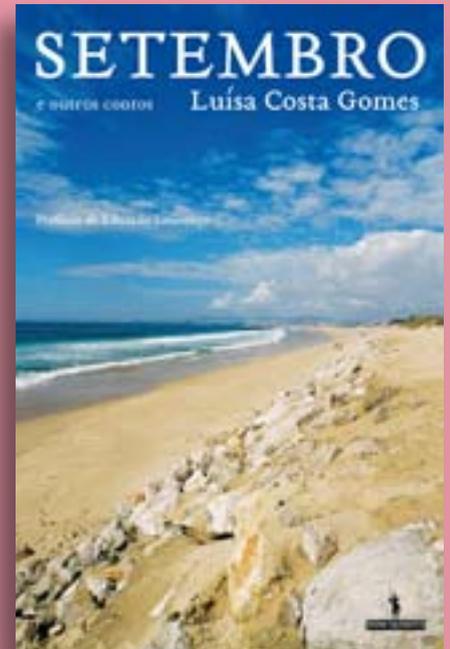


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Luisa Costa Gomes



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## Luísa Costa Gomes

Luísa Costa Gomes was born on June 16, 1954. She received a degree in Philosophy from the Faculdade de Letras de Lisboa in 1976. She has taught Philosophy, creative writing (narrative, short story, and theater), and literary translation; written and produced programs on philosophy and literature for Portuguese radio and television; and been involved in the creation of web resources related to Portuguese literature, including an online library of the Portuguese short story. She has received numerous grants from the Gulbenkian Foundation and the Ministry of Culture. Her translations include the screenplays of dozens of films; numerous American, English, and French plays; and short stories by Nabokov, Robert Coover, Woody Allen, Elizabeth Bishop, Jerome K. Jerome, O. Henry, and John Updike. Luísa Costa Gomes has published several dozen short stories, seven novels, eight plays, two books for children, and numerous articles on contemporary affairs and literature, as well as interviews and chronicles. Her work has been translated into Catalan, Dutch, French, and English.

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Luísa Costa Gomes' flair for satire and parody and the parable-tales and ostensibly circumstantial texts which are its embodiment, are an authentic innovation in Portuguese fiction. We were taken by surprise by this imagination, which is at once truly frenetic and unpredictable, uncanny and yet under such control, conjuring up, as it does, unremarkable fait divers which, in a split second, are overtaken by a kind of vertigo which then drifts impavidly, carrying us along with it, towards gulfs and eddies where the meaning of the world founders, to annul itself, as it were, and emerge resplendent.

Eduardo Lourenço

## THE GOOD MOTHER

The good mother never lets her child out of her sight. Wherever he goes her frozen smile follows, like a fixed pattern of clouds in the sky. In this way, too, she is shaming her own mother, who used to turn her loose on the vast expanse of sand whilst she fell asleep, sunglasses askew, a cigarette still hanging from the corner of her mouth, her back to the sea. She was left to wander off and get lost, trying to recognize her mother in every new stranger's face. Once she even confronted her with this harsh picture from the past, but she didn't recognise herself in it. She shrugged, took a drag of her cigarette and responded, in her booming voice: "you poor little thing".<sup>1</sup>

A few steps further on, another young mother is playing with her eight-year-old son. If she notices the child is distracted for a second, the good mother sneaks a glance at them out of the corner of her eye. She casts the net of judgement and the grid of comparisons over them. She decides the other woman's child is too thin and the woman herself a little sad and distant. She is building a good-sized sandcastle - but how mechanical her gestures are, she thinks - as the child provides the buckets of sand. The sad mother's child is called Jerónimo and he is quite convinced they are sculpting a mermaid together. He would prefer to do it on his own, or at least to build it himself instead of marching up and down, filling and emptying buckets. It seems his mother always needs more, always more. She looks behind her once in a while, keeping an eye on her husband who, sitting cross-legged, keeps watch on the clear horizon. Since his mother's sudden death three years before, he had felt a growing urge to stand vigil over horizons. He even forgets to finish his cigarette

sometimes. His wife attributes his lack of interest in the things around him to an ill-fated infatuation for a (younger) girl at work. Jerónimo is digging a tunnel, and looks sideways at his mother, watching her watchfulness, wishing for a moment that she would fall asleep or disappear into the sea. As she pats the sand to strengthen the abutments, the mother remembers her own mother, reigning over the beach from her high plastic chair, engrossed in observing the proportions of the male nude. Dead as she was, she would be smiling disdainfully at those two and their ridiculous game.<sup>2</sup>

