



JOSÉ MIGUEL SILVA

(Portugal, 1969)

[Friday 1 February 2008]

José Miguel Silva was born in 1969 in Northern Portugal, in the coastal city of Vila Nova de Gaia. He studied philosophy, but never completed his university course. Today he works as a translator. Along with novels by authors such as Virginia Woolf, Iris Murdoch, Alice Munro, Don DeLillo and Lorrie Moore, he has translated Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and *Macbeth* into Portuguese, as well as Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology*. In 1999, he published his first book of poetry, *O Sino de Areia (The Sand Bell)*, a quite extraordinary first volume that already contains characteristics that would come to mark his later work. These include a confident sense of prosody, a refined sense of humor and, above all, a powerful capacity for invention, uncommon in a declaredly realist poet, who strives for clarity and communicability and who, sometimes, doesn't hesitate even in venturing down the dangerous byways of political poetry. Among Portuguese poets who have appeared in recent years, perhaps no other has his talent for surprising the reader.

Already present in *O Sino de Areia* are the domestic scenes, the episodes of everyday urban life and small commerce, as well as evocations of the poet's past, all of which will return in other books, such as *Vista para Um Pátio, seguido de Desordem (View of a Patio, followed by Disorder)*, and yet the childhood and adolescence that José Miguel portrays is hardly idyllic, and the view he now takes of them, if not one of resentment, also has little to do with the nostalgia so typical of a good deal of contemporary Portuguese poetry.

Like other poets of his generation, such as Rui Pires Cabral or Manuel de Freitas – with whom he collaborated on his latest book, *Walkmen* – José Miguel Silva was influenced by pop music and by the experiences associated with it, but also by cinema. Already in his first book, there are poems that take some

of their references from Japanese films. In the second, *Ulisses Já Não Mora Aqui*, (*Ulysses Doesn't Live Here Anymore*), whose title itself plays off Scorsese's *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, we find a poem inspired by Tarkovski's *Stalker*. And, finally, in *Movimentos no Escuro* (*Movements in the Dark*), all of the poems, with the exception of one, take their titles from the names of films. But if in some of these poems the author maintains a fundamental relation with the works evoked, in others he uses them as a springboard to narrate small personal incidents – “The boy with green hair was me, in the late 70s” – or even to criticize the murky political and moral corruption of today's Western world, drawing an analogy, for example, between Ettore Scola's *Ugly, Dirty and Bad* and the cynical professional politicians of our time.

In recent Portuguese poetry, this disillusioned view of contemporary society is far from being the exclusive property of José Miguel Silva, but it is only the rare poet who, like him, dares to adopt a tone of open indignation. He does, and he pulls off something even rarer, he avoids the most obvious pitfalls of 'engaged' poetry.

© Miguel Queirós (Translated by Martin Earl)

POEMS

AT THE BOOK FAIR – II

HERE TO STAY

MY MUSE

RAINING STONES - KEN LOACH (1993)

THE BICYCLE THIEF - VITTORIO DE SICA (1948)

THE BOY WITH GREEN HAIR - JOSEPH LOSEY (1948)

TO PLEASE A SHADOW

VIEW ONTO A COURTYARD – 10

AT THE BOOK FAIR - II

“Do you have books about pleasure?”
mumbles the unarmed
gunner of love.
A kink in his genome
had buried his heart.

Teeth on edge,
slanting eyes,
hair like tow,
his life has been refuted

NA FEIRA DO LIVRO - II

– “Tem livros sobre o prazer?”
sussurra o desarmado
pistoleiro do amor.
Um deslize do genoma
soterrou-lhe o coração.

Os dentes em balanço,
os olhos de través,
a estopa do cabelo;
sua vida é refutada

by the festive canon
of the Greek to kallon.

He has no place in the world
of heroes. He learned to spell
in the school of misfortune,
and no one forgives him
the suffering that throbs
in that utterly indecent
question.

© Translation: 2008, Richard Zenith

pelo cânone festivo
do grego to kallon.

Não tem lugar no mundo
dos heróis, aprendeu a soletrar
na escola do revés
e não há quem lhe perdoe
o sofrimento, quando pulsa
na pergunta
entre todas indecente.

