

DISRUPTION

JORGE MELÍCIAS

TRANSLATED FROM THE PORTUGUESE BY

BRIAN STRANG & ELISA BRASIL

DURATION PRESS E-CHAPBOOK 25

COPYRIGHT © JORGE MELÍCIAS

TRANSLATION © BRIAN STRANG & ELISA BRASIL

PUBLISHED AS DURATION PRESS E-CHAPBOOK #25

acknowledgements

Many thanks to Jorge Reis-Sá, editor of Edições Quasi, who published the original Portuguese versions of the *light in the lungs* and *incubus*.

Thanks also go to valter hugo mãe, editor of *objecto cardíaco*, who published the original Portuguese version of *the long blasphemy*.

This translation of the *light in the lungs* appeared on Projected Letters. Many thanks to Gregor Milne.

Poems from *the light in the lungs* also appeared in *26: A Journal of Poetry and Poetics*.

“Extremity Alive: The Poetry of Jorge Melícias” was published in both English and Portuguese in *Cosmoroma* 07.

Extremity Alive: The Poetry of Jorge Melícias

I first fell through a trapdoor into the dark world of Jorge Melícias' poetry in unlikely circumstances in 2004: in sunny Bertrand, among the national euphoria and flag waving of the Euro football championship. Upon opening *a luz nos pulmões* (*the light in the lungs*), I was confronted by a poetry of individual vision and tension.

I am no stranger to Portuguese culture and literature—I have lived with a Portuguese woman, Elisa Brasil (co-translator of Melícias' work) for 20 years, I have visited Portugal many times over the last 17 years and have been to nearly every part of the country. A poet who has been influenced by Fernando Pessoa, I am also aware of the long shadow cast over Portuguese literature by this great Pessoa, this greatest and most complex of Modernists. And I'm not unaware of the particular vein of Portuguese poetry to which Herberto Helder belongs. But Melícias' poetry did not seem to belong to either of these lineages, or to any other discernable line; even among the bright new voices of *Edições Quasi* and *Objecto Cardíaco* he seemed to stand alone. Into what drawer could the literary taxonomist place Jorge Melícias?

I finally met Jorge this summer in Coimbra (2006), as an oppressive heatwave engulfed the city. We sat for hours in a sidewalk cafe with leaves helicoptering in slow spirals down upon us, drinking beer and talking of Saint-John Perse, Andre Breton, Fiama Hass Pais Brandão and Al Berto. But when the conversation turned to American poetry and Jorge asked me the question "If you had to choose between Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, who would you pick?" (an impossible question for most American poets), I gained some insight into Melícias' influences.

The abstracted fear of Dickinson echoes throughout Melícias' work. "'Tis so appalling—it exhilarates--/So over Horror, it half Captivates" can be read as a guiding poetics for his work. In *a longa blasfémia* (*the long blasphemy*), Melícias writes "Procuro a antecipação de uma veia" ("I want the anticipation of a vein") echoing this thrill of horror, the fascination of the repulsive. And *incubus* is an unnerving study of the compulsion toward ritual examination. Horrors abound in this work, portraits of incisions and dissections of apparently human meat, an unnamed subject operating on an unnamed object with taut language:

A traqueia
ou como se acera desde o fundo
o movimento tubular de uma lâmina.

Ainda que o crime
parta de uma exterioridade pura.
E o golpe seja uma mera declinação.

The trachea
or how the tubular movement of a razor
is sharpened to the end.

Though the crime
cuts through pure exterior.
It is the incision of mere decay.

The movement toward horror is fundamental to an understanding of Melícias' writing. In "Powers of Horror" Julia Kristeva distinguishes between the vague cloud of "fear" and the necessity for discourse to approach the other:

..that word "fear"—a fluid haze, an elusive clamminess—no sooner has it cropped up than it shades off like a mirage and permeates all words of the language with nonexistence, with a hallucinatory, ghostly glimmer. Thus, fear having been bracketed, discourse will seem tenable only if it

ceaselessly confront that otherness, a burden both repellent and repelled, a deep well of memory that is unapproachable and intimate: the abject.

Likewise, Melícias' writing operates not by merely conjuring horror but by necessarily and intimately examining the abject, by approaching, what Kristeva calls "one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated." Here is where writing approaches the unknowable, where it becomes unbearably alive:

O animal recolhe-se na lâmina.
Não há resistência ou retração.
Ele é agora a extremidade viva
de uma metalurgia brutal,
a mecânica vocalização do horror.
Sobre a coalescência do sangue
a blasfêmia e a sua têmpera.

