



A. M. PIRES CABRAL

(Portugal, 1941)

[Thursday 1 May 2008]

The author of some forty books of poetry, fiction and essays, A. M. Pires Cabral was born in 1941, in a village of northeastern Portugal, and took a degree in English and German. Unlike many Portuguese writers, who left the interior of the country for the urban centers along the coast, Pires Cabral remained in the region where he was born and raised, working there today as an administrator in the area of culture. The human reality of the rural northeast is very much present in his novels and short stories, as well as in some of his poetry, which at the same time could not be farther removed from the stereotypes of regionalist literature. The dominant theme of his most recent verse collections is a universal one: the lamentable inevitability of death.

The author's loyalty to his geographical origins is partly responsible for the tardy recognition of his poetic oeuvre, although one or another critic took note of its importance in the early eighties. His first books were published at his own expense, by local institutions or small publishing houses, which did not help his poetry gain the visibility it deserved.

In the 1970s, in Portugal as elsewhere, many poets wanted poetry to have a more vital, direct relationship with everyday reality. Without renouncing the cultural references and attention to form that characterized the preceding generation, they pursued a discourse that was more centered on personal experience and the expression of emotion, thereby hoping to restore poetry's capacity to communicate, which they felt had been compromised by the militant efforts in the 1960s to achieve an autonomous poetic language.

Pires Cabral's first book, *Algures a Nordeste* (Somewhere in the Northeast), published in 1974, when he was already 33, was a critical moment in this shifting of poetic priorities. If its significance in this respect has not always been noticed, this may be due to the unusual circumstances of its distribution. The author, out of his own pocket, paid for a print run of a thousand copies, which forthwith proved to be overoptimistic. With his home overrun by boxes of unsold books, he was relieved to accept an offer from the local volunteer fire

department to buy out the edition, which the firemen then sold from door to door, as a novel means for obtaining funds for a new ambulance. All the copies were sold in no time, though we may doubt whether the book found its ideal reading public. Recently, upon recalling this episode, the poet suggested that homemakers may have used the book to light their fires, “unless,” he added, “it served for some less canonical purpose”.

Contrary to other poets, who clearly aspired to making a break with the sort of poetry that prevailed in the previous decade, it is unlikely that the author of *Algures a Nordeste* had such an ambition in mind. In fact, one of the most interesting aspects of the various books published by Pires Cabral in the following years was precisely how they were able to include characteristics from both of the apparently antagonistic programs.

In the early 1980s, the author stopped publishing poetry altogether and dedicated himself to fiction. But in the 21st century he returned to verse, bringing out a series of slim, highly structured poetry volumes, some of which are better understood as a single poem in various parts. In these books he manages to make rigorous and extreme poetic concision coexist with a discursive spontaneity that sometimes approaches colloquial speech. Many of these poems address the horror of knowing ourselves doomed to extinction. Pires Cabral shares none of the romantic vision of death as a mysterious night and moment of fusion with the unknowable all. Death, for him, is but a physical fact that we have the misfortune of being able to foresee.

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POEMS

COMPUTER IN THE TRASH
CONFESSION OF ONE WHO FLEW
GYPSIES
THE PROSTITUTES
THE TRIUMPH OF INSECTS
TO A ROOSTER

COMPUTER IN THE TRASH

Here lies a computer
in the trash. And yet
its tin brain contained memory
– gigabytes of it! –, performed
the four mathematical operations
and accepted verses
on its immaculate
virtual whiteness.

Now it can no longer add
or subtract,
nor groan out poems, nor underline
misspelled words.
The droplets of solder, precarious
metal neurons,
have lost their memory.

Tell me, brother,
since you got there first,
what it's like not to function.

And if the rust is painful.

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CONFESSION OF ONE WHO FLEW

1.

But if in these six and a half decades
I was capable of some sort of flight

– which could only have been comparable
to the awkward and rudimentary flight
of chickens, with a great expenditure
of energy to achieve brief and desperate
moments of scant ascension,
but a kind of flying all the same,
by which I managed to stay aloft
in my lighter moments –

now, that cycle of flight having ended,
I must perch, the way birds do.

COMPUTADOR NO LIXO

Eis um computador
no lixo. E todavia
o crânio de lata teve memória dentro
– gigabytes dela! –,
fez as quatro operações,
aceitou versos
no seu imaculado
branco virtual.

Agora já não soma
nem subtrai,
nem geme poemas, nem sublinha
erros de ortografia.
Os pingos de solda, precários
neurónios de metal,
perderam a memória.

