



LUÍS MIGUEL NAVA

(Portugal, 1957)

[Monday 1 December 2008]

Luís Miguel Nava, who published the bulk of his work in the 1980s, was perhaps the strongest and most original Portuguese poet to come to light in that decade. Brutally assassinated in Brussels, in May of 1995, when just 37 years old, Nava published his first book – which he soon renounced – when still an adolescent. This was followed, in 1979, by *Películas (Films)*, which won the prize for emerging poets from the Portuguese Writers’ Association.

After earning a degree in Romance Languages and Literatures, he worked as a university professor in Lisbon and at Oxford. From 1986 onwards he lived in Brussels, working as a translator for what was then called the European Community Council.

His last will and testament provided for the creation of a Luís Miguel Nava Foundation, which was to publish a magazine and award a poetry prize, directives that have been faithfully carried out.

The fact he was careful to draft a will at thirty-some years of age and even the way his poetry evolved – his friend the poet Gastão Cruz aptly classified Nava’s last book, *Vulcão (Volcano)* (1994), as “a veritable Office of Tenebrae” – strongly suggest that the poet had a presentiment that he would not live a long life.

His work, and in particular his last three books, lead us into one of the strangest and most inhospitable worlds ever forged by Portuguese words. In Nava’s universe, which seems to be ruled by a hallucinatory synesthesia, everything interpenetrates and is fused together, or so it feels. And this ‘everything’ includes the body in all its aspects, from the skin (or even the clothing that covers it) to the innermost viscera; everyday objects; landscapes, ocean and sky; past, present and future; and memory, which in Nava’s writing also takes the form of a tangible object, endowed with physical properties. This generalised porosity of things, which

allows everything to communicate with everything else, presupposes a universe not governed by the laws of classical physics, but also implies a literal materialisation of sensations.

As his poetry moves inexorably towards chaos and darkness, the properties of the body that sustain this world change accordingly. In *Rebentação* (Breaking) (1984), everything is still elastic and adhesive, with all the parts of the body in communication with each other and with the world. But in the last two books, as if that elasticity had been taken so far it finally snapped, the body is fragmented and divided, to the point of the poet describing it as a row of bones driven like stakes into the desert.

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POEMS

**DARKNESS
FROM THE WASTELANDS
STAKES
SQUALL
THE KING
THE STREWN BODY
TWO RIVERS**

Darkness

Darkness is beginning
to dissolve our body,
like a bloody snow
falling from the sky

or like a stone that, falling
into a lake, opens it into
successive circles, some already
outside the water, right here in life.

Someone
in the midst of the landscape
brandishes a heater

As trevas

Começam-nos as trevas a romper
a carne, comparáveis
a neve que do céu
caísse ensanguentada

ou pedra que, ao tombar
num lago, o abrisse
em sucessivos círculos, alguns
dos quais já fora de água, em plena vida,

alguém
no meio da paisagem
empunha um calorífico

while I, having just a handkerchief
for clothing,
cover my head with it to keep from dying.

Here everyone knows
that lakes start freezing at their edges
and man in his heart,

that light
rises from the void
and all we have left
is a discredited sun
in an indifferent sky,

darkness already wrapping
our bones, with death itself
seeming to serve as our skin,
like on a bat.

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enquanto eu, que de roupa
não trago mais que um lenço,
com ele cubro a cabeça para não morrer,

aqui ninguém ignora
que os lagos gelam a partir das margens
e o homem a partir do coração,

que a luz
ascende do vazio
e tudo o que nos resta mais não é
que um sol sem crédito
num céu desafectado,

envolvem-nos as trevas
os ossos, dir-se-ia
que a própria morte
nos serve aqui de pele, como a um morcego.

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From: *Vulcão*
Publisher: Quetzal, Lisbon

From the Wastelands

Grass has begun sprouting between my bones.
Perhaps in the wastelands of the mind
that end up at the mouth of my senses
those who dig as if pursuing
a more authentic life will finally appear.
They'll hold time in their hands like a hoe.
Breathing chunks of my body
will gleam in their shovels.

