



*excerpt from: O APOCALIPSE DOS TRABALHADORES*

*[the workers' apocalypse], 2008*

translated from the Portuguese by Kenneth Krabbenhoft

at night maria da graça dreamed that souvenirs of life on earth were on sale outside the gates of heaven. people held their hands out, brazen voices called out to her as if they were hawking fresh fish, they closed in on her soul and, for a song, sold those things most likely to meet the pressing needs of the dying. the ultimate charlatans, she thought, actually ashamed that she had to go on thinking when she was dead, or maybe it was good, before entering heaven, to be given the chance to take an object with you, a materialized image, a kind of evidence of a past life or of extreme longing. she asked them to let her through, repeated that she was in a hurry. she couldn't figure out what she was supposed to do, couldn't make up her mind about anything. she was in a bind, she didn't want to risk setting herself up in eternity through an act of greed. in the understandable fear or anxiety or excitement of so obviously being there for the first time she kept hoping that st peter would explain how it worked so that, with one foot in and the other one still out, she could purchase mozart's requiem or a print of goya's frescos or within a budding grove, in french.

contrary to expectations, the gates of heaven were small. one had to crouch quite low to get through them, and those who wanted attention created a remarkable fuss that ended in violence and clouds of dusts that were kicked up with some frequency. maria da graça has barely escaped the hawkers; now she's trying to figure out which side of the square was the best route to the gates. it would not be easy to negotiate those hundred meters without getting knocked down, but it would be worse to be taken for one of the trouble makers and made to stay outside, eternally raging.

later she thought, they won't stay there forever, they'll have to move on to hell, pulled by the ears like misbehaved children. maybe there was a little closed cart that came by to pick them up like stray dogs. men would pick out whoever was blocking the way and throw huge nets over them, that would be the end of their fussing. then the square would be passable for a while.



maria da graça made her way, staying as close to the walls as she could, convinced that, because she had died in such a horrible way, she deserved every kind of pardon and would be allowed to enter heaven. this is how she introduced herself: i'm maria da graça, i was a cleaning woman, yes, i did houses – as if she only worked part time, a few days a week. st peter would ask her then, what's your point, and she would say, mr ferreira murdered me, he had been treating me badly already for some time, i actually foresaw what was going to happen. st peter leaned backward, thrust his head back and his belly forward, he laughed and said, my dear lady, that doesn't matter any more, the dead are all equal, they don't have jobs, and what they knew how to do is no good to them, or do you think there are rooms here that need cleaning. maria da graça repeated, but i didn't want to die, it was the old man, i was still a working woman, i'm not somebody who runs away, not from anything. the gatekeeper of heaven scrutinized her up close, stifling his guffaws, peering deep into the woman's eyes. and what might you have done to deserve it, he asked her, how can you expect to be forgiven if you stuck by that predator when you could have run away, what message were you sending. why was st peter provoking her, she wondered, why was he so nasty, he should know all about her iniquities. what a perverse man, to make it so hard to enter heaven, what a terrible impression it gave, the endless, noisy scuffles at the gate. the saint tightened his lips like someone withdrawing into himself so as to say no more, it was as if he were emulating a rock, a rock that instead of being a creation of beautiful, inert strength had rolled across the front of that little gate as if it were sealing a tomb. how awful it would be if the door to heaven was just like the door that opened onto death. going to heaven, thought maria da graça, is the same as dying. this idea shocked her, as if in the nature of things the one thing couldn't signify the other. she woke up in a sweat, her heart beating wildly in her chest, her mouth hissing in anguish: i'm not the kind of woman who runs away, i'm not the kind of woman who runs away.

that bastard ferreira, she mumbled. she had to be at his place in half an hour, had to ask the supervisor of the condo for permission to enter. then walk up five flights of stairs carrying the rugs she had washed the day before. the bastard had said to her, maria da graça it's better if you take the rugs home with you to wash. they have to hang in the sun to dry and as you can see there isn't much sun here. and she thought, as you can't see, because you can't see anything in here, i should have told him a thing or two about how badly he treats me, but she was silent, did not smile, answered, yes, mr ferreira, i can take them home. and maybe later she would throw open all the doors and he might notice how spacious his house was and how what he did with it was the opposite of what one would expect.