© 2002, José Miguel Silva
From: *Ulisses Já Não Mora Aqui*
Publisher: & etc., Lisbon

HERE TO STAY

When we most expect it
there's a knock on the door:
not the postman
and not youth calling. He says
he's family and is here to stay.

First he plays hide and seek
with our thoughts.
He wakes us up at night, rips
our slippers apart for fun,
leaves jars of formaldehyde
on the kitchen table.

At a loss for what to do, we try
to divert his hunger.
We show him our watch,
give him our wallet,
the buttons of our raincoat, our rings.
And finally our fingers.

At which point he persuades us
to call him sir and to offer him
our grandfather's chair, the phone numbers
of our friends, the view from the window.
With head uncovered
we serve dinner.

VEM PARA FICAR

Acontece quando mais o esperamos:
um punho bate à porta,
não se trata do carteiro
nem da juventude. Diz-se
da família. Vem para ficar.

Começa por brincar às escondidas
com os nossos pensamentos.
Acorda-nos de noite, diverte-se
a romper as sapatilhas,
deixa frascos de formol
sobre a mesa da cozinha.

Primeiro, não sabendo o que fazer,
tentamos distrair a sua fome,
mostramos-lhe o relógio,
passamos-lhe a carteira para as mãos,
os botões da gabardine, os anéis.
Por último, os dedos.

Neste passo, depressa nos convence
a tratá-lo por senhor, a ceder-lhe num sorriso
a cadeira do avô, o telefone
dos amigos, a vista da janela.
De cabeça descoberta
servimos o jantar.

In time we realize
he wants to dress us inside out,
to line our coat collars
with the north wind, to have us say:
“the autumn leaves are burning bright,
what am I doing at home?”

© Translation: 2008, Richard Zenith

MY MUSE

She’s chaste compared to me
and drinks only mineral water.
Furtive, cheeky and fickle,
she sometimes stays away
for months, and then I feel like
punching her. But it’s probably
my fault. I spend too much time
scratching my head or watching
airplanes from the balcony.
Of course she gets tired of me:
I’m rarely at home when
she arrives, and I’d rather sleep
than watch TV with her
sitting on my knees.

I often wonder
if it’s worth going through all
the torments she makes me suffer.
She’s bent on turning me
into a poet, when what
I’d really like to be
is an aviator. (But I’m afraid
of heights, and she knows it.
She takes advantage of my weakness.)

She makes me sleep with my eyes
wide open, studying life’s
bared teeth, the manual
of the elements, the disastrous
history of my mistakes.
It’s hard to stomach
so much solitude. Small wonder
I’ve frequently cheated on her
with Helena, with bourbon

Com o tempo percebemos:
quer vestir-nos do avesso,
forrar de vento norte
a gola dos casacos, levar-nos a dizer:
“há nas folhas do Outono vivo lume,
que faço eu em minha casa?”

© 1999, José Miguel Silva
From: *O Sino de Areia*
Publisher: Gilgamesh, Oporto

A MINHA MUSA

É mais casta do que eu
e só bebe água mineral.
Furtiva, insolente, caprichosa,
às vezes desaparece-me de casa
durante meses. Apetece-me
bater-lhe. Mas talvez a culpa
seja minha. Passo tanto tempo
a coçar a cabeça ou no terraço
a ver passar os aviões.
É natural que se farte de mim,
raramente estou em casa
quando chega, prefiro dormir
a ver televisão com ela
sentada nos meus joelhos.

Amiúde me pergunto
se compensam os tormentos
a que me força.
Meteu na cabeça fazer
de mim poeta, quando
o que eu gostaria era de ser
aviador. (Mas tenho medo
das alturas, e ela sabe-o.
Aproveita-se da minha debilidade.)

Obriga-me a ficar de olhos abertos
durante o sono, a estudar os
caninos que a vida me mostra,
o manual dos elementos, a história
calamitosa dos meus erros.
É preciso ter estômago
para tanta solidão. Não admira
que muitas vezes a traia
com a Helena, com o bourbon

amid friends, with the soaring purple
of the jacaranda on Viriato Square.
All in vain: she feels no jealousy.
She herself pushes me
into the world's arms.