A little higher up under a thatched sunshade, mother and child are embarking upon yet another circular conversation. As chance would have it, the mother, though aware of the direction of the wind on that particular beach, is at a disadvantage, as she sits facing north. It seems to her that the words leave her mouth and are carried along the coast, away from Catarina. She has to raise her voice, making her appear tense, which leaves her daughter cross too. Sitting with her back to the wind, the words she hurls at her mother's face sting like a lash, feeling even more hurtful due to the state of the weather. She likes to say that she is at the stage of her life in which everything seems inside-out. Deep-seated canals have surfaced or breached their banks, spilled over and merged together, and she struggles in the swirling, murky waters. She can never be certain of anything. She loses the thread long before she gets there. Yet the unspeakable things that no one talks about are right there on the tip of her tongue. She has to make an effort to avoid slapping the child. She cannot look her in the eye any more. The two of them talk looking straight ahead and when one of them turns her face towards the other, she turns her head away so that their eyes don't have to meet. When she asks for something she seems to be pleading, when she chats, it sounds as though she is demanding; and when Catarina turns to face her she looks away, either downwards, to one side, or up into the air.

<sup>1</sup> The good mother omits the following episode: «one month in winter, when she was six or seven, she announced that she was going to paint her mother's portrait. Her mother stubbed her cigarette out, switched on the standard lamp and took up a pose. It was a good quarter of an hour before she had gathered her drawing things together, the coloured pencils she only used on special occasions and her new sketchpad, and only then did she begin pacing around in search of the best angle. Then she made her mother keep still – and God knows how hard it was, with the dinner to be cooked and a machine-full of clothes waiting to be washed – and worked on the drawing with the same maniacal concentration she put into everything she did. After a while her mother began to show signs of impatience as she drew and erased; and drew and erased, and as she grew conscious of the limitations of her technique and recognised the distance which separated the subject from its portrayal, she became frustrated and anxious and ended up trembling with rage. Finally, she finished. Or gave up. She didn't want to show the final result. Using the arts of persuasion, her mother managed to calm her down enough to let her see the portrait." It's lovely" said her mother, "just wonderful. I think you captured this part around the eyes very well" But she ran and locked herself in her room in despair. She knew her mother was lying. She always lied to her. She only felt she was being honest when she was indifferent towards her or punished her.»

<sup>2</sup> Which is clearly impossible. What is more, Adelina Moreira's best feature was not her smile. Adelina was Jerónimo's grandmother and the mother of Ariana – no classical reference, given her absolute ignorance of History and Mythology. She was a hard-working woman, as she said herself, and liked to call a spade a spade. The fussy and timorous side of her daughter exasperated her. Life was hard for everyone. And the kid was going the same way, always clinging to his mother's skirts, always afraid he was going to hurt her. That was what you got when you had children when you didn't really want them. Adelina was not far off the truth on that. Jerónimo's father had conceived his son in several different ways; he desired him, he imagined him, and saw himself reflected in him. Ariana had resisted, and then gave in eventually, out of fear of losing her husband's love. Adelina Moreira had died recently – six months after her son-in-law's mother whom she despised – of a huge, untreated growth in her intestines.

These are the angles of her disappointment. Her own mother, serene and astute, a regular for soap operas and adventure novels, which she used to read standing in the light of the wide back window, with a smile of mild disbelief on her face, had always been and still remained a source of unfailing comfort to her. What she is unable to do now is to associate that sacred vastness which became one with the afternoon light, with the mute, wizened old woman who spends the day sitting in the lounge and is startled when the tram goes by. On the beach at Catarina's side, Elisa is still very much the little girl looking in awe at her mother from the table in the room where she used to do her homework. She always thought her mother was immortal. Every time she is stung by the possibility that one day she might not be there, tears surge like furies. She had striven to enjoy the same unconditional love with her daughter that bound her to her mother. The outcome was this inexplicable aggressiveness which disheartened her so much that she felt she was losing her grip inside herself.

