

The Professor

Cristovão Tezza

He woke from an uncomfortable dream: lying on what seemed like a bed, he was embracing his enemy, whose lips were inching closer to his own. He did not want to be brusque, however, to push him away, as would be most obvious, or perhaps even to lash out with a punch; instead he merely moved his face out of the way, saying something he could no longer remember in the bright morning light. But it was plain to him that his movements had been gentle; he was trying to distance himself delicately, like a man getting out of a bed where his wife is asleep, and must not be woken. The enemy: yes, he imagines he had one, throughout his life, and now the enemy was there to haunt him with his inescapable proximity, even in dreams. He was intrigued, in the cold awakening, to find that he was not perturbed by the obvious sexual overtone, those wizened lips almost touching his, an image so powerful that he would not be able to forget it, he would never forget it, and he was suddenly alarmed, as if he had an endless future ahead of him, remembering the dream he had back in 1952, as a child, falling off a cliff and saved only through the sheer force of his scream —his mother came to watch over him, and he remembers clearly that protecting hand running through his hair, more than 60 years ago. She never again ran her hand through her son's hair, but those were different times, tougher —or perhaps it was only he who thought himself a tough person. And yet —and he shook his head, suddenly transported back to the beginning. How long ago? Seventy years —and he looked at his fingers, moving them slowly, feeling the slight pain connected to that gesture in the mornings. It doesn't matter. Almost seventy-one, he corrected himself. The image of the fall remained, and it was as if he were falling again, the emptiness in his chest, the shade of panic, the rollercoaster in his soul. It's all chemistry, he said out loud to calm himself, it's all chemistry, those pills, he added, his voice lower now, so no one would hear, it's all chemistry, and I'm a victim of those experiments with powder in the shape of pills —and then he smiled, as if that simple explanation were able to suppress the entire chain of the day's daily discomforts.

The day's daily discomforts, he whispered, finding the words appealing, prodding the language and feeling a pang of enthusiasm —I could have been a writer, if I had only had the courage at the right moment. I almost crossed that threshold once. It seemed so simple. Therèze had once said to him: why don't you write? A phoneme collision: the day's daily discomforts. In some parts of Brazil, he had repeated thousands of times in front of thousands of students, the phoneme "d" is palatalised when followed by the vowel "i". The word for day, *dia*, is pronounced as *jee-ah* or as *dee-ah*, like this, *dee-ah*, he opened his mouth wide to demonstrate, alveolar consonant, the tongue against the upper teeth. Anyone with a different accent finds it funny. He rubbed his hands over his face, he shook his head from side to side, three times, as if following some stretching routine —it's good for neck stiffness, he had heard this once and then spent decades repeating the movement. But his neck now looks like a chicken's neck, or like a chicken's foot —that's what women say. The simile is perfect. That saggy skin holding on to whatever it can, then spreading over the dry bones that rise like the roots of wrecked trees. The typical overnight stubble, yet to be shaved off. There was a time when it was fashionable. My head is shaped like a bulb, and he surprised himself with the inevitability of the conclusion, which he felt ready to announce to an audience: ladies and gentlemen of Brazil, yes, I was once a handsome man. Ha. He stretched out his right leg, then the left. The legs seemed to hurt less this morning. Chemistry works.

The truth is that I was not always an ancient man, he ironised in self-defence, now sitting on the varnished Brazilian walnut bed, with its whimsical ornaments. Look at the detailed carvings on the headboard. At least an hour of work went into every wooden relief, you can see the veins on every leaf perfectly. From the time of craftsmen, who are long gone. They don't make them like this any more, he heard his wife say a thousand times, genuinely annoyed, today all you have is that disposable rubbish, glued sawdust, the bed will fall to pieces after its first day — after the first fuck, he had once added, many years ago, and they both laughed. That, ladies and gents, was Mônica, so fondly remembered. Perhaps the ceremony that will be held in his honour is in recognition of his currency. No. Of his contribution. As someone

who managed to move without traumas (with great altruism, let's be honest; they have to acknowledge at least that. If it were not for him — if it were not for him the world would not exist? Yes, in a way, and he laughed like someone overhearing a joke at the café; the good old solipsism. After me, the deluge; without me, nothing! It's funny.) —who managed to move without traumas from old Romanic philology to modern linguistics —from written paper to living tongue. From solid texts —some written almost with the point of a dagger some 600 years ago, showing the brutality of time, and which he read with such pleasure, standing at his classroom's lectern, palpable—to the study of truly universal grammar, *it woulde not be propere, nor correcte, that in the course of our essaying we should forgette the ladyes in a state of virginitie, of whom men can speake in two manners — those whose primarie purpose is to garde their maidenhead all their lyfe for love of God and those who garde it 'til the time of their nuptials as ordained by their guardians.* Isn't this wonderful?, he would ask his students, the lecture hall full, a granite-like block of silence.

