Like Herberto Helder, but 35 years later, José Tolentino Mendonça was born in Madeira. The very first poem of his first published book is titled ‘The Childhood of Herberto Helder’, and the homage suggests that the senior poet has managed, in his verses, to conserve a child’s direct understanding. The poem is also a homage to their common homeland, with its first verse affirming: “In the beginning was the island”. The island is Madeira, but it is also Herberto Helder, and José Tolentino Mendonça, and I who write and you who read. Contrary to the old dictum, every man and every woman is an island.

Poetry, for Mendonça, is a vehicle for leaving the island of himself — or it would be, if it were possible to leave. His poetry continually reaches out to the Other, who will always remain ineluctably other, even if they can share certain things: a language, for instance, and the experience of being islands and of attempting to transcend that condition and also to accept it. Love is described, in a poem such as ‘Friends’, as a sheer delight in associating with others without regard to time, in a fleeting state of grace, but the beloved others are “always adolescents / afraid and alone”. No matter how close they are to us or we to them, they will always remain “those strangers”.

Some of Mendonça’s poetry reminds me of passages from the works of the Jewish philosophers Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas, both of whom (with all their significant differences) insisted on the inalienable otherness of the You — not as an opposite term that dualistically gives the I its identity, but as the possibility of love, as the recognition of mystery, of something beyond the insularity and solipsism of an individual human consciousness. For them as for Mendonça, who is a Roman Catholic priest, ethics (which means respect and responsibility for the Other) is the foundation of knowledge. And for the I-You encounter not to collapse into a new form of egoism — with the You appropriated into the I, becoming its mere alter ego — there must be an eternal or divine You. (May students of philosophy forgive my simplifications here!)
“What separates one form from another / has always escaped me,” admits Mendonça (in ‘A Strand of Hair’), who does not draw clear lines between his solitary condition and his celebration of love and his awareness of God. The three motifs are interwoven in his poetry. Love is not a cure for solitude but is its expression and counterpart. And God is perhaps more a search than a certainty, doubt being a kind of raw material of faith. And since knowledge is founded on ethics, which is love, which is a real encounter with the other, or the Other, the poet opts for the plain directness of common speech (see ‘The Purest Presence’).

One of Mendonça’s admirers, the late and great poet Eugénio de Andrade, wrote: “This is a poetry that prefers poverty to luxury, simplicity to complication, a poetry that I feel is close to me and my aesthetic (if I really have one). I remember two lines of Montale: ‘We who are poor also have certain riches: the scent of lemons’.” Andrade’s poetry is rife with smells and sensuousness, and these enter some of Mendonça’s poems (‘Freesias’, for instance), but his aesthetic, it seems to me, is starker, more ascetic — a story of lostness and redemptive encounters on a vast and empty (is it empty?) stage.

Mendonça’s seven titles of poetry were recently issued in a collected edition. He has also published a play, various translations and two books on theological subjects. He is a professor of Biblical Studies at the Catholic University in Lisbon.

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POEMS

A STRAND OF HAIR
CALLE PRINCIPE 25
EXCEPT FOR YOU
FREESIAS
FRIENDS
PLANE TREES
STONE CROP
THE CHILDHOOD OF HERBERTO HELDER
THE LAST DAY OF SUMMER
THE PUREST PRESENCE
THE RUBBISH OF THE WORLD
THE WHITE ROAD
A STRAND OF HAIR

I abandon house and garden my place at the table
my favorite jacket, folded on the bed
this almost banal truth
that was me all my life

I don’t open the door when people knock
(sometimes they knocked by mistake)
I don’t tally up certainties
what separates one form from another
has always escaped me

Yesterday the chilly air from the fields
began to be clearer
I thought it was just passing and it turned out
to be a secret that my body
was telling my body
once and for all

But when I fell to the ground
like a strand of hair
(one of those that fall early
from the head of a young man
and since no one notices
they’re all the more lost)
you were at my side

You set fire to cities
you drowned armies
in the red sea of your rage
you mortgaged precious lands
to be at my side

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O FIO DE UM CABELO

Abandono a casa o horto o lugar à mesa
o casaco de que gostava, sobre o leito dobrado
esta verdade quase banal
que toda a vida fui

Não abro a porta quando batem
(às vezes batiam só por engano)
não avalio o balanço das certezas
o que separa uma forma da outra
sempre me escapou

Ontem começava a clarear
o ar frio que vinha dos campos
julguei-o de passagem e afinal
era um segredo que meu corpo
de uma vez por todas contava
ao meu corpo