Catarina considers that her mother is deserving of criticism in everything, whilst her mother, in her turn, feels criticised in every respect, both implicitly and explicitly, and (though she knows that Catarina has the ability to read her mind) she cannot help thinking of criticising her daughter for her criticism. This is why she doesn't bother to defend herself any more, she feels incapable of doing anything more than gently appealing her daughter to defuse her judgmental fury. Her mother's friend, lying face downwards on the sand, criticises both mother and child in her thoughts. When alone with the mother, she tells her she cannot understand how such an intelligent and independent woman, in certain things, allows herself to be tormented like that by a thirteen year-old girl.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>. Catarina never stops pointing out that she is only a month off fourteen. And her mother smiles and strokes her hair. To which she responds: "Don't even dream of having a little family get-together" She wants to go to a club with her friends. This is in retaliation, her mother thinks, for the following episode which she told her about: « I was coming into Avenida 5 de Outubro. A woman drew up alongside me at the lights, lowered the window of the car and asked if I knew where the Hospital Particular was. That's where I work, I told her, just follow me. As soon as I drove off I came up against a new one-way street sign which forced me to turn where I didn't want to, into a side street and then take another right into a stretch of road under repair, all of this with the woman behind me in the other car. I hate people seeing me mess up. The woman must have thought I was crazy. I tell her I know where the hospital is, I suggest she follows me then I start driving round in circles... I start to worry about getting lost. And at some temporary lights near another place where there were works in progress, I look back anxiously through the rear-view mirror to make sure she is following me. I can't tell her car from others of the same colour and the same size. Obviously I had turned a corner and lost her, or she had given up or had been summoned by another driver.

As she bathes her legs to alleviate her unsightly varicose veins, she hears the daughter raging against her mother, who doesn't dare to leave the shade, and she cannot help feeling the delight of a confidant, nor can she help agreeing with almost everything the young girl says. She recalls her own mother, as cold as water, who threatened never to speak to her again, every time she threatened to leave the family home.

On a big blue towel stretched out on the slope of the dune, the new mother lays down her baby, smeared all over with white cream.<sup>4</sup>

Spread out under the parasol there is an array of thermal bags – a special one for the bottle of the purest water, twice-boiled and twice filtered, to wash the baby's dummy in should it by chance fall upon the sand, seething as it is with disgusting creatures. There are cotton bags, linen nappies, noisemakers, teething toys and other things which will only be of use much later, like the spade and rake and tiny bucket, which prove that *the baby* is a dynamic concept in which anything may happen at any moment, whether it be due to some imaginative, more-often-than-not adverse exterior reality, or on the other hand, to some ebullient reality which might make him stand up and walk, or speak philosophically, or raise a technical problem which no one is ready yet to solve. Just the thought of that woman crossing the dunes, loaded down with so much stuff, leaves one aghast. Yet despite being surrounded by all these accessories and utensils, which, to the casual observer might seem to be a demonstration of insecurity, Berta feels immortal. She has condescended to surround herself with these signs of awareness of all the perils, solely to avoid her mother's permanent scrutiny. She knows what precautions to take, and she doesn't mind having to prove her competence. Deep down, she is as sure of being invincible as she is of being on that beach at that precise moment. Alone with her son, she surrenders to savage, animal-like adoration.

A few steps away, scattered chaotically on the sand, a family of four - father, mother two male children - discuss Sunday's match. And almost on top of them, blissfully unaware that they are making one of the

<sup>4</sup> A present from the little boy's godmother, in the best quality Turkish towelling from *El Corte Inglés*, it will accompany him to the beach until he is five, spending the winter in the chest into which the father tosses everything that reminds him of summer. On the first day at the beach it is taken out and hung in the sunshine to air. «Why bother washing it? -says the father- it was clean before it was put into the chest». He takes it off the clothesline and «puts it away tidily» at the very bottom of the drawer. This is how he unwittingly becomes part of a conspiracy with the maid who ends up by tearing up the towel for cleaning cloths one morning when Berta Manfredi is caught unawares. « It was just a worn old towel» says the sly Brazilian girl. And Berta feels like strangling her.