Já que te antecipaste,
companheiro,
diz-me como é não funcionar.

E se a ferrugem dói.

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From: *Como se Bosch Tivesse Enlouquecido*
Publisher: Assírio & Alvim, Lisboa

CONFESSO QUE VOEI

1.

Mas, se nestas seis décadas e meia
eu fui capaz de algum voo

– concedo, semelhante ao das galinhas,
isto é, rudimentar, desgracioso,
com muitíssimo dispêndio de energia
para pouca ascensão, breve e apenas
em desespero de causa;
em todo o caso uma forma de voo
pelo qual me sustentei no ar
em horas de menos peso –

devo agora, fechado o ciclo do voo,
como os pássaros pousar.

This isn't like when a shop
changes its line of business
or closes to take inventory
at year's end.
Nor is it like carrying out
an arrest warrant
or atoning for the disorderliness
of being a pedestrian who flew.
Nor is it the inevitable conclusion
to an act of sedition.

Perching, that's all. Returning
to the endearing things of earth.
It's the earth finally claiming what I owe her
and my claiming what she owes me
since my very first hour.

I flew, I'm flown out.
Without nostalgia.

2.

I choose the branch
most suited to my condition and alight
from my flight, perching like a bird
whose flying temporarily peters out.

And just as a perched bird, right
after alighting, still flaps its wings
two or three times,
so I flap mine.

But whereas the bird flaps its wings
to shake off the residue
of its flight,
I flap mine to keep my balance;
the branch bends, I'm not as agile
as I used to be, and I'd fall
if I didn't flap my wings.

Which is to say: I flap my wings the way
the tight-rope walker probes with his rod
and the blind man with his cane.

To feel more comfortable
outside my flight.

E isto não é como uma loja
que muda de ramo
ou que em fins de Dezembro
fecha para balanço.
Nem como executar
um mandado de detenção.
Nem expiar a desordem
de, sendo pedestre, ter voado.
Nem um remate compulsivo
à sedição.

Pousar, é tudo. Regressar
ao afago das coisas da terra.
A terra cobrar por fim o que lhe devo
e eu cobrar dela o que me deve
desde a primeira hora.

Voei, está voado.
Nada de nostalgias.

2.

Escolho o galho
mais ajeitado à minha condição
e, como a ave a quem o voo se esgota
temporariamente, apeio-me do voo.

Assim como a ave que, acabada
de pousar, bate ainda as asas
por duas ou três vezes,
assim as bato eu.

Mas enquanto a ave as bate
como para sacudir delas
os resíduos do voo,
eu faço-o por exigência de equilíbrio:
o ramo verga, já não tenho
a agilidade doutros tempos,
cairia se não batesse as asas.

Isto é: bato-as da mesma forma que
o funâmbulo tenteia a vara
e o cego a bengala.

Para me acomodar mais facilmente
no exterior do voo.

3.

And my perching, unlike the bird's,
is not a temporary state. From now on
I'll observe the march of my days
from my definitively perched perspective.

So here I am, perched, trying to accommodate
my body to this new condition.

My eyes look up at the space
from where I banished myself
to see if perchance I scratched
the crystal of air with my flight,
since even the tiniest scratch would cause
the crystal to cease being crystal.

I scratched nothing.
Thanks be to God.
After all that clumsy flying
I leave the air as clear and whole
as I found it.

(It's no wonder. I was always careful to shake
the dust from my feet before rising in flight.)

4.

No, it's not out of nostalgia
that in this terminal hour of perching I
remember
the deft but imprudent, and impudent, forays
of my flight and how I seized the light.

It's out of gratitude, I suppose.

Flying was always the most useful
of my useless occupations.
A sprig of hay in the corner of my mouth.
A charitable donation to the flesh.
The orifice through which
torrents drained.

Intensely perched,
this is what I remember.

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3.

Nem o meu pouso é passageiro
como o da ave. Daqui em diante
assistirei ao decurso dos dias
pousado definitivamente.

Eis-me pois pousado, procurando
ajeitar o corpo à nova condição.

Os olhos erguidos para o espaço
donde me escorracei
para saber se porventura risquei
o cristal do ar com o meu voo.
Um arranhão que fosse, que depois dele
o cristal já não fosse cristal.

Não risquei.
Louvado seja Deus.
Depois de tanto voo desastrado
deixo o ar nítido e inteiro
como o encontrei.

(Não admira. Sempre tive o cuidado
de sacudir os pés à entrada do voo.)

4.

