing from darkies and think we should serve you shrimp on a golden platter!"

You don't respond. You lower your eyes. It's false and it's true, but both truth and falsity require a voice, and you don't have a voice. It's very early. I was still growing the root of the truth. Still underneath, humid, growing, eating earth, waiting for earth.

All sides possess their irrefutable truth. Nothing can be done about it. Prisoners of their absolute certainty, none will admit the lie they've built in order to walk free of guilt, or simply to walk. In order to be able to sleep, wake up, eat, work. To go on. There are innocent innocents and guilty innocents. There are as many victims among the innocent innocents as among the guilty innocents. There are victimized victims and guilty victims. There are executioners among the victims.

A long time passes until you have a voice, until you've liquidated, for better or worse, the debt you thought was yours. Until you spit on duty, honor and allegiance, those dirty, contrived crutches. Until you don't care if you're simply a bitch, a pariah of blood and race. Until you lose your faith and politeness. Until you lose everything.



My father had a large, sweaty face filled with hatred or love, depending on the day of the week. I preferred the loving days, but I had to contend with many hateful ones. When you're in love and you're violated at the same time, and you can't get away, you stare just as closely into the face of love as into the face of hatred, and you don't flinch. You feel the spit land on your lips and your eyes, and you hear it all out till the end, without blinking, without moving a muscle in a way that could be misconstrued. You can't get away. It becomes a certainty. A high-security prison inside which you know you must resist and survive.

My father was voracious, he devoured, vociferated all the feelings he managed to express. And he managed very well, with an eloquence so brutal it made you dizzy.

When you're young, you believe in such a love or such a hatred because the face belongs to whom you love. There's no one else. You're in the hands of those who brought you up and tell you you belong to them. And you do. But it's hard to belong to someone to whom you owe blind allegiance.

I took on all my father's words of hatred. I heard them an inch away from his face. I tasted the spit of his hatred, which is harder to take than the spit of love, and I confronted, eye to eye, his anger, his frustration, his utterly vile ideology, and as I listened I said nothing, not a single nod, not a muscle moving, and my whole being was a no.

I was afraid of my father. I was afraid of him hitting me with his paws, yelling at me, telling me, You're not my daughter because my daughter doesn't like darkies, doesn't go around with darkies, doesn't dream of darkies. There was such an enormous rage in him, which coexisted amiably with the love he could give me in the blink of an eye.

But he didn't drag out of me any sign of consent. He never heard from my mouth a "you're right," a "true," a "yep." At most a "got it" in response to his "got it?" Because he could force me to sit, listen and keep quiet, he

could subject me to public and private spectacles of racial ideology, but he couldn't convince me of the advantages of either race or hatred.

My father couldn't drag me out of what I was and thought. My father was incapable of educating my thinking. I escaped him. He'd told me too many times his favorite legend, the story of Saint Martin cutting his cloak in half. Given that I'd absorbed a message of such generosity, he could talk all he liked about darkies. I could've listened to the spiel blaring from loudspeakers twenty-four hours a day, like a prisoner in Guantánamo, and I wouldn't have budged an inch. Because I thought what I thought with unyielding certainty.

It wasn't easy being the electrician's daughter. I dreamed many times of the electrician dying in multiple ways and leaving me free to think, to live without fear. To answer him back.

And one day he really did die, before we could make up properly, before I was completely grown up and he completely defeated, and now he's sitting here, an inch from my face, reading to me, and I, in all sincerity, would just like to tell him the time we had was too short for our love. It was confused, ill-fitting, unfair. What happened to us was simply this: the wrong chessboard in the wrong time and place for our love.

And I betrayed him so we could lift our heads up.

## 36.

Maputo–Lisbon, TAP flight via Senegal.

I remember what day it was when I arrived by myself at Lisbon airport, around six in the morning in late November 1975. It was very cold and I was freezing. But it wasn't the coldest day of the winter of 75. As far as I recall, that year was particularly harsh.

Having passed through customs, all bundled up in the lettuce-green wool coat my godmother had worn in the 1950s, altered in a rush to fit my body, I descended the long, curving walkway that led me to people I didn't know but who were waiting for me—my parents' family.