She's such a snob, so demanding,
so rude. She'd do away
with Sundays, holidays
and summers. For her,
life could be a darkened room
with B movies and a soundtrack
of gunshots, sobs, and guffaws
of an anatomical theater.
She sets up duels for me – she's
crazy! – with frightful swordsmen
who make my soul shudder
from head to toe. She says
it's good for me to bleed a little,
and that she's my friend. Hmm.

Cold, stern and calculating,
she does her best to contradict
my noisy, patient,
sentimental nature.
She says writing with tears
is crap, she recites
Mallarmé, she gets up at night
to rip up my poems.
It's not easy to put up with her.

She changes the names of things
just to irritate me. If she sees
a massacre, she calls it
an acre of plowed earth. If she sees
a deadbeat, she calls him
wheat. She sees a door
and calls it fright.
Sometimes I wonder
if she isn't batty.

To be with her doesn't in fact
make me happy, just a little
more solitary.
But without her, see how
sad, how forlorn, how.

© Translation: 2008, Richard Zenith

dos amigos, com o voo violeta
do jacarandá no Largo do Viriato.
Mas não adianta, não sente ciúmes,
ela própria me empurra
para os braços do mundo.

É tão exigente, tão snob, tão
tinhosa. Por ela, não havia
domingos nem feriados,
não havia verão. Era sempre
toda a vida um quarto escuro
com filmes de série B e
uma banda sonora de tiros, soluços,
gargalhadas de teatro anatómico.
Marca-me duelos – é louca! –
com temíveis espadachins,
à vista dos quais a minha alma
treme dos pés à cabeça. Diz que
me faz bem sangrar um bocado,
que é minha amiga, talvez.

Fria, severa, calculadora,
tenta o que pode para contrariar
a minha natureza ruidosa,
paciente, sentimental.
Diz que é uma porcaria
escrever com lágrimas, recita
Mallarmé, levanta-se de noite
para me rasgar os poemas.
Não é fácil aturá-la.

Só para me irritar, muda
o nome de todas as coisas:
se vê um massacre chama-lhe
acre de terra lavrada,
vê um mendigo chama-lhe
trigo, vê uma porta
e chama-lhe susto.
Às vezes pergunto-me
se não será parva.

A verdade é que não sou feliz
com ela, apenas um pouco
mais solitário.
Mas sem ela – vejam que
tristeza, que abandono, que.

© 2002, José Miguel Silva
From: *Ulisses Já Não Mora Aqui*
Publisher: & etc., Lisbon

RAINING STONES - KEN LOACH (1993)

The unemployed, by definition, have no face. It must be embarrassing not to have a face. Maybe that's why they hide from us. They hide in the streets, on park benches, at bus stops. They hide in your bread, in your purse, in badly written poems or in realist British films. Where they know no one will bother them.

© Translation: 2008, Richard Zenith

CHUVA DE PEDRAS - KEN LOACH (1993)

Os desempregados, por definição, não têm cara. Deve ser embaraçoso não ter cara. Daí talvez o motivo por que se escondem de nós. Escondem-se nas ruas, nos bancos de jardim, nas paragens de autocarro, escondem-se no pão, no teu porta-moedas, nos poemas mal escritos ou nos filmes realistas ingleses. Onde sabem que ninguém os irá importunar.

© 2005, José Miguel Silva
From: *Movimentos no Escuro*
Publisher: Relógio d'Água, Lisbon

THE BICYCLE THIEF - VITTORIO DE SICA (1948)

500 miles per day pedaled my father, from his bed
near the Douro River to the booming
ceramicware
plant of Valadares. If all men, from birth,
are given some sixty enemies per hour,
imagine a life cycling to and from a factory.
One effort after another: the rosary of frost
covering
clusters of broom, a newspaper battered by the
wind,
the greenness of Spring, the dusty sweat on
each hand.

