



LUIZA NETO JORGE

(Portugal, 1939-1989)

[Thursday 29 September 2005]

Luiza Neto Jorge was born in Lisbon and in that city died, shortly before her fiftieth birthday, but most of her poetry was written in Paris, where she lived from 1962 until 1970. She published two chapbooks, in 1960 and 1961, before going to France, and after returning to her hometown she wrote and published poems sporadically (including a few in French), but at that point most of her literary activity was centered on translation. The many, mostly French authors whose works she rendered into Portuguese include Stendhal, the Marquis de Sade, Verlaine, Michaux, Artaud and Yourcenar. She also adapted several texts for theater and wrote dialogues for cinema.

Regarded as one of the outstanding poets to emerge in Portugal in the early 1960s, Luiza Neto Jorge is also the most difficult to apprehend. She was a poet in constant revolt, not only or openly against Salazar's so-called Estado Novo [New State], or the traditional norms of society, or the subordinate status of women, but against the very way thought and language typically happen and poetry is made. Her poems break the usual laws of reason and of reasonableness. The subject is often unstable, the narrative of what's happening tends to be fuzzy, there are unexpected shifts in register and point of view, and stanzas or entire poems may feel unresolved. Which may make the reader feel dissatisfied.

The poetry of Maria Teresa Horta (1937), who began publishing at the same time as Luiza Neto Jorge, vindicated woman's right to be a sexually desiring subject as well as a desired object. (She would gain international renown as one of the "three Marias" who co-authored the militantly feminist and erotically uninhibited *Novas Cartas Portuguesas* [New Portuguese Letters], in 1972.) In Luiza Neto Jorge eroticism permeates the images and the very language of poetry. If the houses of her homonymously titled poem (see Houses) are personifications of feminine sexuality, the poetic vocabulary of *The House of the World* is invaded by names of and allusions to body parts; a simple birthmark becomes a world replete with

sexualized memories (“erotic cobwebs”) and worlds within worlds (the hallway of the third stanza, or the oval mirror of the fifth). All these houses, like her poems in general, are open spaces, accommodating the world at large.

Something of Surrealism’s free and extravagant associations seems to characterize Jorge’s poetry, which does not depend, however, on automatic or unconscious processes. It seems ultraconscious, hyperreal, but averse to the typical processes of poetic representation. Writing, for this poet, is not an ascension into the lyrical realm but a probe into what is closest to home: minimal things (Magnolia), the body (Head in an Ambulance), everyday sights and sounds (Waking up on the Street of the World).

The critic Rosa Maria Martelo cites verses from one of Jorge’s poems in French – “Jamais je n’obéirai./ Je répète: jamais.” [I will never obey. I repeat: never.] – to support her explanation of the poet’s eroticism as transgression and excess. One of Jorge’s poems is titled ‘O Corpo Insurrecto’, and this “rebellious body” is not only the eroticized physical body that submits to no law, following only its own inordinate desires; it is also the body of the poem that refuses to be tamed, that forever behaves in extreme, ‘unacceptable’ ways. The critic also cites Georges Bataille’s observation (in *L’Érotisme*) that the erotic experience is unspeakable; it bids us to silence. Something similar occurs when we read the poems of Luiza Neto Jorge. It isn’t easy to speak about them, much less explain them. They are what they are – to be quietly appreciated, or not.

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POEMS

HEAD IN AN AMBULANCE

HENRY MOORE’S WOMEN IN THE GARDENS

HOUSES

MAGNOLIA

THE DEBT

THE HOUSE OF THE WORLD

THE POEM TEACHES THE ART OF FALLING

WAKING UP ON THE STREET OF THE WORLD

HEAD IN AN AMBULANCE

There are cyclical wounds furious flights
inside rounded air sacs
wounds that are thought of at night
and break out in the morning

or that open up at night
and in the morning are thought of
along with the other thoughts
our organs are adept
at inventing like bandages

compresses helmets
sacraments
for securing the head
when it breaks away from us

when it's able to sense us
in a syncope or naked exposure
or in a more spacious error
or in a quieter letter
or in the torture chamber
in the dark chamber, of childhood.

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HENRY MOORE'S WOMEN IN THE GARDENS

The smell of rain has infected the gardens
Henry Moore's women inhale the air.

And you, son, take aim at me, camouflaged
in the cavernous whiteness of those beings.
"Dead!, you're dead!" you exult.

Among the magic projectiles adrift
– now chrysalises now arks in the flood –
they ask in their calm bodies for peace
with the earth, its furrows, its grass.

Are these our ships returning to the soil?

