

Gonçalo M. Tavares



The Portuguese writer Gonçalo M. Tavares was born in August 1970. He published his first book in December 2001 and in less than three years went on publishing novels, poetry, plays and short fiction, for which he has already been awarded important prizes, such as the *José Saramago Prize*, in 2005, for his novel *Jerusalém*.

He numbers all of his books and organizes them into series and lines: *the Misterys* - lucid books, amusing and yet profound at the same time; the novel series entitled *Black Books*, set against the background of moral and human existence in the midst of war (*Jerusalem, A man: Klaus Klump, Joseph Walser's machine*) and the *Bloom Books*, unclassifiable books, where literary genres are undermined and questioned, that is poetry books, researches and theatre.



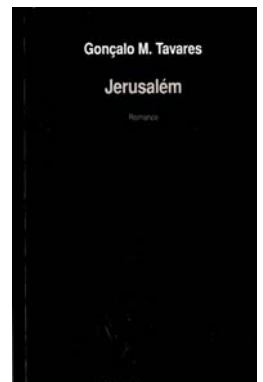
He is an absolutely exceptional case in Portuguese literature. This is not an everyday occurrence. It has happened with Gonçalo M. Tavares, and he can do no other than force a complete brake in literature written in the Portuguese language.

Eduardo Prado Coelho, 2005



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Dr. Ray-Güde Mertin
Literary Agency
Friedrichstrasse 1
D-61348 Bad Homburg
Phone: 0049-6172-2 98 42
Fax: 0049-6172-2 97 71
info@mertin-litag.de



Jerusalém

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Chapter IX The Mad

1

It's Gada speaking. He's fifteen.

I come in and out of here. They open me like a door and shut me. I've been operated on for eleven years. Seventeen times. They've made a door of me for eleven years. They've been opening me and shutting me. Opening me and shutting me. They've also made a door of my head.

It's Gada, he's fifteen, with a scar on his head.

I don't have a shadow, says Heinrich.

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It's hot. The man under the shadow of the tree smokes a cigarette and gobs strongly so that nothing lands within the shadow. I'm having a competition with my gob, says Heinrich. Seeing whether my gob goes further than the tree's shadow.

Heinrich moves away from the tree and goes out into the sun to get his shadow back. You see, pointing. I'm not dead.

He looks at his feet and gobs towards his right foot.

I need water, lady, says Heinrich. But there's not a single lady around.

She's feverish and wants to break the glass. I don't feel my hand, says Mylia. If I break the glass with my hand, I'll feel my hand.

Witold says: if you don't feel your soul break the glass with your soul. He laughs.

The soul shouldn't break the glass. The hand is used to it.

I don't feel my hand, says Mylia.

Count your fingers.

Five fingers.

See, you've got your whole hand.

The hand is missing, says Mylia.

Two women grab her. Mylia opens and closes her right hand dozens of times.

I'm sweeping the hotel, says Marksara.

The hotel is dirty, it's got crumbs and men. It's got butts.

I'm sweeping the hotel. It's full of men, says Marksara. And butts.

They smoke a lot.

I won't stop sweeping, says Marksara.

They've shut me up in here so Mother won't see me die.

Johana says she understands.

A mother mustn't see her daughter die.

Johana cuts the fingers of a glove off so she can mend it after with woollen thread.

It's to save the fingers, she says, laughing.

She doesn't have scissors. She tears the fingers of the glove off, grabbing it and then pulling with her teeth.

My mother had strong teeth, Johana says.

They've shut me up in here so she won't see my teeth.

My mother shut me up in here.

Marko watches television all day long. From the moment he wakes up until he goes to bed. No one can get him away from it.

Something might happen, he says.

He has a hat.

He says that the hat makes his head nervy. But he doesn't want to take it off.

It invents nerves in the head, he says, about the hat.

The hat isn't heavy, he says, offering the hat. No one putting the hat on will fall over.

Nobody accepts the hat. He puts it back on his head.

It was my father who gave it to me when I was fifteen. It's small.

The man hangs his head and cries.

She's got number 53 on her jumper and is eating a sweet.

I'm Martha.

She's very thin.

Martha says: I'm very thin.

She points at the number 53 on her jumper.

When my mother let me play in the park.

Then my mother brought me here. I thought it was a game.

You can see the collar bones underneath, the bones of the thin legs.

My mother used to say my clothes didn't have a body.

He has various maps in his pocket. Maps of the world, of Europe, of Asia.

Stieglitz says: now we're here.

Whenever he stops he takes the maps out of his pocket and consults them. He then uses a marker pen to show where he is.

We are here.

He never says: I'm here. He always says: we are here. Everyday he repeats the same route. You can't see the borders of the countries now due to the lines of the marker pen.

When somebody comes from the outside, Stieglitz goes up to them and whispers:

If you could give me maps.

When somebody says they don't have any, Stieglitz becomes violent.

Then he shuts up. He looks at the person and smiles.

I swallowed a nail, I've got a nail in my throat.