My father, to be sure, never complains. He
earns five
dollars a day and has a small house and big
dreams
of gas-powered tomorrows. "At least I don't
work
in a slaughterhouse", he thinks, and with good
reason,
standing tall on the pedals of his shadowy

LADRÕES DE BICICLETAS - VITTORIO DE SICA (1948)

Mil quilómetros por dia pedalava meu pai,
desde
a cama junto ao Douro até à próspera Cerâmica
de Valadares. Se qualquer homem recebe,
à nascença, uns sessenta inimigos por hora,
imaginem a jornada de um operário ciclista.
Tudo são despesas para ele: o rosário de geada
nas giestas, o jornal atropelado pelo vento, o
verdor
da Primavera, a poalha do suor em cada mão.

Meu pai, é claro, não se queixa, ganha um conto
de réis, tem uma casa portuguesa e grandes
sonhos
de amanhã a gasolina. Pelo menos não trabalho
em nenhum matadouro, pensa ele, e com razão,
erguido nos pedais do seu veículo de sombra,
solitário trepador pela encosta de Avintes. Não
trabalha em nenhum matadouro. E nesse
reconforto
passa à Quinta dos Frades, alcança o Freixieiro,
sente já o rumor de fumacentos camiões na
nacional,

vehicle,
a solitary cyclist climbing the slope at Avintes.
He doesn't
work in a slaughterhouse. And with that solace
he rides past the Quinta dos Frades, reaches
Freixieiro,
and hears the rumble of the smoky trucks on the
highway,
where the ride, at last, will be much smoother.

© Translation: 2008, Richard Zenith

THE BOY WITH GREEN HAIR - JOSEPH LOSEY (1948)

The boy with green hair was me, in the late 70s,
fleeing through brambles and gullies while the
throng
of jackals chased my sparrowy legs,
and only on a bike could I escape danger, since
the stones, hisses and torments were determined
to teach me basic notions of political
philosophy.

I pedaled over tears, back to the open arms
of my own blood, climbing the wall around our
yard,
from where I cursed the assassins: sons of
bitches!

What happiness, years later, to have ceased
being
a coward, to be the hand that slaps and wields
the stick,
and to laugh among equals in the row of the
anointed:
the first cigarette, the testicle examination.
What luck
to see tears fall and those tears not be mine.

© Translation: 2008, Richard Zenith

onde tudo, depois, será muito mais plano.

© 2005, José Miguel Silva
From: *Movimentos no Escuro*
Publisher: Relógio d'Água, Lisbon

O RAPAZ DE CABELO VERDE - JOSEPH LOSEY (1948)

O rapaz de cabelo verde era eu, em finais de
setenta,
a fugir por entre silvas e valados, quando a
turba
dos chacais acometia as minhas pernas de
pardal,
e só de bicicleta me tirava eu de apuros, pois
as pedras, os apupos, as polés insistiam em
mostrar-me
elementos capitais de filosofia política.

Pedalava sobre lágrimas, de volta para os braços
do meu sangue, trepava para o muro do quintal
e de lá esconjurava os assassinos: filhos de uma
puta!

Anos depois — que alegria já não ser o mais
cobarde, ser a mão que traz o pau, a bofetada;
e rir entre os iguais, no renque dos ungidos:
o primeiro cigarro, o exame dos colhões — que
sorte
ver as lágrimas cair e não serem as minhas.

© 2005, José Miguel Silva
From: *Movimentos no Escuro*
Publisher: Relógio d'Água, Lisbon

TO PLEASE A SHADOW

Now that I've wept my part as a lonely man,
I can turn the script over and declare that, in
fact,
I've never been alone. I've always had the good
company
of my shadow. And I have to say
we've done all right together, with bad days and
worse days,
like all couples. We were (and are) the same
age, with the same musical tastes
and a parallel fondness for sitting by the fire,
reading the same books, using almost
no oxygen.

She was the one who sometimes insisted
we go dancing, whereas I naturally hated
the scuzziness of discotheques, preferring
the descriptive movement of novels
to the mortgaged light of a distant body.

The tension between us increased over time,
with things going downhill when she started
inviting other people into our bed. Until
one day she arrived home and introduced me to
"the love of our life; now we're a threesome".
And so my shadow, that ingrate,
began saying the most atrocious things.
Such as: "You go to the movies. We're staying
home."
Or: "We could walk separately now and then,
don't you think?" And she shuts herself up in
the bedroom
for impassioned (breathless) conversations with
the other.
At which point I leave the house in a huff.