Mas quando tombei sobre a terra
perdido como o fio de um cabelo
(aqueles que primeiro caem
da cabeça de um rapaz
e por não serem notados
são mais perdidos ainda)
estavas junto de mim

Lançaste ao fogo cidades
afogaste os exércitos
no vermelho mar da sua ira
hipotecaste terras tão preciosas
para estares junto de mim

© 2001, José Tolentino Mendonça
From: *A Noite Abre Meus Olhos*
Publisher: Assírio & Alvim, Lisbon
Without warning we lose
the vastness of the fields
singular enigmas
the clarity we swear
we’ll preserve

but it takes us years
to forget someone
who merely looked at us

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EXCEPT FOR YOU

What’s said about winter may be said about youth
it’s an abstract season
at a certain moment we feel suddenly cold
as if time no longer consented
the unexpected rapture which often
too often stems from that truth

But there’s something whose crux
is farther or nearer

You don’t even know for how many years
you’ll keep going back to the woods
to the details you ignored
to the remnants of that first love
we all think we’ve gotten over

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Perdemos repentinamente
a profundidade dos campos
os enigmas singulares
a claridade que juramos
conservar

mas levamos anos
a esquecer alguém
que apenas nos olhou

© 1999, José Tolentino Mendonça
From: A Noite Abre Meus Olhos
Publisher: Assírio & Alvim, Lisbon

MENOS PARA TI

O que se diz do inverno pode dizer-se da juventude
é uma estação abstracta
numa hora qualquer acabamos com frio
o desprovido transporte que por vezes
demasiadas vezes é o daquela verdade

Mas o jogo de alguma coisa
está mais longe ou mais perto

Nem tu sabes por quantos anos ainda
voltarás aos bosques
aos detalhes que ignoravas
ao que resta do primeiro amor
a que todos pensam ter sobrevivido

© 2001, José Tolentino Mendonça
From: A Noite Abre Meus Olhos
Publisher: Assírio & Alvim, Lisbon
FREESIAS

Freesias are flowers that smell like tea and she, at age thirty-seven, preferred them to the usual flowers for sale. She admitted beauty but not splendor because repetitions are sad. They soon become wise precepts and she, at age thirty-seven, only cared for secrets that remained secret even when told.

(in certain periods she would sleepwalk through some forgotten door into the yard which bordered the woods and sometimes they had to search for her calling out her name or with the help of dogs already a long way from home)

she had the habit of lighting fires she then forgot about which is also why the villagers feared her)

an intense and troubled child for whom no certainties existed she never grasped the nature of domestic life

she’d tell her most beautiful discoveries without a second thought to someone she didn’t know

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FRESIAS

Frésias são flores com cheiro a chá e ela, aos trinta e sete anos, preferia-as às flores que se vendem por aí admitia a beleza mas não o esplendor porque são tristes as repetições num instante se tornam saberes e ela, aos trinta e sete anos, prezava apenas os segredos que mesmo ditos permanecem como segredos

(em certas épocas, por alguma porta esquecida escapava-se sonâmbula, para o pátio que dá acesso à mata e, por vezes, iam buscá-la gritando o seu nome ou com a ajuda dos cães já muito longe de casa)

tinha por hábito acender fogueiras de que, depois, se esquecia e por isso também os aldeões a temiam)

nunca compreendeu a natureza da vida doméstica intensa e aflita criança incapaz de certezas

o que de mais belo soube sempre o disse, de repente, a alguém que não conhecia

© 1999, José Tolentino Mendonça
From: A Noite Abre Meus Olhos
Publisher: Assírio & Alvim, Lisbon
FRIENDS

We look at those strangers
whom we love and who love us
and they’re always adolescents
afraid and alone
with no practical sense
with scant notion of the threat or renunciation
that weighs on the light
careless and intense in their devotion
to what’s fleeting

One day we wake up sad with their sadness
since the fortuitous meaning of the fields
explains with other words
what makes their eyes incomparable

But the greater impression is one of happiness
that can’t be grasped
and is therefore tenuous, mysterious
the way perhaps all love is

© Translation: 2006, Richard Zenith

OS AMIGOS

Esses estranhos que nós amamos
e nos amam
olhamos para eles e são sempre
adolescentes, assustados e sós
sem nenhum sentido prático
sem grande noção da ameaça ou da renúncia
que sobre a luz incide
descuidados e intensos no seu exagero
de temporalidade pura

Um dia acordamos tristes da sua tristeza
pois o fortuito significado dos campos
explica por outras palavras
aquilo que tornava os olhos incomparáveis

Mas a impressão maior é a alegria
de uma maneira que nem se consegue
e por isso ténue, misteriosa:
talvez seja assim todo o amor