Wisliz shows his throat. He points at a small ridge.

The nail's here, pointing.

The nail won't let me sing.

As a child I ate snails. I got hold of them and ate them.

My father didn't like me eating them. He said it was bad luck.

Rodsa is a woman who's afraid of suffocating to death.

I was a very wealthy woman, she says.

Rodsa is fifty.

When they tell her how old she is, she asks: what's that?

They've explained to her that her age is several times that week that passed since her brother's last visit.

Rodsa says: I don't know what fifty years is.

Rodsa is thin and smokes a lot.

The last time my brother visited me, Rodsa says, I put a short skirt on. So he could see my legs.

My brother brought me cigarettes.

Rodsa touches her sex three times for luck. >>

I'm still going to have three boys, she says.
Rodsas pats her sex three more times with her right hand.
Rodsas has no children.

Zero percent doesn't exist, says Uberbein, who was a mathematician.

Because of his visits to a prostitute, he's lost his hair.

By the summer I'll have no hair. That's what they've told me.

But zero percent doesn't exist, he repeats.

Uberbein puts his hand in his pocket and shows a handful of salt.

If zero percent existed this wouldn't be here.

He almost starts crying. He composes himself.

It was because of going to a prostitute that I've lost my hair.

I was a maths teacher, says Uberbein.

By the summer I'll have no hair.

She has short white hair.

She could be everyone's mother.

Laras is sixty-five.

They say I've got a problem in my head, but it's a lie, says Laras. My mother had short hair like me - and died from a heart problem.

They say I've got a problem in my head, but I won't die from the head. I have a heart problem, and not a head one.

I'll die when my heart stops.

My mother also had short hair.

Laras manages to stick out her chin.

See? I could be everyone's mother.

Janika is black and likes making food.

I like making food, says Janika.

She puts everything she finds in the pot. Stones, grass, cigarette butts, scraps of paper.

You can't waste, she says.

Janika is fifty.

I've been hungry, says Janika. You can't waste. Some men throw cigarettes and butts straight into the pot Janika carries.

I've been hungry. I like making food, says Janika.

Paola is in love.

I've met a boy, says Paola, and starts laughing and lifting her skirt.

Paola is forty and Rudi, the boy, is thirty-two.

I met him here, says Paola.

It was here, Paola points to the corridor leading to the rooms.

Paola says: he's crazy.

I'm going to plait my hair for my boy to think I'm pretty.

But he's crazy, he laughs a lot.

I shouldn't plait my hair for someone who only knows

how to laugh. But I'm not pretty either, says Paolo.

Vana grabs Markso's genitals through his trousers.

He's got a big one, says Vana.

It's the biggest here. I've seen them all.

He was in the shower one day, Vana says, and I opened the door and I saw.

Markso's thing is the biggest.

Markso is leaning against a tree. He's smoking a cigarette.

Each time Vana touches his genitals he seems to stop thinking for a moment, but carries on indifferently.

Markso only knows how to smoke, says Vana.

There's no hygiene here, says Mylia.

They don't wash me.

Mylia lifts her skirt constantly: she shows her genitals.

There's no hygiene, Mylia insists, they stuck a garden here.

It's shameful to lift your skirt to show, but I've always liked to show. I've always been clean, says Mylia. There's a lack of hygiene here.

They brought me here. It was my husband. Doctor Busbeck. He's important. He says I see souls.

Mylia points to the garden: a lack of hygiene. How can they have made a garden? asks Mylia.

They don't wash me here, it disgusts them to wash my thing, says Mylia.

Wisliz has a bandage on his head.

I was operated on the head, says Wisliz.

They took intelligence away.

They say I'm stupid, that I don't understand.

I'm tired, I can't concentrate.

I need to sleep a lot, says Wisliz.

Ernst. The others mock the way Ernst runs. My name's Ernst. Ernst Spengler.

I like it here.

Chapter X Kaas

1

Belly down the boy tries to sleep, unsuccessfully. He gets up decidedly, but stops, sits. He lets himself fall back on the bed again. Unused to his body after sleep, Kaas Busbeck, met again that thickness continually grabbing at him: a discomfort; getting up he looked at himself in the mirror.

His thin legs would never allow him to be a soldier. Unhappiness compromised him from the first moments of the day, when he awoke still tired from some harsh sleep. He lit a match. He looked: night still. The match in his hand, >>

alight, proved that night was still in charge of the surroundings. He looked at his knees which were a slight advance on the extraordinary thinness of his legs. However, it would be impossible to chase anyone, or even run away. A general weakness, the doctors said. Just that: general weakness. As if his body forced him to stay where he was a little longer. Laziness or you're there already and, so, there's no need to multiply movements? Certain deficiencies are, sometimes, nature's way of granting our most secret requests, said his father, Theodor Busbeck.