The animal withdraws from the razor.
There is no resistance or retraction.
He is now extremity alive
from a brutal metallurgy,
the mechanical vocalization of horror.
Above the blood's coalescence
blasphemy and its disposition.

a longa blasfêmia (the long blasphemy)

Jorge Melícias moves the reader toward the unthinkable by creating a theater of the page which dismantles assumptions about the integrity of the social. His books, mostly serial poems of around 40 pages pull the reader into the dimly-lit world he creates. And, in this, his poetry is reminiscent of the late works of Samuel Beckett. The page that creates a world is seductive; the reader loses the sense of the immediate in favor of the immediacies of this world into which he or she is plunged. Here, character is reduced to the most minimal elements, sometimes (as in Beckett) fragments of character. The structure of the Portuguese language lends itself to this deconstruction of character, with frequent deletion of pronouns (indicated instead by verb conjugation) more easily attainable than in English:

Hão-de levantar-se das corolas do apocalipse,
as jugulares estuando de uma ferocidade acúlea.
Serão sobre a paisagem
uma caligrafia errática,
o timbre em que deus susteva a nota.

They will lift themselves from the apocalypse,
jugulars seething from a stinging ferocity.
They will be an erratic calligraphy
over the landscape,
the tone at which god held the note.

a longa blasfêmia (the long blasphemy)

And so as unnamed forces act, most often brutally, upon lightly delineated but vivid objects, the reader is asked to relinquish character as a driving force in the drama.

Even in his most socially-located work, *a luz nas pulmões (the light in the lungs)*, but also in other works, characters are iconic and dimensionless. Through vivid imagery, they operate as objects, surreal and dreamlike in their nature, devoid of volition, acting according to concerted impulse (as a flock of birds) or as subjects of the forces of the landscape (as trees in the wind). And yet they are, in much of his work, brutally material. Humans located thus--bracketed by a larger context and a material part of this context--are no longer at the center of the world they inhabit. And this approaches a kind of social commentary, a skepticism about the primacy of the social, a reaffirmation and unflinching examination of human corporeality, the pathos of the human condition and the possibilities for imagination in this realm.

The incitement to imagination lies in the imagery of Melícias' poems, imagery that can be understood as an indictment of the brutality of living according to unquestioned beliefs, a critique of the banal. Although *incubus* seems to deal specifically with acts of criminal violence, how many images from *a longa blasfêmia (the long blasphemy)* could be read as simple descriptions of the unquestioned carnivorous ordinary? "Sob os calabres do sangue/pulsam guelras aéreas." ("Beneath cables of blood/aerial gills pulse."); "E a brutal inflorescência/dos ferros no dorso." ("And the brutal inflorescence/of irons in his back."). This kind of brutality is commonplace. Though indeterminate, though luminescently written, though mediated by and experienced through language, by the poetic sign, they could easily be description of fishing or a bullfight. But a clear line is drawn by civilization around these acts; they are not to be witnessed without the social contexts that justify them. By rendering images such as these in bright exacting language, Melícias not only illustrates (and indeed possibly encourages) social complicity in violence, but also asks the individual to consider his/her own contentment in and fascination with this violence. The work itself, filled with fetishistic images of violence, is not exempt from value judgments; all works of art do, to one degree or another, carry implicit values or ideology. And as this poetry pushes its way off the page and into our thoughts, we become disturbed as it imposes itself on our values (or what we thought were our values). The text enters our world and we must ask ourselves about the darker corners of imagination and the drive toward Thanatos in the human psyche. The disturbance his work causes asks us to consider our own complacency in relation to the violence that lies in our own psyches.

In regard to the images in his painting, Francis Bacon (with whom Melícias shares an affinity of artistic vision) once said,

I'm always surprised when people speak of violence in my work. I don't know why people think it is. I never look for violence. There is an element of realism in my pictures which might perhaps give that impression, but life is so violent; so much more violent than anything I can do! One is exposed to violence all the time and these days, with the millions of images from all over the world, violence is everywhere and permanent. I really cannot even begin to believe that my work is violent.

Perhaps this is an important reminder in relation to Melícias' work. Can a book of poems be nearly as violent as the ruthless efficiency of, say, a commercial slaughterhouse? As an American, I am acutely aware of the very real violence and exploitation committed around the world by the system of which I am a part; it is overwhelming. But if there is violence in Melícias' poetry, it resides (permanently?) in our hearts and our world, in our animal nature. In this theater of the page is a lesson: accompanied by the shiver of horror is an affirmation of awareness, an antidote to sluggish social acceptance. Realism took as its cue an investigation into the act of seeing. And Melícias uses this investigation, a kind of psycho-realism, in relation to what makes us recoil, briefly lifting the veil of social conditioning for an existential glimpse of our material selves, however grotesque. This poetry, imbued with the power of the abject, repels and attracts, reaffirming the power of fascination, so that the reader is left alive, becomes extremity alive.