points of a triangle with the baby and his mother, a couple of very young lovers exchange protracted kisses. Mara's mother had prepared her from an early age for the scares of puberty. She had regaled her daughter with a range of bibliography, beginning with phylogenesis and ending with the contemporary female. She had thrown in some illustrated sex manuals for ages 10 to 13 and 13 to 15. And she had also given her love poems by Camões and Neruda, to cover the emotional side. She spoke about sex «openly», as she put it, making piquant remarks about virtually every aspect of everyday life. Mara felt like burying herself in the ground every time her mother mentioned the word penis to her. And her offhand way of dealing with women's private affairs left her sick with resentment. No one had ever described what Mara felt for Carlos. She literally wanted to eat him up, bit by bit - starting with his perfect ear lobe. First, she thought, she would have to shave his head and the little hairs that seem to grow everywhere on boys' bodies, and then devour him like a bunch of grapes, skin and all, spitting out the pips when she was done. She couldn't fathom how he hadn't noticed, although at times, if she got carried away, like now, and pressed herself up against him sucking at his neck - he pulled away a little and laughed, looking into her eyes as if he were trying to guess what she was up to. Mara was tempted to confess her urge was uncontrollable; sooner or later it would have to come out.

The mother rests her head lightly on the baby's shoulder. He will be big and strong. He is the most beautiful baby that anyone has ever made. His head is as round as an orange. It is an extraordinary achievement to have a baby as beautiful as this. Even her mother seems to be envious of her. And all the other women, as they pass by quickly at the seaside, and even when they don't, steal a glance at the baby from a distance and envy those blue eyes. Can she describe how much she loves him? No, it is not possible. There is no measure. How long it took to choose his name. He wasn't a Vitor. He wasn't a Lourenço. What was he then? The baby wriggles with contentment, waves his hands in the air and coos. He turns over suddenly and mouths his mother's nose. He already has two teeth. The mother laughs out loud, the baby goes on gnawing at her face, deep in concentration, his intensely blue eyes turned to the sky.

Mara's mother always refers to her as «my daughter» or, when she is feeling especially tender, particularly when she is talking to her own mother, «my Mara». She never says just «Mara», as Mara thinks she should. Why «my Mara»? she asks Carlos out of the blue, feeling short-tempered and unsatiated. Carlos never knows what he is supposed to say to her. It's not that he actually decided never to open his mouth, he had no choice. Mara dragged him into conflicts that he knew nothing about. His own mother was a placid creature, who seemed to have gone into hibernation as soon as she stopped breast-feeding him. Now he feels sick to his stomach when he thinks about it - he was breast-fed up to three years of age, which means he was still being breast-fed twelve years ago. And suddenly he pulls away from Mara and suggests they go

for a swim. She springs to her feet, guessing that the activity and the cold water will calm her down.<sup>5</sup>

They are now sitting side by side on the sand, on the same towel, whilst, in the water, the friend performs her obligations towards her varicose veins. In their loneliness, they share a common hatred for her interference. The mother hardly dares to breathe because she knows the truce will be short-lived. She is watching her little Catarina out of the corner of her eye, so perfect with her long straight hair, dark, unblemished skin, and such small teeth, which fortunately need no appliance; and she is sickened by the old man who paunchily waddles by, ogling the girl. Her disgust for the old man does not go unnoticed to Catarina who pulls a face and hugs her mother, giggling. It would certainly astonish her timorous and lonely mother if she could hear what Catarina was saying to her in her thoughts.

Rebelling against her husband, who had forced their daughter to bear the burden of a trapeze artist's name all her life, Berta Manfredi's mother always called her Belita, in memory of a childhood cousin who had joined a convent to become a nun. It is true that this cousin always annoyed her when they were children because of her holier-than-thouness and the way she lisped her rosary, but she had forgotten all that, remembering only the freedom the other girl would enjoy amongst the nuns. Dr. Manfredi had a passion for his wife which he described as carnal, and therefore involuntary and absolute. It was a love based on ownership, contingent jealousy and conflict of interests. Mila Manfredi said she despised that kind of love, which smacked of humiliation to her. Berta paid little heed to the quarrels between her parents - two giants surrounded by an aura of sexual tension - she observed the rules of filial piety, took her degree, got a job in a Ministry, married, all of this in a haze of somnambulism punctuated with passions for invented people, inspired by strangers she met on the bus. The pregnancy was normal. The birth normal, too. Then this.<sup>6</sup>