on the way over she was upset all over again by the erudite references that kept popping up in the dream and were running through her head. she was angry that she had put up with all those conversations which were meant to impress her and put her down. this is a book about goya's work, the man told her, a genius, as you can see. there's nothing like it any more, and not even god himself could have been aware of the marvel that entered the world with that man's



birth. you know there are men who take the creator by surprise, maria da graça, i'm sure of it. he swelled up as he settled into the old leather chair as if to say that he was brilliant for having come to this conclusion, as if he could surprise god himself and take pleasure in it. she answered, of course, mr ferreira. he stood up, put his hands on her shoulders, leaned over a little to be on her level, and kissed her. it's not that this is right, he said, surely it isn't right, but we both know our place and this is how society is structured, it's the awareness of this that keeps society from falling apart. you've brightened up this house, maria da graça, i've told you that before. he turned to her then and bent over and covered her mouth with his, probing her tongue as if he were feeling for insects in there. you shouldn't do this, mr ferreira, the same thing happened yesterday, she blurted out. it gives me nightmares. well i have the most beautiful dreams, he said. she settled herself in his arms and hoped that it would just be a few kisses, a longer hug to calm him down so they could each get back to their work. and what evil filth do you dream about, he asked her. it's grieves me, because one doesn't expect such things from a woman. he assumed that things had been set up differently for men. they have better jobs, greater freedom, even their conscience was different from women's. for women, loose morals were a luxury they couldn't afford. if anybody found out about it, maria da graça would have no more floors to scrub. mr ferreira smiled again and renewed his attack as if with fresh enthusiasm, it's so much more fun when one is aroused. don't play innocent, maria da graça, if anybody found out about this, if they knew how much we like each other, so to speak, they'd want you so badly they'd die to be able to touch you the way i do. maria da graça didn't know if what he said was true. it made her feel cheap that this bastard touched her when he bragged that he only did it because he could get away with it. every word she heard said the same thing, while one hand cleaned the house, the other one polished the boss's imperial ego. look, mr ferreira, one of these day's my augusto's going to find out about this and show up here for a serious talk.

and later on goya had his ups and downs, you can see on the walls of god's house how he also bore witness to the terror that lurks in everyday events. he was a lucid man. he knew that art is incapable of exaggeration. art is incapable of exaggeration. do you understand what i'm saying, maria da graça, he would ask. she would give a little shrug but she didn't know what to say, it all seemed too precious to have anything to do with her simple life. she imagined she was only there to earn a living, and what she needed was to put food on the table and clothes on her back. those impassioned theories did not strike her as something you could eat. passion is the only thing that can energize a man that way, he continued, when it is aligned with god's will, only passion can result in such incredible work, this is what happened with fernando pessoa. maria da graça sat down timorously, looked at the book and saw the blurred faces of the human figures, their downcast, frightening expressions. she asked, and what did he paint besides these nasty pictures. the bastard opened his eyes wide, delighted by his student's presumed interest. he leafed through the book until he was able to say, this here, absolutely magnificent.



his kisses were ochre but also worn out and unpredictable, alternately greedy and unhurried. they came on all of a sudden and she didn't like them one bit. she would take her time cleaning the kitchen, tormented by his presence, because before or after she had finished her work he would touch her, some days more boldly, other days less. she spent more time scrubbing the dishes, looking to vent her suffering as if it was as evanescent as the soap bubbles. maria da graça wanted to deny the fact that she had fallen in love with him, but it was hard to focus on the idea. she kept thinking she hated him, but she was obsessed by this thought, like someone who can't think of anything else or, worse still, like someone who doesn't want to think of anything else. he was old, yes, much older, and he didn't care about being nice, cared even less about playing by the rules. she was married, as he was well aware, which made him nothing more than a man who abused his power, taking advantage of her lowly position of maid to thrust himself upon her and underscore her ignorance by recounting to her the wonders of the world. maria da graça knew perfectly well that he was a prideful and unscrupulous man, always ready to subject her to his whims and go far beyond what an employer should require of an employee. in order to survive the violence of the situation she focused on the money she made and how difficult her life had become. she could put up with difficulty unless it got seriously out of hand.

many times she had resolved not to go back to the bastard's house. to find someone else who wanted to hire her, because the arrangement of four days a week was not legally binding, and she was free to quit whenever she saw fit. mr ferreira, arrogant and self-confident, left her meager pay in a bowl by the front door. for him this was such a fortune that he could never believe she would walk out on him. he was careful counting the money so she wouldn't think he was paying her for some special attention or extra work and expect the same the following month. nothing doing. the bills were placed in the bowl after being counted and recounted, and there they remained, held in place by a bronze paper weight in the shape of a hand. when maria da graça picked it up she knew she would find the most penny-perfect of all the payments she received. if she flipped through the bills before putting them away it was only because she hoped the man would go mad some day, and this would be either very good for her or very bad. checking the money was a way of calculating the passage of time, another month completed prior to the big event of the madness which, she was convinced, would spell his death.