Brian Strang

disrupção: (n) the jump of a spark between two bodies charged with electricity. The name of the sudden electric charge that causes the disappearance of a majority of accumulated energy. The act of tearing.

Grande Dicionário da Língua Portuguesa
Society of the Portuguese Language,
volume IV

table of contents

the light in the lungs	10
incubus	35
the long blasphemy	56

DISRUPTION

the light in the lungs

but a lung hewn to break from inside,
the center of a breathed stone.

On the fingertips
the seismic words beat.
And the brow opens profusely
to the force of the name.
I say: he who writes infuses the prodigy,
breathes to the top with the light in the lungs,
crosses as if flowering in the abyss.

All is ascendantly sung,

the fingers come from below and touch the voice,
curve themselves like hooks on the edge of the name.

Beside the salt marshes the men decline,
their heads like fulminating comets.

Once in a while the children come,
bringing solitude like burning metal on their backs,
bringing a swarm of stingers.
And memory is an insidious pulse.

When they leave they close the door behind them,
and the men return to sit on the stakes
and shine.

The insects boil thwarted by whitewash
and on the skin insanity is marked.
They ask me to sing death,
the fire running inside the walls.

In the mouth salt is an absolute thought.

The man is doubled over the table,
palms stuck to the top,
death in his nape.

All around the women delimit the house,
they are the pulse of the house,
and there is a silence like a split stone.

But the women will extinguish themselves
before the fire.

Women will grow like flowers on the roofs.
They will dream all around, arched like vaults.
They will be the poem vertically
with their high and white fronts.
And no bond will connect with death
when overhead they undulate like torches.

Behind the glass the women undulate.
They lift the children through their mouths,
puffing us up inside.
The voracity is tremendous on their flexed heads,
the children travel in thought
like a vertebrate light.

At times they almost imagine that they sing,
that they open completely with blood stopped
over the world.

They twist fire,
turning and turning inside of the blood.

Like them I summon my gift
and sing with the name closed around.

They push from their eyes,
splitting up throughout the house.
Like great empty chambers they dream
or become mad behind the water pots.
The singing hands bake the clay,
the oil sleeping in the jugs.

They sing autumn in the wet eyes of dogs.

They dwell on the signs and bleed.
Leaving the fire
and at the city gates burn themselves with oil.
They are the site of memory,
a house with a slow lung.

Gentle women that veil the indeclinable,
and the children are the fingers that drip through the days.

They close the wells,
singing along the shadow
with wrists bound.
The enigma is a beam on their shoulders,
the extreme name that inaugurates the sigh,

a new breath over the world.

The hands whisper over the vase,
bringing the essence to the surface.
The secret is a horizontal wand,
bleeding or flowering on the ends.

Someone inside
plays the flute,

the arch over the world.

The fingers touch the name and exhaust it.
There is no profundity after this.
I wanted to emerge magnificent
from my breath,
to sing over the bellows of the tongue.
I say that the whole name is danced,
that it roars as if touched from inside.

A circle of enigmas
or the head fundamentally bent.
The blood flows through rings of thought,
nourishes the loom of fever.

And there is the stake from the depths.
It rises from the groin to the root of the breath,
sets the world aside diurnal throbbing.

The poem is a bonfire raised in the throat
or a slumber tilted onto the knives.

Someone says, vertically
all the names burn,
and there is an astonishing outburst,

the word ignites
with a blood-filled tree.

A courtyard or a heartbeat,
death like a house threaded
with a nerve,
the abyss whispered over the name.

The breeze of the name turns on the lathe,
and man is like a vertical bellows
beneath the arch of the tongue.
At other times he is a wand thrust
to the center.
He opens the idea,
bears the fire in the hands,
burns to the center like a pure craft.

I rise to the spiral encounter,
having magnets and radial knives in my voice.

The name rises in my throat
like a closed dance,
it is the fire running among the shavings,
a flash in the loins of the lightning bolt.

incubus

The criminal is often not equal to the greatness of his crime: he degrades and defames it.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

He who kills deciphers.
He is above the crime
like one who handles god.

Let us consider the crime:
the way his blade extracts
his own mutation.
Because the whole object yearns
to exceed its exactitude. To become.

I transcend
with all of my nightmarish insanity.
I know that incitements will be split open
between the nodules. I wait.
In the presence of intent
the immanence is somewhat indefectible.

At times I am over the knives like one who schemes.
At others the metal reverberates where it goes insane.

I know that the crime encloses its own geometry:
the incision occurs where the error is a refraction.

With the razor I open a vein and let it run.

There is no room for denial:
the razor runs along
the interior of the spasms,
sharpening itself with each contraction.