In the meanwhile, Jerónimo dared his father and ran on of him ahead into the water. But his father stopped, shivering, at the water's edge, bent and huddled up, the wind preventing him from playing the role of the dependable fellow who played football and was good for a quarter of an hour of beach tennis with his wife, whilst the child umpired. The wind is yet another hostile factor he has to endure. Everything in his life has become difficult, particularly his wife's distressing silence. He remembers the permanent whining of his diminutive mother, dressed in what she said was black, and wasn't any more because she couldn't see properly, concerned, as she always was, about landlords and old women. She kept his dinner warm the old fashioned way, with a plate covering the pot on the hob, and on his

<sup>5</sup> To Carlos all this is new. Mara is his first serious girlfriend. «Serious» is her expression, an expression she picked up from the conversations she hears her mother having on the phone with her friends. He lets her take the lead in their amorous pursuits and keeps a fairly low profile, hoping as he says «not to screw up too much.» Whenever he says anything which hurts her feelings, Mara kisses him to silence him.

once-a-week visit, his food was served luke-warm and dried up and he ended up by drinking more than he had planned. He had failed to protect her; he had allowed her to die at the hands of the other old women.

The good mother carried out - and in such an exemplary fashion! - every duty there was to perform. She followed the programme of echographic tests dutifully and thought long and hard before choosing doctor and clinic. Such was her concern for detail that Pedro's room was ready almost too late to be inaugurated. Colour was essential; there were yellows which excited and greens which depressed. There were elephants which could be frightening, and bears which might cause nightmares. Curtains? They brought dust and dependency, or, just the opposite, were they as vital as mothers' milk? The whole space should be occupied, to give a womb-like feeling of cosiness, of being accompanied. Or should it be left empty, coloured only by the child's own imagination? Created, as it was, with total certainty of every possible consequence, and proudly exhibited to family and friends, the room was later closed up and abandoned. Pedro always slept in his parent's room, in his little basket in the middle of the double bed, and later, when he was able to walk, curled up at his mothers' feet. She knows she is doing everything as it should be done but there is always a niggling feeling that something may be escaping her. Her imagination is preventive, the result of her mother's tremendous crime. She remembers her being exclusively preoccupied with her father, for whom she cooked, chose what to wear, made up her face, wept and tried to stop herself from weeping. As she watches Pedro, properly protected against the sun, happily running up and down on the beach and playing in the water, unafraid and unresentful, the good mother thinks to herself that until her son

was born, she had to survive on odds and ends. And she looks back on her earlier life as a secondary affair which occurred on some faraway shore, now suddenly fulfilled and triumphantly revealed.

In the meanwhile the wind has dropped and the sky has suddenly clouded over. The air has grown murky and the light capricious; here and there it penetrates the grey vault and leaves the water silvery, changeable and scattered with very light green, leaden-green and mercury-coloured patches, as oily as the back of a whale. In an instant everything is covered by seagulls which swoop in, screeching, on the low tide. Many touch down on the sea amongst the bathers and shoot off again nervously towards the sky. The good mother is startled from her daydreaming and takes her eyes off her son for a moment to watch the fierce, ugly birds. From there she departs over the waves towards the effects of the light, stretches out her legs and sighs. And does not return. Pedro crouches down, picks up a handful of sand and throws it at his mother's face. She covers her eyes with her hands and runs into the water. Pedro hears her, wetting her face in distress, wraps himself in her towel, then throws it away and flops down on the sand, looking at the sky. In the meanwhile the clouds have cleared.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Dr Manfredi's jealousy was not, in fact, entirely unfounded. Mila Manfredi, who was known at the Criminal Investigation department where she provided secretarial support as Venus de Mila Manfredi, fell in love at the end of the seventies with a series of Italian police officers, of which Capt. Bolloni was the first link in the chain. He was involved in an international search for a dangerous brigand who had taken refuge at M. M.'s house in Lisbon, where he had spent two weeks eating and drinking. I am inclined to believe that it was this very same Capt. Bolloni, who, if not the instigator himself, was at least the unwitting cause of an unpleasant case of blackmail to which I fell prey, when I lived in the same house several years later. But to get back to Mila: her wild romantic episodes did not prevent her from being an ever-present and somewhat severe mother, who determined on which days her daughter could go out and what time she had to be back at night, the minimum grades she had to get in each subject and the domestic chores she had to carry out. For everything else in the home she depended on a maid she had inherited from her mother. The maid's daughter, who, in one of those picturesque family ramifications which are still so common in Portugal, was Mila's mother's goddaughter, was brought up almost like a sister and, on occasions, performed the role of concubine to the master of the house, when Mila was going through one of those phases of her life when she had to work particularly long hours. Mila's severity was completely wasted on Berta, about whom a friend once perceptively said « if they gave you a whole garden to play in, you would sit in a corner and say; thank you but don't worry, this little bit is quite enough for me »