he stared at her as she went back and forth between the living room and the bedroom. she worked especially hard, lest the man lunge at her mouth or ask her to get up off her knees so he could run his hands over her body. she was as busy as possible with the chairs and the table, not giving him a chance to think she didn't have anything to do, that she had time for a carnal break. as the afternoon wore on she calmed down, at least today was the day she would take her money from under the bronze hand. meanwhile he thought he would like to see her leave his house so satiated that she couldn't stand her husband. the thought engrossed him. how many times had maria da



graça, who knew nothing of this aspiration, found herself in his bed, even on her way out, giving him the body and the time that she would later share with her husband. the bastard would groan and tell himself that age had done nothing to tarnish his performance. in the middle of it she would look into his eyes, wanting to tell him he had no idea what was going on, that she held no surprises either for him or, much less, for god, and that she would never have enough words to describe this love she hated. she would get out from underneath him arranging her clothes and he would smoke a cigar that scorched the air and stank to high heaven. she would excuse herself, explaining that her husband was in port and i have clothes to wash, i'm running late. he would answer with a smile and a query, when does he leave again, a fisherman in the heart of bragança, that's not an ordinary husband.

she would arrive at her house sweating the sweat of shame, she would take a quick bath so as to feel less guilty for loving another man. then she started cooking. augusto was soon home, he would claim everything on the table for himself, convinced that his fatigue was always greater and more deserving of respect than hers. after sixteen years of marriage, and his attitude getting worse, maria da graça regarded him as a piece of junk she couldn't get rid of. she would put the eggs on the table in front of him, the rice, the soup that was getting cold, and collapse into her chair, listening to him complain about how he had to wander around without anything to do. i went to the job sites, he said, they're crawling with men from the east, more and more of them, they're desperate, they'd carry the trucks on their shoulders if they had to, to survive. these men from the east are tough, he went on, they're going to be our ruin. because they're shrewder and stronger and more desperate. she ate the soup first, kept her left hand in her lap, pulling her skirt down, only once in a while placing her hand on her pubis – it hurt a little, it was a little conflicted, she wanted to lie down, she kept thinking about the bastard and how he came on her to her, pursuing her with desire.

augusto was rolling around on the couch, his stomach hurt, he didn't know that maria da graça had put a few drops of cleaning fluid or some other abrasive in his soup. all she did was turn the television down and go to bed. staring at the ceiling, she thought of unrelated things, she swore more and more fervently that she would spend some time with quitéria, that she would make her swear by all that was holy never to say anything to anybody. neighbors that they were, and a week would go by without them seeing each other. it was always like this when augusto was home. he would relax with a lukewarm beer and fall asleep in the living room, certain that living in bragança was what was destroying his health. the poor woman didn't want to kill him, she only wanted him to pay her back a little for her lack of freedom, because being married to him was like being on a leash attached to a wall, what was worse a stupid wall with faded paint, a wall made of stupid opinions. if augusto died in a few weeks from the cleaning fluid soup it would be a pleasant surprise though frightening, because she didn't picture herself a murderer. she got to



thinking about this murder business but she couldn't imagine herself under arrest, stuck in some prison or other. she considered herself to be a woman like any other, and because of that anything she did had to be reasonable, given the hard life that was hers to live. maybe those drops of cleaning fluid were her way of not running away from augusto. a way of leaving him intact while obliterating some part of him. making him half the man he could be, since maria da graça was already sick and tired of the half-man that he already was. she had crossed the line and there was no going back. quitéria gave her the idea, this is how you do it, you can give him up to a liter, a little bit every day, it seems to me that a man who drinks a liter of cleaning fluid will most certainly depart this life. they would laugh, accomplices in their unconscious criminal intent. it was a source of light entertainment drawn from the most enduring and difficult part of life. an entertainment to take the place of their silly adolescent dreams, those times when they had slept with a man out of love, discovering later that love always dies. the effort required to accept the insensitivity of men. abandonment or enforced solitude by decree of god's creative will. and later they believed that none of it mattered, that they might as well be made of stone. making their way through the world, observing it without feeling or even interest. and quitéria would say, shut up, graça, you're crazy about the bastard, your only plan is to go to ruin down there, meaning that everything in her life would be in jeopardy. indecisive, sometimes leaning left and sometimes right, swinging between endless duration and instant depletion, between sweet and sour, between being loved and being deeply hated. quitéria used to tell her, love that is born this way, for someone you hate, is the worse kind, it's like fighting against a shadow. maria da graça put another drop of cleaning fluid in augusto's soup and believed she was free of those disgusting feelings. she sought refuge in the clothes lines, shaking out sheets and hanging up even more rugs, until her body trembled, her nerves shaken by the horrible idea of falling in love with an old man who despised her, a man she had also learned deeply to despise.

augusto would still be sleeping in discomfort, squirming and muttering in his sleep, when maria da graça got up, quite early, never able to shake her nightmares, surrendering to the harshness of a sleepless night, in her everlasting innocence.

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