Não. Não é por nostalgia
que nesta hora extrema de pousar
me lembram as hábeis imprudências do voo,
as impudências, a tomada da luz.

Parece-me isto antes gratidão.

Voar foi sempre o mais útil
dos meus gestos inúteis.
A haste de feno ao canto da boca.
Um donativo à carne.
O orifício por onde
se escoavam enxurradas.

Intensamente pousado,
é isto que me lembra.

© 2006, A. M. Pires Cabral
From: *Antes que o Rio Seque*
Publisher: Assírio & Alvim, Lisboa

GYPSIES

It is said they come from Central Europe. I see them coming from the direction of Grijó, in a weary caravan.

The she-dog trots beneath the only wagon, availing herself of the jiggling, faint shade. In the driver's seat, with his swarthy hand slackly holding the reins, a man daydreams, trusting the slow mule to lead the way. Other men on foot, along with the young women, lighten with laughter the long hard trek. Then come their chattels, loaded on donkeys whose precarious trotting also bears a few oldsters tired of everything. Nursing infants suck with drowsy stubbornness at teats stretched and shaking, but round and white. The children run along in playful little herds, making brief and furtive sallies into the vegetable plots on either side.

They are all dark-skinned and have a sing-song speech. They all look at me with soft brown eyes. It is said they come from Central Europe, from a landless race, and here, amid insults, they seek to carry out their struggle, their exile and their primitive vocation. It is said they unearth animals deceased from foul diseases and sink into them their millenary hunger. It is said their women are intimate with the stars and for a few dollars will read colorful futures in your hands. It is said they rob gardens and poach chickens, and the villagers, in secret alarm, banish them with iron hand and ruthless voice from the environs of their peaceable land. It is said they fool unwary farmers in their never transparent dealings to sell animals, passing off as a thoroughbred the blindest and most broken-down nag. It is said that in the towns, after taking down their fairs and getting drunk, they trade vicious swipes

OS CIGANOS

Dizem que vêm da Europa Central. Eu vejo-os vir dos lados de Grijó em lassa caravana.

Debaixo da carroça trota a coelheira, aproveitando a sombra débil e ambulante. Sentado na boleia, as rédeas na mão morena descuidadas, um homem cisma, confia do caminho ao macho lento a decisão. Outros homens a pé e mulheres novas entretêm de riso a caminhada espessa. Logo após, sobre os burros, os pertences. Alguns velhos também, já cansados de tudo, tiram partido do precário trote. As crianças de peito sugam em sonolenta teima as elásticas tetas sacudidas, mas alvas e redondas. Os mais velhitos caminham repartidos em pequenas e lúdicas manadas, dando às hortas laterais breves saltos furtivos.

Toda esta gente é morena e tem fala cantada, levanta para mim doces olhos castanhos. Dizem que vêm da Europa Central, de uma raça sem chão, e aqui procura, de insultos rodeada, cumprir a sua luta, seu degrado e sua primitiva vocação. Dizem que os ciganos desenterram animais defuntos de alguma enfermidade menos limpa e neles cravam dentes de fome milenária. Dizem que as mulheres estão na intimidade das estrelas e a troco de uns mil-réis lêem nas mãos destinos coloridos. Dizem que roubam quintais e assaltam capoeiras, e os aldeões, em pânico secreto, os expulsam com voz impiedosa e decidida mão das cercanias do seu chão governado. Dizem que enganam os incautos campônios em negócios sempre escuros de animais, em que fazem passar por uma estampa o mais escalavrado e cego dos cavalos. Dizem que na vila, ao desfazer das feiras, têm por costume, depois de embriagados, trocar com as bengalas possantes e vistosas pancadaria rija, de que morrem.

with their sturdy, handsome canes from which they die.
It is said they have strange passionate dramas.
It is said they have no god and get married by tossing joyful hats into the air.

All this and more is said about gypsies. I don't know.
I see them coming from the direction of Grijó and there they all are, right in front of me, and they look to me like people, just people.

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THE PROSTITUTES

Back then our town
would be visited by prostitutes –
our only recourse,
the perfect answer to our accumulated
seminal anxiety.
They came from Vale da Porca, or from
some equally godforsaken place.
They came with flashy scarves on their heads
and handbags containing the old, sad story:
artless seduction and chronic squalor,
but not mere mercenary vice.
In barnyards, planted between their legs
like kings, we gave them our waters.
To flatter us they tried to time
their feigned orgasms with our own.
They kissed us, saying: so young!
They endured our insults and rude thrusts.
With an experienced (but not surfeited) hand
they guided us in that beautiful and urgent
education that cannot wait,
extending us credit and affection –
those women who were so chaste,
those prostitutes.