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A Cabeça em Ambulância

Há feridas cíclicas há violentos voos
dentro de câmaras de ar curvas
feridas que se pensam de noite
e rebentam pela manhã

ou que de noite se abrem
e pela manhã são pensadas
com todos os pensamentos
que os órgãos são hábeis
em inventar como pensos

ligaduras capacetes
sacramentos
com que se prende a cabeça
quando ela se nos afasta

quando ela nos presente
em síncope ou desnudamento
ou num erro mais espaçoso
ou numa letra mais muda
ou na sala de tortura
na sala escura, de infância.

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From: *Poesia*
Publisher: Assírio & Alvim, Lisbon

Mulheres de Henry Moore nos Jardins

O cheiro da chuva inquinou os jardins
mulheres de Henry Moore sorvem os ares.

E tu alvejas-me, filho, camuflado
na recôncava brandura desses seres.
"Morta! estás morta!" rejubilas.

Entre os mágicos projecteis à deriva,
já crisálidas, já arcas no dilúvio,
pedem paz elas num sossegado corpo
com a terra, seus regos, suas relvas.

Naves nossas de regresso ao solo?

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From: *Poesia*
Publisher: Assírio & Alvim, Lisbon

HOUSES

I

The houses came at night
In the morning they're houses
At night they stretch their arms upward
and give off smoke all ready to depart

They close their eyes
they travel great distances
like clouds or ships

Houses flow at night
under the rivers' tides

They are far more docile
than children
Closed up inside their plaster
they ponder

They try to speak very clearly
in the silence
with their voice of slanting rooftiles

II

She vowed to be a virgin all her life
She lowered the blinds over her eyes
she fed on spiders
dampness
slanting rays of sunlight

When touched she wanted to flee
if a door was opened
she concealed her sex

She caved in under a summer spasm
all wet from a masculine sun

V

Crazy as the house on the corner was
she took in people at any time of day

As Casas

I

As casas vieram de noite
De manhã são casas
À noite estendem os braços para o alto
fumegam vão partir

Fecham os olhos
percorrem grandes distâncias
como nuvens ou navios

As casas fluem de noite
sob a maré dos rios

São altamente mais dóceis
que as crianças
Dentro do estuque se fecham
pensativas

Tentam falar bem claro
no silêncio
com sua voz de telhas inclinadas

II

Prometeu ser virgem toda a vida
Desceu persianas sobre os olhos
alimentou-se de aranhas
humidades
raios de sol oblíquos

Quando lhe tocam quereria fugir
se abriam uma porta
escondia o sexo

Ruiu num espasmo de verão
molhada por um sol masculino

V

Louca como era a da esquina
recebia gente a qualquer hora

She was falling all apart and
just think of it invited whores
rats storks nests train whistles
drunks and pianos
as well as all the voices of wild animals

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Caía em pedaços e
vejam lá convidava as rameiras
os ratos os ninhos de cegonha
apitos de comboio bêbados pianos
como todas as vozes de animais selvagens

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From: *Poesia*
Publisher: Assírio & Alvim, Lisbon

MAGNOLIA

Exaltation of the minimal
and the magnificent lightning
of the master event
restore to me my form
my splendor.

A tiny crib cradles me
where the word elides
into matter – into metaphor –
as needed, lightly, wherever
it echoes and slides.

Magnolia,
the sound that swells in it
when pronounced,
is an exalted fragrance
lost in the storm,

a magnificent minimal entity
shedding on me
its leaves of lightning.

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A Magnólia

A exaltação do mínimo,
e o magnífico relâmpago
do acontecimento mestre
restituem-me a forma
o meu resplendor.

Um diminuto berço me recolhe
onde a palavra se elide
na matéria – na metáfora –
necessária, e leve, a cada um
onde se ecoa e resvala.

A magnólia,
o som que se desenvolve nela
quando pronunciada,
é um exaltado aroma
perdido na tempestade,

um mínimo ente magnífico
desfolhando relâmpagos
sobre mim.

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From: *Poesia*
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THE DEBT

Alive in the dagger's instantaneous lip
in the daily arrested hour

The debts grow they're already rough
they hurt the skin they're already pus

The day starts out from shadows
as a people starts from dust
Hour after hour light and death coincide

The debt spreads it spreads its wings
it seizes my weak dreams everything tempts it

Behind the gesture I make
my hand is alone my fingers conspire
asymmetrically
sticking out from my body until death

I'd give them away today if I could
But what weapon can separate them from me?

While I'm thinking
the debt keeps growing

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THE HOUSE OF THE WORLD

Sometimes what seems
to be a birthmark on one's face
is the house of the world
is a mighty armoire
with bloody tissues stored there
and with its tribe of sensitive doors

It smells of erotic cobwebs. A delirious chest
on the scent-of-the-sea of sensuality.