The shock of that silence — why don't people appreciate beauty when they have it in front of them? Because beauty has to be conquered, he explained: it has to be discovered, loved and cultivated. Conquered. Beauty doesn't grow on trees. But, sir, if beauty has to be conquered, then it's ready, isn't it? We just have to find it? Wouldn't it be better to say that beauty has to be invented? In other words, things are just there, lying indifferent in front of us, and we invent beauty. More silence in the lecture hall. A bright young man. He felt once again a stab of remorse, as if he had ignored some pearl glinting in the mud, or thrown it away with indifference. I vaguely remember having offered some tetchy reply. What year was that? Or was I enacting, at that moment, a rite of passage into adult life from which that young man hasn't yet recovered? He smiled: I can no longer separate what I said myself from what others said. Memory burns and melts. To be honest, ladies and gentlemen —he would close the first paragraph like this—, I don't wish to remember.

The year was 1984. I was 42 years old, he would explain during the ceremony in his honour, and he felt encouraged as the imaginary speech took

shape in his mind. Look, my friends, I was 42 years old. He would pause briefly. Sitting at the table, surely, would be all his old comrades in arms. Comrades in arms! What happened in 1984? Was it the year of the general strike? No, I don't think so. It was during the campaign for direct elections — who was I then? He closed his eyes: I was at the small café of my university department, mid-May, and I was putting sugar into my plastic coffee cup. Why do I repeatedly recall the same image, like a random and ludicrous photogram that sticks in the brain and stays there forever? Like those fragments of melody that we whistle for years without knowing where they came from, a groove in our mind's vinyl record. Sugar in the plastic coffee-cup; the thermos; I raised my eyes and there in front of me was my name on that semester's class schedule: Prof. Dr. Heliseu da Motta e Silva. Mondays and Wednesdays, 10:30-12:30. I can remember every single name and time slot on that A4 sheet of paper fixed to the wall with two thumbtacks, the way that a sudden movement at the café's counter made the sheet flutter like a woman's demure skirt, and he smiled again, still sitting on the bed. A good start to the day. It's in a poem by Drummond, or Bandeira: the wind makes the women's skirts flutter, something like that. A loose line of verse. This is why I remember that episode: five years earlier, no one wanted to teach Romanic Philology, that excrescence on the syllabus. There had been a slightly awkward discomfort at the department meeting, one person pushing the subject on to another, everyone giving their reasons, until I, who was always a bit old-school, said: I'll do it. I was, ladies and gentlemen, at the midway point: please understand. Not too much in the past, not too much in the future. That's what I'll say: at the midway point. Perhaps he would quote Drummond's line about the stone in the middle of the road, to add a touch of Brazilian humour. Or that opening line by Dante, to allude to the classic spirit *that always nurtured me*, he might use those very words, but it might sound too affected. *My dearest friends* (no, I would never say that; it would be like wearing a carnival mask over my face, one of those Groucho Marx ones. I love Rio de Janeiro, I lived there for two years, *chastely*, I should add —and years later that's where I had my first affair, more out of impulse than desire, and with no consequences, with a woman called Bruna, *the washed out little blonde*, as Mônica described her, before starting to call her *Bruma*, or mist, a nickname he accepted first as

a joke, then out of habit and finally out of realism, it was a metaphor about gender, the female mist —but I was never able to become a carioca.); *My friends* (no; too intrusive —I don't know how those people on their computers manage to have a million friends; at this stage, a single friend would be good enough, and he smiled, maybe a good joke to get started, but no, he would never say that, the self-indulgent piety schtick did not suit him; to be fair, I'm beyond the phase of friendships, now it's all down to the brutal essentials); *My colleagues* (not quite right —there's a hint of possessiveness about their affection, a little off); simply *Colleagues* —followed by a discreet smile, with the exact dose of the spirit of friendship. After all, they will be gathered to celebrate him. Yes. The perfect way to address them. *Colleagues*. Not emphatic, but not distant either. The thing itself, just as it is. It is so difficult to master the correct form of behaviour. Like the time when he opened the door to his son's bedroom, some 25 years ago, and found him with one of his male colleagues. They weren't quite grownups, but they weren't children —he shut the door immediately (the correct form of behaviour) and his life was never again the same: an endless fall, he might say, if he were dramatically inclined. As if that same feeling of breathlessness, or the desire to revisit the image's dry memory, were now coming back to him intact.

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