During the next Carnival, my uncle painted on a clown's face, put on my wool coat and my yellow *la finesse* pants, got drunk, and went out into the middle of the street playing his trumpet. What a reveler! Did you see that fantastic clown costume he was wearing!

In Portugal, I soon got used to being the target of mockery or ridicule, for being a *retornada* or for dressing in red or lilac. But my sense of justice was like a prayer. If it absolved me of guilt, I could walk indifferently through crowds of accusers. Nothing would bring me down.

At the same time, my heart was negotiating with the mockery I invited, and in the end it opened up to it completely.

They tell me that at one stage of my adolescence I razed down everything in my way. I was a combat vehicle, a tornado if you will.

Then one afternoon I was forced to tell the truth: "I lost everything except my number one pencils."

I breathed deeply. And my heart really hurt.



## 37.

It was November and I'd only just arrived.

In Caldas da Rainha, in 1975, the way to school was a black street with the tarmac turned up at the edges and no sidewalk. Filthy, aged houses formed a tunnel on both sides of the road. The street was charcoal grey from beginning to end.

The time of day I walked along it there was still a lot of fog or smoke or opaque cold. The atmosphere was thick and I cut through it like a knife. I encountered rushing workers, stooped by the early hour, by sleepiness, by fatigue, by haste. They walked very fast, taking small steps and keeping their eyes on the ground. They wore jackets, caps of grey, black or brown checkered fabric, and dark overalls. I never saw their faces.

On the right side of the road, where the street began, a wide gate opened up into the entrails of a mechanic's shop. It wasn't a gate but a sewer. Inside, walls were black with humidity and old oil. When I passed in front of the gate, three thickset men with their hands and clothes dirty from work shouted sexual comments at me that I tried hard not to hear. I squeezed my neck into my shoulders, I shrank the walls of my ears, I shut my eyes, I shut myself out, but even unwillingly I kept hearing tits, cunt, ass, words that came adorned with horribly expressive verbs or adverbs. Insults.

I was twelve years old, nearly thirteen, and they insulted me because I showed evidence of tits, cunt and ass, an unworthiness I didn't understand. They insulted me because I was already a woman. That was enough.

There was no other way to school. I had to walk by every day.

My grandmother was a tiny woman with very white hair who dressed entirely in black. When I described the behavior of the men from the garage to her, she told me that was how things were, I shouldn't respond, an honest woman turned a deaf ear.

I don't know whether the black street still exists. In Portugal everything takes a long time to change.



**38.**

Portugal was dirty, ugly, pale and freezing. The Portuguese from Portugal had minds filled with small ideas, oh how small and stupid and backward and scheming they were! So ugly, with rough skin and goose bumps, the extremities of their bodies damaged by cold and excess consumption of bacon with cabbage. Such sad people! They enjoyed confronting and jeering at us, oh it was difficult, wasn't it, well you bet, there were no little darkies here to wash our feet and butts, here we had to work, those fucking lazy bums who've never done shit to make a life for themselves, who've never known what it meant to build a life and lose it, those sad little conformists. What the hell did they know about what darkies were, what we were and what we'd just lived through, those cowardly bastard sons of bitches. Puny assholes, to tell the truth, if I was ever going to tell the truth. Dimwitted, obtuse, with their Montepio saving accounts, eyes crooked from looking sideways at those who come here to steal what little we have, those retornados, stuck-up like royalty who've lost their throne and expect to get it back, that's what they think, don't they! Because nothing sharpens the appetite like loss, and a big, American-style loss to boot. So ugly, so mean-spirited these Portuguese who stayed, marinated in jug wine. Ugly, cheerless, poor, all light gone from their faces and hands. So small.



## 39.

My father was rotting in a FRELIMO prison for having stated in public that Samora Machel was nothing but a lowly orderly. Knowing my father, I think he probably added some further term of endearment, like “darky piece of shit” or worse.

That happened in 1978. I’d been in Portugal three years.

He was released from jail, unrecognizable and silent, after a long and anguished campaign mounted by my mother, who knew someone who was friends with someone else who had a connection with Graça Machel, to whom multiple letters were written asking for clemency. In the end, the matter was sorted out, partly owing to the fact my father had never been tried. My father’s imprisonment was taboo in our family. He never talked to us about what happened on the inside and we were too embarrassed to ask, so I imagine the worst. The shadow of what one doesn’t know is always enormous. My father was a cheerful braggart, so if it didn’t occur to him to brag about the heroic feats he accomplished during his imprisonment, not even a tiny little joke, there probably hadn’t been any and things hadn’t gone well.