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Dizem que vivem estranhos dramas passionais.
Dizem que não têm deus e que se casam
lançando ao ar jubilosos chapéus.

Dizem tudo isso dos ciganos. Eu não sei.
Vejo-os vir dos lados de Grijó
e estão todos de frente para mim
e parecem-me gente – nada mais.

© 1974, A. M. Pires Cabral
From: *Algures a Nordeste*
Publisher: Assírio & Alvim, Lisboa

AS PROSTITUTAS

Naquele tempo,
elas desciam à vila, as prostitutas –
a única saída,
exactíssima resposta para a nossa
angústia seminal acumulada.
Vinham de Vale da Porca, ou outra
terra assim pasmada.
Traziam na cabeça lenços garridos,
na carteira de mão a triste história:
a sedução primária, a miséria espessa,
mas jamais o vício mercenário.
Nas eiras recebiam nossas águas,
de permeio plantados como reis.
Procuravam lisonjeiras acertar
seu êxtase fingido com o nosso.
Beijavam-nos, diziam: tão novinho!
Suportavam-nos insultos e arremessos.
Com mão experiente (mas não habituada)
guiavam-nos na bela, impreterível,
urgente aprendizagem,
concediam-nos crédito e carinho –
as tão castas mulheres,
as prostitutas.

© 1974, A. M. Pires Cabral
From: *Algures a Nordeste*
Publisher: Assírio & Alvim, Lisboa

THE TRIUMPH OF INSECTS

Not all insects will make it to November.
In December hardly any wings will be seen
attempting their resigned, late-season
flaps that go nowhere, though the curtains
may yet harbor some survivor
less exposed to the weather. And January
will retain almost no memory of the tiny life
deposited somewhere by diligent females
and tenaciously resistant to the calendar.

I, meanwhile, will have resisted the cold
and perhaps scoffed at the transitory death
of so many humble bodies
gone downriver.

But when May finally beats its drum
or blows its horn,
the shriveled wings will un wrinkle,
the sky will be small, the flowers scarce.
And the vile insects will triumph
over the ice and over me,
my afflictions.

What's the difference between
sixty years and one year?
What difference between a week
and one day?

Unless it's that no insect suffers
the agony of winter, whereas I fiddle
with these words of exorcism,
these laborious dialectics,
and I don't hide my face, since I can't
hide my face, from the vicious
countenance of the long harsh winter
that will seize me by way of the insects.

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O TRIUNFO DOS INSECTOS

Nem todos os insectos atingirão Novembro.
Em Dezembro se verá ainda alguma asa
tentando seu tardio, resignado
golpe de breve alcance, e acaso na cortina
sobreviverá algum retardatário
menos exposto ao clima. E Janeiro
mal guardará memória da vida pequenina,
tenaz e resistente ao calendário,
por fêmeas diligentes algures depositada.

Terei eu, entretanto, resistido ao frio,
talvez escarnecido a morte intercalar
de tanto corpo humilde
dado ao rio.

Mas quando Maio enfim rufar o seu tambor,
soprar o seu clarim,
as asas engelhadas se desenrugarão,
o céu será pequeno, as flores escassas.
E os insectos vis triunfarão
dos gelos e de mim,
minhas desgraças.

Que são sessenta anos
mais do que um ano só?
Que é uma semana
mais que um dia?

Só que nenhum insecto se agonia
das crises do inverno – enquanto eu
manejo estas palavras de esconjuro,
estes laboriosos dialectos,
e a face não escondo, que não posso,
do rosto violento
do grande inverno duro
que está por vir por via dos insectos.

© 1999, A. M. Pires Cabral
From: *O Livro dos Lugares e Outros Poemas*
Publisher: Assírio & Alvim, Lisboa

TO A ROOSTER

That creature that affronted the dawn
with its acidic, assiduous voice.
That had spurs for its bayonet
and seethed with red envy.

The rooster. One of its bones
still lying in the yard.

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A UM GALO

Aquele que injuriava a madrugada
com ácida, assídua voz.
O que tinha esporões por baioneta,
o do ciúme em brasa.

O galo. Um osso dele
ainda no quintal.

© 1999, A. M. Pires Cabral
From: *O Livro dos Lugares e Outros Poemas*
Publisher: Assírio & Alvim, Lisboa

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Bio and bibliographical information

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Poems