Kaas picked up the clock and suddenly saw in that object an amazing hole in the middle of the compartment where time was concentrated. He pressed his right eye up against the clock as if in hope of seeing something, in addition to the hours of the day that object apparently indicated. With his eye up against the glass that protected the hands, Kaas imagined he was a maker of catastrophes, through the simple image that occurred to him at that moment: the strange, unexpected introduction of one of his long eyelashes into that other apparently separate and mechanical universe: the hands pointing out the hours, minutes, seconds. A tiny eyelash that was capable of confusing time and the normal functioning of days.

He removed his eye: the hands were intact, protected by some stupid glass. Kaas got up and opened the bedroom door. A light in the room, but no one. His father's door was still shut.

Nobody was like Kaas and that hard separateness had touched him early. It wasn't just his absurdly thin legs in relation to the rest of his body, and his particular way of walking which made it seem the distribution of his weight was unbalanced. His personal interests were a gap that could not be crossed in relation to boys and girls of own his age.

Smelling something, he went to the kitchen. Nothing special, just two dirty plates. Kaas' uncontrolled diction was perhaps the most mocked thing, even more than his legs. He could not walk, he could keep still, or even seated, with his legs out of sight, but it was difficult to keep quiet for long in the middle of a group: he'd be ridiculed. Being seated could express a certain acquiescence in the distribution of collective force, but prolonged silence could be seen as provocation; a kind of readiness for revolution, small certainly, circumscribed by a room and half a dozen companions, but revolution: the possibility of denying the meaning of history, however minimal and insignificant. For that reason Kaas had to speak, every now and again. And in speaking he expressed himself through that uncontrolled diction, where certain words finished involuntarily before it was time and others began later, in a turbulence that seemed to put the sentence into a fragile boat. His father, Theodor, would say to him: keep hold of the sentence as if it were an oar, keep hold of the sentence, don't let it rock. But Kaas couldn't.

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For Kaas vigorous health was something he could only show in photographs. Certainly any distant relative, for example, a Busbeck living on the other side of the world that only got news of his father by post, wouldn't have the notion that he wasn't a normal boy. Theodor would choose the photos and refused to make any written reference to his son's deficiencies, sustaining, without ever expressing it, a certain lie which the image permitted. In a photograph, Kaas' skeletal and disproportionate legs were easily hidden, and the incapacity for normal diction was, as seems obvious, untransferable to a visual document only giving importance to the eyes of the receiver. For various reasons, but perhaps also for that one, Kaas acquired an unexpected second activity, along with his studies which, one way or another, he was managing to do, without brilliance, with enormous effort, perhaps even with the excessive aid of his father's good name, but he was carrying on, without even failing a year. Besides normal school, he had the activity of photography, where year after year he seemed to specialise. This activity seemed to condense two moments of comfort in Kaas' existence: manual work, where his skilful fingers would earn the respect of any of his classmates, and the possibility of long silences or perhaps, more appropriately, the easy possibility of dispensing with discourse. The images, the capturing of images properly speaking, became a way of displaying something hiding himself, of being with others from the trunk up, if we can put it like that, in other words: the collective look could fall upon his body without mockery or compassion because, when he was taking a photograph, Kaas was a human who could compete with all the others, on the same level: he became someone you could argue with.

Anyway, the image that had marked him most at school came out of a minor conflict; short insults between him and a classmate that grew in intensity until the moment when neither could say another word without becoming a coward in the eyes of the other. There were the two of them in that unique moment when violent physical contact was inevitable and almost indispensable, when suddenly his opponent, as if he had suddenly remembered something he'd forgotten when trading insults, stopped, and stepping back in a movement that under other circumstances would certainly have been considered cowardly, stepping back, then said to Kaas: I can't fight with you.

It's certain that Kaas had as much force in his arms as his classmates. It was his legs that did not, in the least, have what was needed for a fight between boys. The slightest touch on the legs and he'd go down, definitively, in a second the fight would be over. Kaas couldn't punch or be punched because he didn't have legs. I can't fight with you was the most offensive sentence Kaas had ever heard.

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Something strange was present there in his insomnia. Another clock, the one in the kitchen, exuberantly showed the time: three-fifty. However, the strangeness did not come from him, from the fact of him being awake, as that had happened various times. What was beginning to trouble him was the imposing silence that had installed itself throughout the house. There was something quieter than normal.

He opened the curtain a little and looked out onto the street, completely deserted and without a single sound. Up to now, everything was as usual, the house was in one of the good central districts where, at this hour, the bustle still hadn't reached its peak. Nevertheless, the excessive silence didn't come from the street, but rather from the house itself, from the interior of the house.

He went out of the kitchen and went towards the bedroom of his father, Theodor Busbeck. He put his ear to the door: nothing, no noise. He dared to open the door slowly. The bedroom was empty. Theodor had gone out.

Kaas was still for some moments, as if gathering enough force to accept he was scared. But he didn't stay like that – like someone who has received stunning information – for long. He went to his room and got dressed. He was going to look for his father in the city.

Kaas was angry. As a doctor and as a father, Theodor had no right to leave him alone in the middle of the night.

Cowardice, he murmured.

Translated from the Portuguese by Mick Greer, 2005