The edge
is now coming apart from inside.

The instruments of my death are beautiful
in your hands, the dexterity of ire
over the trepans, the form
like a scream that tubes itself open.

Beneath the parietals
is the overwhelming coercion of blood.

He is hissing on the coils
as if revived.
Though nothing of the knives has returned.

The pruning instruments
shine with insanity,
opening groins to the
splendor of knives.
They gush with horror like a
giraffe stuck with splintered bone.

How the knives
shine before the horror.

Where I settle the incision
there is a closed hook
over the frenzy.

Its rigor is an abomination.

Fish-hooks blunted in the timber
shine to the core with roots
wound in blood.

Under them I resume honing the edge.
Form like fear reciprocates itself in steel.

The movement is supported in its
own anticipation,
from behind
like a returning piston.
The unambiguous gesture:
the moment in which
they will fulfill an assertion.

The crime
or the way an earthquake
appears in the knots.

On the volcanic fingers
I blunt thought,
thunder with its branches.

He runs over the tiles of hatred
opened to ecstasy.
Everything in him invokes predation:
more than the speed of the crime
the impossibility of slackening before it.

Beneath my rejoicing skull
the animal of impunity.

I am a germination of its breath.

He proceeds from the horror,
leaving on the running boards
with remorse inciting his lymph nodes.
At times he sees clearly
as if he understood,
as if the only penitence
were relapse.

The trachea
or how the tubular movement of a razor
is sharpened to the end.

Though the crime
cuts through pure exterior.
It is the incision of mere decay.

Beneath the oxidation of corneas
meticulous tools work,
the obsessive pliers of remorse.

I am held up by blindness
and rise to the occasion:
I will kill for the smell of it.

A nerve is snatched by precision.
On it I construct the method.
An implicit purpose and axiom:
the collapse is unavoidable.

One arrives at the crime by exercising evidence.

the long blasphemy

It precedes the leveling of the scythes,
runs in front of the extermination
like a ploughshare
with long manes.
And the fable opens.

For she crosses over
with night inscribed in her genes.
And inside the fracture
bursts, untamed
like gargoyles.

Because she is the combustible quaff
on black coral,
the fatal breath.

Beneath cables of blood
aerial gills pulse.
Because the animal
is an object in motion,
a valve
open in the landscape.

Spiral heads rise from the magnets.
And the fish hooks shine so violently inside
that the illumination bends them.
They are heads provided by their own madness
loose in the tale,
skulls illuminated by veins.

She turns the iron under the tongue
as if teaching it.
And a metallic menstruation
flows in the crucible of the mouth.

Once in a while she spits
the part that fits the young.

Until instinct takes over the blood.

I saw lightning arranged on the frenum
like a plainer on the derangement of the corneas.
The hooks with their incisive
gleaming mechanics.
I saw the cleaver. And the percussion
was a decanted blindness.

I want the anticipation of a vein.
I arrange the irons
over the premeditation of a movement.

If the animal rises from the silt
there will be an archaic lung
bristling on the back,
an exact assumption.
And the tenacity that shines
on the scales
like an affront.

Embers rise from the deep
and in tubes of thought plow
a stopped filing,
ready to convulse.
I touch the head
tuberous calcification of madness,
a seismic belt
spiked between the temples.

The animal lifts itself above what bleeds.
It sings at the root of breath.
Millstones of blasphemy emerge.
He is facing the abyss
and hurls himself into the heresy.

To get over the blood
the form arranges itself
a bony corolla.
And if the shine rises from the recesses
and touches the fracture
a gill will tear itself
in the front.

The groins besiege devastation
but it is inside that the primers
wound.

The uterus or forge,
until blood
runs down the middle of the pig iron
and against all reason
grow into trees.

He replaces death
in the middle of truculence.
He advances with audacity
projected on the scapula,
sublime in his obstinacy.
And the brutal inflorescence
of irons in his back.

The slow tubes of fear rise,
set in the middle of laudatory heads
like a coaxial emanation.
He is the high voltage of a name,
the stamp that reverberates inside
when the bolts close the corneas.

For where he steps darkens.

The animal withdraws from the razor.
There is no resistance or retraction.
He is now extremity alive
from a brutal metallurgy,
the mechanical vocalization of horror.
Above the blood's coalescence
blasphemy and its disposition.

They will lift themselves from the apocalypse,
jugulars seething from a stinging ferocity.
They will be an erratic calligraphy
over the landscape,
the tone at which god held the note.

Everything leans toward an admirable impurification.
The man is over the disposition of error
like an ignited theorem,
a gunpowder carotid
beating inside the work.

I saw the brood get loose from the snare.
On their foreheads, they display the long blasphemy.