<sup>7</sup> In accordance with the forecast, in fact. The good mother reacts badly to changeable weather. It seems she can never form an opinion, be sure about anything. Delivered by caesarian in the depth of darkest winter, she prefers a good, solid rainy day to these unsettling winds. She even developed serious allergies which kept her in bed on cortisone injections at the onset of spring and autumn. Meteorology had been one of her many crazes, but at thirteen she wanted to be an astronaut, after seeing the film *"The Right Stuff"* and developing a crush on Ed Harris (and not Sam Shepherd, who was intended to appeal to the female audience). Shortly afterwards, and after discovering a profound aversion to maths (she called her relationship with abstraction «platonic»), she opted with the same fierce conviction for Theology, about which she had no clear idea, then Law and then Philosophy. One has to admit that her passions were absolutely classical. Fashion Design and bizarre Engineering courses never even crossed her mind. When the time came to decide, she used the highly practical method of first eliminating what she did not want, thus discarding unrequited passions in a whole series of subjects together with the entire area of Science and the Arts, in favour of Languages. She picked German, the only alternative which enjoyed a certain *cachet* and seemed to be the Mathematics of the Arts. And so it was that she became an excellent interpreter, until Pedro was born. Later she turned down an invitation to work at the European Parliament. Her mother, Georgina Pires, a strong and extremely patient woman who was devoted to her, body and soul, without exactly being blinded by love for her, did her best to put up with the endlessly changing moods of her daughter, whom she described, in public, with true mother's love, as firm and determined. *Sottovoce*, she called her mulishly stubborn. Georgina confided to her own mother: "Imagine, today she wanted me to enrol her in the Fine Arts Institute. It was seven in the morning, and she turned to me with that look on her face, her mind absolutely made up, no contradiction admitted, and announced: « I was born to paint. It is what I am, what I am going to be. I know it's going to be a difficult career, full of obstacles, but, Mother, I am absolutely sure this is what I want! » And you should have seen her face, Mother, those eyes! As black as the ace of spades! So intense! Only the other day it was Nursing, she wanted to be a Florence Nightingale! It's just those sects I am scared of, if they once got hold of her, she would be putty in their hands. » Her mother laughed: «And you went? » And she replied «To Fine Arts? Me? What for? »

At about five in the afternoon the beach is flooded by toddlers. They come down the dunes from all sides, in their mothers' arms, on their father's shoulders, peeping out of their baby chairs. The ones who can walk rush towards the water, kept upright by the speed they pick up as they run down the slope. They spread out over the firm sand of low-tide, with sunhats protecting their heads, trying to keep their balance in their nappies, an unfair burden for those who have so much on their minds already. The wind drops suddenly and the air becomes sweeter. Their mothers follow them, placing their feet carefully on the sand, some of them expecting babies again; and as they gravitate around them, they are drawn into the orbits of the other mothers, so that at this time of day, the beach becomes a planetary system in which everything revolves around babies. Still a little uncertain on his feet, one of them is holding his mother's hand as he paddles, his head hanging down, interested in what he is treading on, a shell here and there that tickles, dark things, shadows of flotsam, and when he raises his head he is amazed to see so much water and points, looking up at his mother and asking her to explain. And another performs a dance of love with the sea, beckoning to the wave with his hands and shuffling backwards with tiny steps as it rolls in, almost as if he were putting it to bed on the beach and making it comfortable; one can almost imagine him tucking the sheet in under its chin. Then he leans forward, pats it and sends it away again, and starts afresh. As tiny as he is, he knows the world is made up of wounds and separation. Down at the water's edge toddlers run up and down, leaving their mothers behind, rushing towards the lapping waves, encountering dogs and children, grown-ups, rocks, burrowed tunnels and towering sandcastles, and then back again to their mothers whom they cling to or drag behind them, depending on what they saw or experienced down there, in this busy carousel that heralds the close of day.