A bracing sea. Roman walls. Any and all music.
The hallway recalls a rope stretched between
the Pyrenees, the windows between Greek
faces.

A Dívida

Viva no instantâneo lábio do punhal
na hora diariamente imóvel

As dívidas crescem já são ásperas
magoam a pele já são pus

O dia começa pela sombra
como um povo começa pelo pó
Luz e morte coincidem hora a hora

A dívida alastra abre as asas
leva-me sonhos débeis tudo a tenta

Atrás do meu gesto
a mão sozinha os dedos conspirando
assimétricos
salientes do corpo até à morte

Já hoje os doava se pudesse
Com que arma porém os separar de mim?

A dívida mais cresce
enquanto eu penso

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A Casa do Mundo

Aquilo que às vezes parece
um sinal no rosto
é a casa do mundo
é um armário poderoso
com tecidos sanguíneos guardados
e a sua tribo de portas sensíveis.

Cheira a teias eróticas. Arca delirante
arca sobre o cheiro a mar de amar.

Mar fresco. Muros romanos. Toda a música.
O corredor lembra uma corda suspensa entre
os Pirinéus, as janelas entre faces gregas.
Janelas que cheiram ao ar de fora

Windows that smell of the air outside,
of the air's marriage to the ardent house.

I reached the door gleaming.
I interrupt the family objects, I throw open
the door.
I switch on the lights, switching everything
around,
the new landscapes are lucid, light
is a clear painting, I remember more clearly:
a door, an armoire, that house.

A green, oval-shaped mirror
seems to be a tin bulging
with a shark writhing in its stomach,
its liver, its kidneys, its bloody tissues.

It's the house of the world:
it's here, it disappears.

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THE POEM TEACHES THE ART OF FALLING

The poem teaches the art of falling
on various kinds of ground
from losing the sudden earth under our feet
as when a love collapses
and we lose our wits, to confronting
the promontory where the earth drops away
and the teeming absence overwhelms

to touching down after
a slowly sensuous fall,
our face reaching the ground
in a subtle delicate curve
a bow to no one particular
or to us in particular a posthumous
homage.

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à núpcia do ar com a casa ardente.

Luzindo cheguei à porta.
Interrompo os objectos de família, atiro-lhes
a porta.
Acendo os interruptores, acendo a interrupção,
as novas paisagens têm cabeça, a luz
é uma pintura clara, mais claramente lembro:
uma porta, um armário, aquela casa.

Um espelho verde de face oval
é que parece uma lata de conservas dilatada
com um tubarão a revirar-se no estômago
no fígado, nos rins, nos tecidos sanguíneos.

É a casa do mundo:
desaparece em seguida.

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O Poema Ensina a Cair

O poema ensina a cair
sobre os vários solos
desde perder o chão repentino sob os pés
como se perde os sentidos numa
queda de amor, ao encontro
do cabo onde a terra abate e
a fecunda ausência excede

até à queda vinda
da lenta volúpia de cair,
quando a face atinge o solo
numa curva delgada subtil
uma vénia a ninguém de especial
ou especialmente a nós uma homenagem
póstuma.

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WAKING UP ON THE STREET OF THE WORLD

early morning. footsteps of people going out
with a definite destination or indefinitely
stumbling
the sound falling in my room and then
the light. no one knows what goes on
in this world. what day is today?
the bell solidly tolls the hour. the pigeons
smooth their feathers. the dust falls in my room.

a pipe burst open next to the sidewalk
a dead pigeon was swept away in the torrent
along with the pages of an old newspaper.
the slope rules
a car went under
double doors close
our yolk in the egg of sleep.

horns and sirens. it's still not clear
via satellite just what happened. the alarm
of the jewelry shop went haywire. hanging
sheets
fan the buildings. pigeons peck

the glaze on the tiles. those who woke up have
come
to the window. the alarm won't quit. the blood
seethes. the precious image via satellite didn't
arrive the vcr
recorded nothing

and from a flower-pot on a balcony a drop of
water
falls and lands on the bank teller's suit

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Acordar na Rua do Mundo

madrugada. passos soltos de gente que saiu
com destino certo e sem destino aos tombos
no meu quarto cai o som depois
a luz. ninguém sabe o que vai
por esse mundo. que dia é hoje?
soa o sino sólido as horas. os pombos
alisam as penas. no meu quarto cai o pó.

um cano rebentou junto ao passeio.
um pombo morto foi na enxurrada
junto com as folhas dum jornal já lido.
imperava o declive
um carro foi-se abaixo
portas duplas fecham
no ovo do sono a nossa gema.