In the 1990s he’d already been in Portugal for a while, and once, because of my abhorrence of spiders, he bragged about the day he’d woken up on the cement floor of the prison feeling the weight of a huge venomous insect on his bare shoulder. He grabbed it with his large paw I knew well and flung it far away. He laughed. We knew he was courageous, so we weren’t surprised. I asked him what the facilities were like, how they washed, and he replied the guards took them “down to the river,” by which he meant the Zambezi, and they soaped up and washed right there, five yards away from the crocodiles. He said no more. The matter was closed.

I remember my father’s skin, very smooth and moist. I remember his shoulder, where a venomous bug had nested.

Knowing my father, I’m positive he must have called the guards darky pieces of shit, all of them, every day, and that they hit him hard and ugly all

the time, without mercy. Knowing my father, and loving him despite everything, it hurts me to imagine him beaten, humiliated, subdued by those he'd subdued before. To envision him sleeping on a cement floor, among prisoners sentenced for common crimes.

For whites who opted to stay in the former colonies after independence because they sympathized with the liberation movements or because they didn't have any other choice, or didn't want to have one, life wasn't easy. The retornados, most of whom returned to Portugal under a cloud and empty-handed, got away much more easily. Whites who stayed in Africa became an easy target for numerous retributions. They were suspect. Their movements and words were watched by the authorities, local-resident committees, neighbors. One had to be careful with what one said and did. Any slip would be regarded as colonialist behavior, and there was no compassion, the price to pay was high. Constant denunciation.

## 40.

My body was at war. It was war. It started all wars. My body fought against itself, in body-to-body combat, but my father's body was large, peaceful, and flesh and blood. It was his and it was worthwhile. His body belonged to the other that was in me, less the war. Round, soft, scratched, my father's body was suited to laughter, to tickling, to my body.

My father had rosy feet with very white, fragile skin that flaked easily. He said it was due to filariasis and wouldn't let me pick at the flakes. My mother stopped me going barefoot because of filaria parasites, which caused severe itching and had to be removed by burning the skin with ice, right to the bone. My father's feet had scales like puff pastry, which I fancied picking off and eating. My father's flesh was sweet. My father's skin was warm and brown.

His feet were full and neatly finished, with minutely drawn toes, like a Renaissance sculpture, and lovely round, transparent and lustrous nails. During Sunday siesta, when my parents would go for a lie down and I had nothing to do—except play with Pilot, who years later was poisoned by my aunt in an Estremaduran village, and with the cats left in Lourenço Marques, I mean Maputo, that ran off to mate and were for sure caught, killed and eaten by starving darkies, my mother said, the darky rabble was going to rue what they had done to whites—those afternoons I stretched out on their bed and played with my father's feet.

My aunt poisoned my Pilot in April 1978 and accused her neighbors. It was during the Easter vacation. I rocked my dead dog. I'd never cradled a corpse against my chest. His eyes were open and glassy, his contorted hind legs touched his hard, ice-cold muzzle. I held him in my arms, I clutched him, and over his innocent body I cried out my guilt, pain, loss, helplessness, and abandonment. I buried him under a walnut tree that grew on the farm. Later on, the tree was cut down. My aunt and uncle looked at me the whole time with the same kind of emotion you devote to a refrigerator.

What was a dog good for? And what did a dog matter, a dog a retornada who'd been stealing from darkies had brought in style with her to the metropolis, or rather, Portugal?! If there was no room for the retornados, there was even less for their dogs.

My father would press his feet together, squeeze and tense them up, and laugh. I couldn't force them apart to play with them like I wanted. My father's feet smelled of dog's hair. A dry, sweet smell. Dogs smell like earth and bread. His feet smelled like bread, yes, like earth and bread, and I wanted to tickle them so much, and bite them, and he would laugh and say, Let go of me, girl, and I laughed and tried harder, and my mother would say, Let go of your father, girl, and I ignored her, Have some sense girl, go to your own bed girl.