A life shared by three is perhaps shorter than
one
shared by two. Now there's a millimeter of
distance between me
and my shadow. Enough of an interval for a ray
of light.
We're not really any worse off than before.
But it disgusts me to see the pink clover
they sow in the backyard, happy as two little

PARA AGRADAR A UMA SOMBRA

Agora que já chorei o meu papel de solitário
posso virar a folha e declarar que, na verdade,
eu nunca estive sozinho. Tive sempre a boa
companhia
da minha sombra. E não posso dizer
que nos déssemos mal: uns dias pior, outros
pior.
Como todos os casais. Tínhamos (e temos)
a mesma idade, os mesmos gostos musicais,
um amor paralelo por fogo de lenha,
líamos os livros a meias, quase não gastávamos
nenhum oxigênio.

Dos dois era ela quem insistia, às vezes,
para irmos dançar. Mas eu, é claro, detestava
o tremedal das discotecas; amava mais depressa
o movimento descritivo dos romances
do que a luz hipotecada de um corpo distante.

Com o tempo, no entanto, foi crescendo esse
litígio.
As nossas relações foram perdendo vulto
à medida que ela convidava mais gente
para a nossa cama. Até que um dia chegou a
casa
e apresentou-me "o amor da nossa vida; agora
somos três". E assim a minha sombra,
a minha ingrata começou a dizer coisas
lacerantes.
Por exemplo: "Vai tu ao cinema. Nós ficamos."
Ou então: "Bem podemos, de vez em quando,
caminhar separados, ou não achas?" E fecha-se
no quarto com a outra, em colóquios ofegantes.
Altura em que, de raiva, saio porta fora.

Uma vida a três é talvez menos longa do que
uma vida
a dois. Há um milímetro agora de distância
entre mim
e a sombra. O espaço bastante para um raio de
luz.
Não ficámos, realmente, pior do que estávamos.
Mas chega a ser enjoativo ver o trevo cor-de-
rosa
que semeiam no quintal, felizes como duas

movie stars. What can I say? They're like children.

© Translation: 2008, Richard Zenith

VIEW ONTO A COURTYARD - 10

An ardent fan of period films, childhood skips up the cinema staircase, heart aflutter, to feast eyes on the dashing swashbucklers, on the heroes' wrathful beauty.

The reckoning of justice, the ideal gunshots, convey the certainty that evil has been surrounded in the gorge and, with only two bullets left, is bound to lose.

The dim light in the theater fosters the illusion, which dissolves amid the laughs that surround him at the exit, where his schoolmate all agree: you're the villain, you can be the water boy.

© Translation: 2008, Richard Zenith

estrelinhas de cinema. Nem sei o que diga. Parecem crianças.

© 2003, José Miguel Silva
From: *Vista para Um Pátio seguido de Desordem*
Publisher: Relógio d'Água, Lisbon

VISTA PARA UM PÁTIO/DEZ

A infância gosta de filmes de época. Sobe a trote a escadaria do cinema, alado o coração, ao encontro dos melhores espadachins, da colérica beleza dos heróis.

O acerto da justiça, os tiros ideais, comunicam-lhe a certeza de que o mal está cercado no desfiladeiro: só lhe restam duas balas – vai perder.

A pouca luz da sala determina a ilusão. Desfeita com os risos que o cercam à saída, quando a massa dos colegas delibera: tu és o vilão, ficas na baliza.

© 2003, José Miguel Silva
From: *Vista para Um Pátio seguido de Desordem*
Publisher: Relógio d'Água, Lisbon

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Poetry in Portuguese

O Sino de Areia, Gilgamesh, Oporto, 1999

Ulisses Já Não Mora Aqui, & etc., Lisbon, 2002

Vista para Um Pátio seguido de Desordem, Relógio d'Água, Lisbon, 2003

24 de Março, Gilgamesh, Porto, 2004

Movimentos no Escuro, Relógio d'Água, Lisbon, 2005

Walkmen (with Manuel de Freitas), & etc., Lisbon, 2007

In Spanish

El Arte de la Pobreza. Diez Poetas Portugueses Contemporâneos, Diputación Provincial Málaga, 2007. Tr. José Ángel Cilleruelo