sirenes e buzinas. ainda ninguém via satélite
sabe ao certo o que aconteceu. estragou-se o
alarme
da joalheria. os lençóis na corda
abanam os prédios. pombos debicam

o azul dos azulejos. assoma à janela
quem acordou. o alarme não pára o sangue
desavém-se. não veio via satélite a querida
imagem o vídeo
não gravou

e duma varanda um pingo cai
de um vaso salpicando o fato do bancário

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ARTICLES

Portuguese Surrealism:

Welcome to Portuguese poetry - July 2005

January 18, 2006

Did a true Surrealist Movement exist in Portugal? Even those who are reputed to be its leaders have disagreed on this point. The most enduring and prolific of Portugal's Surrealists, Mário Cesariny de Vasconcelos (b. 1923), prefers to speak of a Surrealist 'intervention' in his country's art, literature and society.

The Portuguese version of Surrealism was far more modest than the French original after which it was modeled, but it was inwardly and passionately felt by its practitioners – it wasn't just a cheap copy – and had a profound influence on art and poetry. Perfecto E. Cuadrado, one of the most dedicated scholars on the subject, convincingly argues that it had the characteristics of a genuine avant-garde movement, with an organized structure, publications, doctrinal statements and public manifestations. In this formal sense the movement was short-lived, but it has survived as an attitude still discernible in certain poets, such as Herberto Helder.

Portuguese Surrealism got going in 1947, when a small group of Lisbon artists and writers, including Cesariny and Alexandre O'Neill (1924-86), began meeting to discuss French Surrealism – as promulgated in André Breton's manifestos and chronicled in Maurice Nadeau's *Histoire du Surréalisme* (1945) – and to try out several of its methods for creating without relying on reason: the *cadavre exquis* (a composition by any number of co-authors, each of whom writes a word or phrase without seeing but a fraction of what the previous co-author wrote) and automatic writing. These and other methods, with their visual art equivalents, aimed at producing, if possible, works of art and literature directly out of the unconscious.

Even before they delved into French Surrealism (founded already in the mid-1920s but ignored for several decades in Salazarist Portugal), Cesariny and his friends had arrived at its Dadaistic spirit of iconoclasm and distrust of the rational. Violently opposed to any artistic expression associated with the political regime, they also fell out of sympathy with the prevailing school of opposition: Neo-Realism, whose economically determined socialist aesthetic had little room for the vagaries of a free-ranging imagination.

Cesariny traveled to Paris and met Breton in 1947, but the Grupo Surrealista de Lisboa had no official ties with its French prototype. In August of 1948 Cesariny and some of his friends broke with the Grupo Surrealista, which would organize an art exhibition in 1949 and publish five issues of a magazine before disbanding, in 1950. The splinter group, led by Cesariny and known as the Grupo Dissidente, or simply Os Surrealistas, promoted several exhibitions, published manifestos and organized conferences until the early 1950s, when it too dispersed. But writers and artists identifying themselves with Surrealism continued to meet in Lisbon cafés and to promote its doctrine until the early 1960s.

That doctrine was perhaps best expressed in a 'communiqué' of the Portuguese Surrealists written in 1950 but not published till much later. It reads, in part: "Man will only be free when he has destroyed any and every kind of political-religious or religious-political dictatorship and when he is universally capable of existing without limits. Then Man will be Poet and poetry will be Explosive Love. (...) Our last word to country, church and state will always be SHIT."

In their struggle against socially imposed limits, the Portuguese Surrealists tried to bring art out of its isolation, to make it part and parcel of life. The ‘purest’ among them weren’t concerned to produce works of art for posterity but to live imaginatively, artistically, to integrate the human creative faculty into daily living. Freedom was the catchword that informed their work generally and their poetry most especially. Thematically this meant bitter opposition – through mockery, sarcasm and grotesque parody – to the repressive political regime and to a perceived smallness of the national spirit that allowed that regime to hold sway. Technically their poetry was characterized by free associations, seemingly irrational leaps, word plays, borrowings from other authors (sometimes placed in quotation marks), extravagant imagery and metaphors, and an occasionally transgressive syntax.

The two authors presented here produced the most significant bodies of poetry among the Portuguese Surrealists. But Mário Cesariny quit writing poetry many years ago, dedicating himself instead to painting, and Alexandre O’Neill dissociated himself from the movement already in 1951, almost at the beginning of his publishing career. Traits associated with Surrealism abound in O’Neill’s subsequent work, but we can wonder if they might have been there anyway, even if the movement had never existed.

In an interview published in 1982, Cesariny stated: “Surrealism was an invitation to poetry, love, freedom, personal imagination. Surrealism brought together Romanticism, Symbolism, Futurism, libertarian traditions and other movements, and gave them a meaning. That meaning isn’t going to disappear. What was called Surrealism has always existed.”

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