



# JOSÉ TOLENTINO MENDONÇA

(Portugal, 1965)

[Sunday 1 October 2006]

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

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

Some of Mendonça’s poetry reminds me of passages from the works of the Jewish philosophers Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas, both of whom (with all their significant differences) insisted on the inalienable otherness of the You — not as an opposite term that dualistically gives the I its identity, but as the possibility of love, as the recognition of mystery, of something beyond the insularity and solipsism of an individual human consciousness. For them as for Mendonça, who is a Roman Catholic priest, ethics (which means respect and responsibility for the Other) is the foundation of knowledge. And for the I-You encounter not to collapse into a new form of egoism — with the You appropriated into the I, becoming its mere alter ego — there must be an eternal or divine You. (May students of philosophy forgive my simplifications here!)

“What separates one form from another / has always escaped me,” admits Mendonça (in ‘A Strand of Hair’), who does not draw clear lines between his solitary condition and his celebration of love and his awareness of God. The three motifs are interwoven in his poetry. Love is not a cure for solitude but is its expression and counterpart. And God is perhaps more a search than a certainty, doubt being a kind of raw material of faith. And since knowledge is founded on ethics, which is love, which is a real encounter with the other, or the Other, the poet opts for the plain directness of common speech (see ‘The Purest Presence’).

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

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

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## **POEMS**

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

## A STRAND OF HAIR

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

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

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

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

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

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## O FIO DE UM CABELO

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

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

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

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

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

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## CALLE PRINCIPE 25

Without warning we lose  
the vastness of the fields  
singular enigmas  
the clarity we swear  
we'll preserve

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

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## CALLE PRINCIPE 25

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

mas levamos anos  
a esquecer alguém  
que apenas nos olhou

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## EXCEPT FOR YOU

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

But there's something whose crux  
is farther or nearer

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

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## MENOS PARA TI

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

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

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

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## FREESIAS

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

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

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

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

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

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## FRESIAS

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

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

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

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

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

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## FRIENDS

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

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

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

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## PLANE TREES

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

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

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

## OS AMIGOS

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

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

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

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## PLATANOS

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

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

Não sei bem acordar vivo destas coisas:  
aproveito o ruído do entardecer e grito muito  
alto

to close my eyes that burn so much  
or I toss leaves from the riverbank into the  
water  
to measure the time of a life  
that's drowning

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deixo-te um instante só (um instante só)  
para fechar os olhos que tanto ardem  
ou atiro das margens folhas ao rio  
para medir o tempo de uma vida  
a naufragar

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## STONE CROP

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

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

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From: *Tábuas de Pedra*  
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## ENSAIAO

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

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

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## THE CHILDHOOD OF HERBERTO HELDER

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

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

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

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

I was almost an angel  
and wrote rigorous  
reports  
about silence

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

That was before  
I learned algebra

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## A INFÂNCIA DA HERBERTO HELDER

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

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

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

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

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

Nesse tempo  
ainda era possível  
encontrar Deus  
pelos baldios

Isto foi antes  
de aprender a álgebra

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Publisher: Assírio & Alvim, Lisbon



## THE LAST DAY OF SUMMER

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

We're born and we live for only a while  
we have nothing  
and not even when dusk arrives are we able  
to choose attention or choose forgetfulness  
our forces founder like hazy intentions  
in public  
or in any place

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

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## THE PUREST PRESENCE

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

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

## O último dia do verão

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

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

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

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## A PRESENÇA MAIS PURA

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

a altura desesperada do azul  
no teu retrato de adolescente há centenas de  
anos  
a extinção dos lírios no jardim municipal  
o mar desta baía em ruínas ou se quiseres  
os sacos do supermercado que se expandem nas  
gavetas  
as conversas ainda surpreendentemente

the fatigue of Sunday's run through the woods  
the dry-cleaning stubs with a "don't forget"  
attached  
the terror we have  
of certain chance meetings  
because we've stopped knowing basic things  
about others  
their very names

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

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## THE RUBBISH OF THE WORLD

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

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

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

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

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escolares  
soletradas em família  
a fadiga da corrida domingueira pela mata  
as senhas da lavandaria com um «não esquecer»  
fixado  
o terror que temos  
de certos encontros de acaso  
porque deixamos de saber dos outros  
coisas tão elementares  
o próprio nome

ouve o que diz a mulher vestida de sol  
quando caminha no cimo das árvores  
«a que distância deixaste  
o coração?»

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## O ESTERCO DO MUNDO

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

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

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

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

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## THE WHITE ROAD

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

leaves trembled  
under the stronger invisible weight

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

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## A ESTRADA BRANCA

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

folhas tremiam  
ao invisível peso mais forte

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

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