© 2001, José Tolentino Mendonça
From: A Noite Abre Meus Olhos
Publisher: Assírio & Alvim, Lisbon

PLANE TREES

After shutting everything, I reopen the door
and plunge unsteadily into the empty darkness
at certain hours I’m afraid of the company
of what doesn’t sleep
of what endures in our space
ruled by other forces

But it also happens that I first turn on the light
and only then
feel scared of this house that shelters me
terrified of its invisible maelstroms
which seem to be getting closer and closer
as if I were about to die
at the very hands of God

I don’t know how to wake up alive from these things:
I take advantage of the dusk’s clamor to scream
I leave you for an instant (just an instant)

PLATANOS

Depois de ter fechado tudo, abro de novo a porta
e corro cambaleante para a vazia escuridão
assusta-me a certas horas a companhia
do que não adormece
a resistência disso no nosso espaço
movido por outra forças

Mas também me ocorre acender primeiro a luz
e só depois
sentir um medo louco da casa que me acolhe
dos seus redemoinhos imperceptíveis
que julgo cada vez mais perto
como se estivesse para ser morto
às mãos do próprio Deus

Não sei bem acordar vivo destas coisas:
aproveito o ruído do entardecer e grito muito alto
to close my eyes that burn so much
or I toss leaves from the riverbank into the water
to measure the time of a life
that’s drowning

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STONE CROP

What do the explorers,
the wayfarers, pilgrims we’d thought had long since disappeared,
the Berbers, the nomadic herders
and the exiled
say to people like us whose law is of the letter and testament
not of the unknown necessity
which moment by moment is revealed

Beyond us, where they live, there’s a ghost language
which accommodates what no language can say:
the photons generated by the stars’ clashing
how the antelope wends its way through the orthography
the yellow that returns to the rugged slopes after the heavy snows

© Translation: 2006, Richard Zenith
From: Tábuas de Pedra
Publisher: Assírio & Alvim, Lisbon, 2006

ENSAIAO

Que dizem os exploradores,
os viajantes, os peregrinos que há muito julgávamos perdidos,
os berberes, os transumantes,
os foragidos
a quantos, como nós, tomam lei da letra e do testamento
não da necessidade desconhecida que de instante a instante se revela

Além, onde eles habitam, há uma língua fantasma
que recolhe aquilo que nenhuma língua é capaz de dizer:
os fotões gerados pelo embate dos astros
o modo como se move por entre a ortografia o antílope
o amarelo que ressurge nas escarpas após os nevões

© 2006, José Tolentino Mendonça
From: A Noite Abre Meus Olhos
Publisher: Assírio & Alvim, Lisbon
THE CHILDHOOD OF HERBERTO HELDER

In the beginning was the island
although it’s said
that the Spirit of God
hugged the waters

In those days
I’d lie down on the ground
to look at the stars
without ever thinking
that those bodies of fire
might be dangerous

In those days
I plotted the stars’ coordinates
by lining up marbles
on the grass

I didn’t know that every poem
is a tumult
that can upset
the order of the universe now
I believe

I was almost an angel
and wrote rigorous
reports
about silence

In those days
it was still possible
to find God
in the wastes

That was before
I learned algebra

© Translation: 2006, Richard Zenith

A INFÂNCIA DA HERBERTO HELDER

No princípio era a ilha
embora se diga
o Espírito de Deus
abraçava as águas

Nesse tempo
estendia-me na terra
para olhar as estrelas
e não pensava
que esses corpos de fogo
pudessem ser perigosos

Nesse tempo
marcava a latitude das estrelas
ordenando berlindes
sobre a erva

Não sabia que todo o poema
é um tumulto
que pode abalar
a ordem do universo agora
acredito

Eu era quase um anjo
e escrevia relatórios
precisos
acerca do silêncio

Nesse tempo
ainda era possível
encontrar Deus
pelos baldios

Isto foi antes
de aprender a álgebra

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From: A Noite Abre Meus Olhos
Publisher: Assírio & Alvim, Lisbon
THE LAST DAY OF SUMMER

Sometimes I miss having no one I can tell
a certain day from beginning to end
the real enchantment of the steady wind
all along the shore at Foz do Douro
what I’d give (and I’d give everything) for compassion

We’re born and we live for only a while
and not even when dusk arrives are we able
to choose attention or choose forgetfulness
our forces founder like hazy intentions
in public
or in any place

That’s why I put so much stock
in the unquestionable nature of your eyes
where the light records its every aspect
your impatient and inconceivable eyes
here with me now
as I dance alone
in the empty city