My mother's body was dry and geometric. I wasn't authorized to touch it. The only thing that interested me on my mother's body were her large, soft breasts. What a delight it would have been to be able to touch them, lick them, suck them all over. Squeeze them hard. She used to shake me off, Stay still. Touching my mother was inappropriate behavior. My father's body, in contrast, was solid, round and available. It was like a hill overgrown with bushes and vegetation, which I could climb and feel, smell, pinch, bite. I pulled at his hair and his nails.

My father's calves were so full, with such harmonious, rolling curves. I pretended to bite them very hard and he pretended to cry out, Ouch, ouch, stay still girl. How beautiful they were, my father's legs! White. Neither excessively muscular nor fat, even though he was fat. Long and shapely. He looked good in shorts. His legs were almost feminine. He needed me, his smile brimming with the same absence of modesty I too know very well, You'd like to have legs as nice as mine, wouldn't you? But these are for showing off to the ladies. He would say this often when he was all dressed up, I'm going to show off to the ladies. And I thought he was joking. My father's legs make me so angry.

My father's belly sprawled when he lay down on his side. Such solemnity. Of such consequence, a belly extended like that. I respected it. He protected it with his arms, his belly and his genitals, though the latter didn't interest me. When he lay on his side and happened to be wearing skimpy, loose shorts, you could discern some frightful shadows in that region.

I would turn my gaze away in shame, fear and disgust. My father's intimate parts were a dark, soft blotch. What unpleasant visual contact!

I remember the feel of his unshaved face brushing against my face, my lips. Go shave. I've shaved now, see? You'd like to have skin as soft as mine, wouldn't you? Yes, you would!

It was soft. I remember the sweaty smell of his neck. A man's sweat. Thick. From the enormous mass of his body, so safe and right. To sit by his side, on his knees, on his shoulders. My father's body was a throne. My father's body was good.

What remained of it is stored away in a drawer at Feijó cemetery. As for everything else that belonged to him, I couldn't store it away anywhere. It wouldn't fit.



## 41.

My mother thinks she's going to die and can't leave me alone in the world. That's why she found her. I want to be alone in the world. Don't affront me with the brutal words I had to listen to all my life without being able to protest, and that I ran away from when I became my own mistress.

My mother gave her my number. She really wanted to talk to me. She'd lost track of me. She was nostalgic for the lost girl—me. In the space of twenty minutes the past gave me a phenomenal slap in the face.

People don't change. When you meet them again, many years later, you understand why you'd grown apart.

“Blacks, those bastards, those sons of bitches. I came back from there last year. I never let them treat me disrespectfully. They called me momma, they called me auntie, and I would tell them, I'm not your mother because I'm not a whore. Nor your auntie, you bastard. And you won't rob me because I'm white and a foreigner and I'll send the police after you, you black piece of shit.”

I'd heard this all my life. Go ahead, talk to me about the kind and gentle colonialism of the Portuguese... Yeah, why don't you tell me that old wives' tale.

People don't change. A white who lived under colonialism will be a white who lived under colonialism until their dying day. And all my truth is treason to them. These words, treason. An insult to the memory of my father, but my father and I get along just fine with his memory.

The butchers were all so kind that when they killed a goat they gave the entrails to darkies. The tripe, the skin. They paid for their slave labor with a beating, plus some meal, which they ate with their hands, those black pigs. And if they were made to work seven days a week, any number of hours, that was simply badly needed legitimate treatment for their laziness. It was a favor the whites were doing them. To civilize the monkeys.

And now there's such a lack of respect in Maputo. “We're what's lacking there. They miss us. A white person is constantly assaulted. In the street.

At home. They steal everything from us, the bastards. And they've ruined that land. They've burned it."

## 42.

The young man was standing ahead of me in the line for the cash register, with a supply of cookies and chocolates. He was dressed as a navy official. A black uniform with a white cap, very elegant, very noble. On the left sleeve of his jacket, high up, a fabric badge embroidered in gold spelled out Mozambique. My attention was immediately seized by this youth. I felt the urge to call out to him, Excuse me, I just wanted to tell you I'm also from Mozambique. But then I didn't. It would've been ridiculous. Why should he care about that? That inside me there is a land from which I'm exiled. Maybe he's exiled too. So what?! Afterwards I thought perhaps it was his last name. The lad could have been called Tiago Mozambique like others who are called José Portugal. He went off toward the Alfeite naval base, and I followed him, proud of his poise.