Mara and Carlos embrace in the water. He carries her in his arms until they are almost out of their depth, then, leaving her floating, he moves away and dives. When he emerges, the lifeguard follows him with his eyes, puffing on his cigarette. The rumbling of the tractors, coming to help the fishing boats, can be heard approaching. Mothers gather up the smaller children into their arms and warn the other women. They point out the boats to the children, their bows and sterns rising above the waves, one painted red and white, another blue and yellow, like toys. The two tractors pull to a standstill by the sea, about 500 yards away, and the drivers cheerfully jump out onto the sand and fill their plastic cups with wine. They eat bread. The regulars on this beach know that hauling the boats in is a lengthy operation and you just have to be patient. The two fishermen nearest to us sit on the tractor talking and gesticulating and one of them tries out the winch. In doing this they both have a touch of the cowboy about them, a look of toughness, Man against adversity, but also some-

thing of professional artistes in a show like the circus, which everyone admires and dreams about but secretly wishes will soon disappear forever. The blue and yellow boat, the *Robalo*, or *Sea Bass*, so named perhaps in the hope that like attracts like, is still some way off and the people on the beach lose interest, the children go back to their seaside activities and are re-armed with rubber rings, boards and water wings and released into the water. The sea is calm and shallow next to the breakwater and the tide has left a big natural swimming pool; it has got warmer at the end of the day and bathers now stand a hundred yards from the beach with the water coming only halfway up their calves. Intent on staring at the distant lighthouse or chatting away, they forget their surroundings, and on looking suddenly about them are surprised and frustrated in their expectations.

But the fishermen have already jumped down from the *Robalo* and the boat is being hauled and escorted up the beach, surrounded by a cloud of seagulls. Out of reach, they call the tractor drivers bastards and everybody laughs. Where this group of women has appeared from, no one knows. Addressing the men in a familiar way, they shoo away the seagulls which have already smelled the bag of fish, spread a thick sheet of plastic on the beach and start unloading the red plastic crates from the tractor. The fishermen and the tractor drivers are becoming livelier and the women too, on seeing them again; they haven't been far or away for long, it's the re-encounter which is the cause of all the hubbub. The fisherman ahead of the boat catches the rope from the tractor and winds it into figures-of-eight around the bollard, all the while taking part in the conversation and talking to his mother on the cell phone. Bystanders gather to watch the work. The tractor drags the boat towards dry land whilst the fishermen, in the water, push without conviction against the bows, talking and stopping if necessary to explain some of the more abstract points with their hands. The boat is hauled up the beach and the same fisherman unties the rope, whilst the tractor driver, always sprightly and self-assured, manoeuvres and places himself between the boat and the sea to recover the nets and the fish-bag. There are more than twenty people helping. The crates are laid out around the plastic sheet stretched out on the ground, onto which the bag will be opened and the fish emptied out. The winch operator is now winding in the rope attached to the nets, giving it two or three turns and hauling the fish bag closer, whilst a man and a woman take the net from the winch, spread it out and cast it like a veil to rest in folds on the bottom of the boat. As it gets heavier, more people rush to haul in the rope by hand. It is the tractor, however, which drags in the bag with a final tug, exposing its fullness to the whole beach. And when it opens, the toddlers are there, ready to watch; the silvery, heaving mass, the splashing salty water which might get into their face and eyes, so many forms of life. Some at first are overwhelmed,