© Translation: 2006, Richard Zenith

O último dia do verão

Pois às vezes me falta a quem contar
certo dia passado do princípio ao fim
o encanto que tenha realmente
a insistência do vento ao longo da Foz
aquilo que daria (e eu daria tudo) por compaixão

Nascemos e vivemos só algum tempo
não temos nada
não podemos mesmo na penumbra
decidir a atenção ou o esquecimento
as forças soçobram como vago motivos
em público
e em qualquer lugar

Por isso sei tão bem o valor
da natureza indiscutível dos teus olhos
onde a luz anota seus aspectos
teus olhos impacientes e irrealizáveis
que me acompanham
agora que sozinho danço
pela cidade vazia

© 2001, José Tolentino Mendonça
From: A Noite Abre Meus Olhos
Publisher: Assírio & Alvim, Lisbon

THE PUREST PRESENCE

Nothing in the world is closer
but those to whom we deny our words
love, certain infirmities, the purest presence
hear what the woman dressed in sunlight says
when she walks on top of the trees
“how far away from common speech did you leave
your heart?”

the desperate height of the blueness
in your teenage photo hundreds of years ago
the disappearance of lilies from the public
garden
the sea of this bay in ruins or if you prefer
the supermarket bags expanding in the drawer
the conversations from our school days
still recited in the family

A PRESENÇA MAIS PURA

Nada do mundo mais próximo
mas aqueles a quem negamos a palavra
o amor, certas enfermidades, a presença mais pura
ouve o que diz a mulher vestida de sol
quando caminha no cimo das árvores
«a que distância da língua comum deixaste o teu coração?»

a altura desesperada do azul
no teu retrato de adolescente há centenas de anos
a extinção dos lírios no jardim municipal
o mar desta baía em ruínas ou se quiseres
os sacos do supermercado que se expandem nas gavetas
as conversas ainda surpreendentemente
the fatigue of Sunday’s run through the woods
the dry-cleaning stubs with a “don’t forget” attached
the terror we have
of certain chance meetings
because we’ve stopped knowing basic things about others
their very names

hear what the woman dressed in sunlight says when she walks on top of the trees
“how far away from common speech did you leave your heart?”

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THE RUBBISH OF THE WORLD

I have friends who pray to Simone Weil
For many years now I’ve noticed Flannery O’Connor

Prayer must be like those things
we say to someone who’s sleeping
we have and don’t have hope
only beauty can come down and save us
when the barriers are lifted
allowing images, noises and spurious sediments to become part of the magnificent pageant on top of the ruins

Those who pray are like beggars of last resort
deeply rummaging through the emptiness until that emptiness bursts into flame inside them

St. Paul explains it in the First Letter to the Corinthians,
“we are the rubbish of the world to this very day”,
a citation that Flannery kept at her bedside.

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O ESTERCO DO MUNDO

Tenho amigos que rezam a Simone Weil
Há muitos anos reparo em Flannery O’Connor

Rezar deve ser como essas coisas
que dizemos a alguém que dorme
temos e não temos esperança alguma
só a beleza pode descer para salvar-nos
quando as barreiras levantadas permitirem
às imagens, aos ruídos, aos espúrios sedimentos integrar o magnífico cortejo sobre os escombros

Os orantes são mendigos da última hora
remexem profundamente através do vazio até que neles o vazio deflagre

São Paulo explica-o na Primeira Carta aos Coríntios,
“até agora somo o esterco do mundo”,
citação que Flannery trazia à cabeceira

© 2005, José Tolentino Mendonça
From: A Noite Abre Meus Olhos
Publisher: Assírio & Alvim, Lisbon
THE WHITE ROAD

I walked with you through the exact afternoon
you gave me your hand, life seemed
hard to establish
above the high wall

leaves trembled
under the stronger invisible weight

I could die for just one of those things
we share and have no words for saying:
stars cross paths at a frightful speed
unmovable glaciers at long last shift
and in the only way it can accompany you
my heart beats and beats

© Translation: 2006, Richard Zenith

A ESTRADA BRANCA

Atravessei contigo a minuciosa tarde
deste-me a tua mão, a vida parecia
difícil de estabelecer
acima do muro alto

folhas tremiam
ao invisível peso mais forte

Podia morrer por uma só dessas coisas
que trazemos sem que possam ser ditas:
astros cruzam-se numa velocidade que apavora
inamovíveis glaciares por fim se deslocam
e na única forma que tem de acompanhar-te
o meu coração bate

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From: A Noite Abre Meus Olhos
Publisher: Assírio & Alvim, Lisbon

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