Exiles like me are people who were unable to return to the place where they'd been born, who cut their legal ties to it but not affective ones. They are undesirables in the lands of their birth because their presence brings back bad memories.

In the land where I was born I will always be a colonist's daughter. That stain will remain upon me, most probably inviting retaliation. But the land where I was born remains in me like a stain that's impossible to erase. I pursue navy officers whose uniforms have sleeve badges on which the word Mozambique is written!

A few decades have passed since that girl-faced with six-year-old black children, barefoot, shabby, hungry, asking for work at the gate—called her mother. There was no work. I knew there wasn't. Still, I called her. I harbored a hope that all of a sudden there might be some picking to do, or a coin, some bread. Sometimes my mother would be in a good mood. Sometimes she felt sorry for the children.

They and I didn't speak the same language. Only some isolated words.

I stared at them intently, and they at me. For example, at this very moment I'm staring at them across time: In their eyes there's a perplexity, an emptiness, a hunger, and in mine an impotence, an incomprehension that no reasoning can possibly explain. Mozambique is this still image of a young girl in the sun, with her impeccably neat blond braids, facing the black child covered with dust, almost naked, hungry, in a silence in which neither knows what to say, looking at each other from the same side and from opposing sides of justice, of good and evil, of survival.

An exile like me is also a statue of guilt. And the guilt, the guilt, the guilt we let grow and twist up inside us like a colorless creeper binds us to silence, solitude, irresolvable exile.

## 43.

The night has fallen over all things born from the earth, touching the earth, defining its limits. You are on the earth. What I mean is, you're rolling on it. You've stretched out your body among the shrubs, quietly, you feel the itch from insects you're letting creep up your arms, you inhale the nauseating odor of the soil, now at rest, the sharp odor of leaves moistened by the coolness of the night. This is what you wanted. This smell. You sit up, you smile. It's exactly the way you imagined. Multicolored glitter among tree branches illuminates the silhouettes of silenced birds. Fragments of light that fire up and die down in the dark, floating like dragonflies. Such soft noises. Wings. A bird chirped. The breeze disturbs the leaves. Leaves rustle together. The weight of animal feet breaks some twigs. Wild dogs are watching you. Like you, they're something entirely undefined, neither dogs nor wolves. They don't bark at you. Dogs never barked at you. You sniff their sexes. Yes, they're your breed. Good company. You lick their muzzles. You can lick them, you can sleep curled up among them if you like. The sweet, hot smell of sleep. So mollified. You're not bothered by the dirt in your hair and under your nails. You rub yourself down. You laugh. You hear your laughter disturbing the night. Such silence. Such tenderness. Everything is true and you taste the earth. You spread it against your palate. Of course you remember the taste. You knew you'd remember the taste. The earth has the same enduring tang as clay and ground cow bones. The earth is sweet. And now you can once again climb trees. The lemon tree in your old garden in Matola. You feel light. Perhaps you can fly, as you once could. You missed this. You confess to yourself, you missed this. The freedom.

The night has fallen long and deep, and the night is your day. You'll adapt. A life has many lives, you know. This is the first night you sleep in the street. Without a bed. You're ecstatic. What will your first night be like? What home will you return to? How long will you stay above the grave pit where your past is rotting? You shouldn't step on your grave. Where are you going? Where are you going, now?



**Isabela Figueiredo** was born in Lourenço Marques (now Maputo), the capital of colonial Mozambique, in 1963. After Mozambique's independence in 1975, her parents sent her to Portugal to live with relatives, while they remained in the former colony for another ten years. Figueiredo studied Portuguese literature at Lisbon's Universidade Nova and women's studies at Universidade Aberta. She has worked as a public high school teacher of Portuguese language and literature since 1985 and as a journalist at *Diário de Notícias* from 1989 to 1994. Her first novel, *Conto É Como Quem Diz*, was published in 1988, and her highly acclaimed second book, *Caderno de Memórias Coloniais* (Notebook of Colonial Memories), appeared in 2009. She has also maintained a blog, *Novo Mundo*, at <http://novomundoperfeito.blogspot.com>.



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