others at first are scared; of the mothers, some are overwhelmed, at first, others are scared, at first. One of them, quite naturally, is perturbed by the weever-fish that a fisherman who is kneeling amongst the small fry has tossed onto the sand, and she warns her child against it. Another prefers not to say anything. There are so many other fish. She chooses to be perplexed by a strange, armoured fish with a trumpet-like snout, a silver blade, flattened on the bottom of the sea by the weight of the water. This doesn't even cross the mind of another woman. She is counting, estimating how many kilos of sardines there are. She is proud of being able to estimate quantities. Pedro feels the urge to stick his finger in the eye of a bass, but his mother smiles and he pulls it back. The good mother then informs him how beautiful it all is, when all he sees is a filthy mess. Holding her baby closer, Berta Manfredi reflects that this beautiful thing, after all, is a spectacle of many deaths. One mother will choose to omit such detail, another will teach this lesson to her son, right there and then. Jerónimo gathers into his bucket, all the tiny fish that the fishermen have thrown away, and will carry them, all-powerful, to his family. The fishermen pick out and separate the fish by affinity, sardine with sardine, squid and mackerel in their respective crates. Sea-bass is handled with ceremony. The ones which are not good to eat are thrown to the jellyfish. Jerónimo's father feels moved by their work. If only everything in life were as straightforward as work. But there are these intervals in which a sense of loss prevails. Intimidated by their audience the fishermen behave like actors and speak loudly, pretending to be more at ease than they really are. The women, feeling flirtatious, now and again fling a jellyfish at the comrade sitting opposite to them. And the seagulls, realising that there is no hope, have disappeared into the sky.

Those who are familiar with the indescribable mildness of certain late afternoons on that coast, will know what happens next. The fishermen and fishwives do some of their business on the spot, then load up the crates and disappear, perched together on top of the tractors, in an exit rather in the style of the Peking Opera and reminiscent of the old days of the cooperative farms. The beach then returns to its true nature and a collective calm prevails in response to the temperature of the air. There is a certain weariness caused by all this rest, a trace of boredom which does not succeed in poisoning the moment. Elisa, from whom Catarina, her daughter, has moved away on the excuse that she has had too much sun, falls asleep amongst the pile of salty towels and bottles of luke-warm water, her head on the sand. She dreams she is walking alone on an immense beach, on a literally golden autumn afternoon, and that on this beach she wants to write a poem. She strolls along the water's edge, engrossed in her poem, which she knows will bring her pleasure and satisfaction sooner or later, and interprets, in a friendly way, the single-minded stare of a

seagull whose rune-like footprints she follows. When Elisa awakes, Catarina has fallen asleep with a magazine over her face. On waking she will complain, as Elisa knows, and complain as if it were her mother's fault, about the ink which has come off the page and is now printed on her skin because of the perspiration.<sup>8</sup>

Mara and Carlos resume their amorous pursuits. After leaving the water, they ran along the beach and ended up by rolling down the slope of the tallest dune, where two or three youngsters are trying out a new, dry-land sport using a *skimboard*. Mara has pricked herself on a spine, which seems to have come running the whole way, as if it were afraid of arriving late. Carlos kneels down, taking an interest. To see him busy taking care of something so small fills her with respect. Then she gets up, leaning on him, to try her foot out. Over the sea, the sun has taken on the reality of a phantom limb.

<sup>8</sup> Elisa will not enjoy remembering this dream, preferring just to retain the positive image of a solitary, easy-going and pleasure-loving woman of mature age, walking along a beach and composing a poem. The truth is more complex. It happens that Elisa passionately wants the poem in the dream to rhyme; and her walk, which might, at least, have been a carefree stroll, turns into a real torment. In the dream, and by extrapolation, in reality, it never occurs to her that there is no absolute need for the poem to rhyme.

## CHARACTERS:

The good mother and her son Pedro.

The mother of the good mother and her mother.

Ariana and her husband.

Jerónimo, their son.

Her husband's mother.

Adelina Moreira, Ariana's mother.

Elisa and Catarina, her daughter.

Elisa's friend.

Elisa's mother.

Elisa's friend's mother.

Berta( known as Belita ) Manfredi.

Berta's baby.

Dr. Manfredi, Berta's father and Mila Manfredi,  
Berta's mother.

Captain Bolloni.

Berta's husband.

Berta's maid: a Brazilian woman.

Mila's maids, one of whom was inherited from  
her mother.

The latter's daughter, Mila's mother's goddaughter.

A family of four (father; mother, two male children).

Mara and Carlos, two adolescents.

The five o'clock babies, their mothers and fathers.

The fishermen of S. João da Caparica and  
their wives.

Translation by David Evans