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Dos descampados

Cresceram-me entre os ossos já as primeiras
ervas.
Talvez dos descampados que me vêm
do espírito acabar à boca dos sentidos
por fim surjam aqueles que quando escavam
o fazem como se avançassem
assim para uma vida mais autêntica.
Terão o tempo nas mãos como uma enxada.
Brilhar-lhes-ão nas pás
pedaços do meu corpo que respiram.

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From: *O Céu Sob as Entranhas*
Publisher: Limiar, Oporto

Stakes

My body's bones are planted in the desert,
every single one of them.
They stand straight out of the desert sands, all
lined up, one after another.
To speak of a skeleton would be absurd.
My skin, for its part, was buried and has been
walked over. Fancy that. My skin, which once
waved high like a flag, almost a crown . . .
The wind holds my vertebra in its grip. Even
the sun shining between them is bare-boned, a
desert sun, infused with the desert.
Maybe we could wash this desert, or perhaps tie
it up, gag it. My skin guarantees this space. As
for the rest, we'll see.

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Estacas

Os meus ossos estão espetados no deserto, não
há um só no meu corpo que lhe escape.
Cravados todos eles na areia do deserto, uns a
seguir aos outros, alinhados.
Seria absurdo falar-se de esqueleto.
A pele foi entretanto soterrada, há quem já
tenha caminhado em cima
dela. Quem diria? A pele, outrora hasteada, uma
bandeira, quase uma coroa.
O vento apoderou-se-me das vértebras. O
próprio sol que entre elas
brilha é descarnado, um sol deserto, onde o
deserto penetrou.
Talvez pudéssemos lavá-lo, este deserto, quem
sabe, ou amarrá-lo,
amordaçá-lo. A pele garante o espaço, o resto
logo se veria.

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From: *O Céu Sob as Entranhas*
Publisher: Limiar, Oporto

Squall

His I had burst to where his very name was a
wound through which his flesh oozed pus. The
lost sunny mornings of his childhood, now but a
few tatters clinging to the roots, still produced
an occasional flash, a hopeless appeal to reality,
searing him from his eyes to his ears.
It now became clear that whoever conceived his
bones wanted them to flower. From them would
sprout the skin, the sky, the pageant of glory.
But all this was no more than a bunch of
desperate images bound together by memories
at odds with the present and even with the past
where they seemed to dwell, images that leaked
at their edges, allowing forgetfulness to act on
them like a species of sulfuric acid.
Each time it rushed in on him, the torrent of
memories rose to such a height of

Borrasca

Estalara-lhe de tal forma o eu que o próprio
nome era uma ferida, através da qual a carne
supurava. Das perdidas manhãs de sol da sua
infância, de que lhe restavam agora escassos
farrapos presos às raízes, libertava-se por vezes
um clarão, desesperado apelo em direcção à
realidade, rasgando-o dos olhos aos ouvidos.
Quem quer que lhe tivesse concebido os ossos,
era então visível o objectivo de os fazer florir.
Deles brotaria a pele, o céu, a encenação da
glória. Tudo isso mais não eram, entretanto, do
que imagens em apuros, imagens atacadas por
memórias em conflito com o presente, ou
mesmo com o passado onde pareciam radicar, e
que, esbeijando-se nos bordos, davam lugar a
que o esquecimento sobre elas actuasse como
uma espécie de ácido sulfúrico.

consciousness that his very bones ceased being fixed and stable points he could hold on to. Dismantled, they ended up floating on the surface of the stormy waters, mixed up among his innards, with only his heart still apparently in place, as if inflating and keeping his other parts afloat among the grease and tumult of remembrances.

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De cada vez que o invadia, a enxurrada da memória ascendia-lhe assim a um tal nível da consciência que os seus próprios ossos, deixando de ser pontos fixos e estáveis aos quais ele se pudesse segurar, vinham, desmantelados, boiar à superfície das águas borrascosas, de mistura com entranhas donde só a alma parecia não se ter desalojado ainda, como que as inflando e conservando à tona entre a gordura e o tumulto das lembranças.

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From: *Vulcão*
Publisher: Quetzal, Lisbon

The King

The sea's in our body. While someone whose heart is his king arrays the other pieces on the chessboard

it breaks in his hand. Between the pieces and the sea there's a complicity whose weight only a player feels, with each move he makes.

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O rei

O mar está-nos no corpo; enquanto alguém a quem o coração serve de rei dispõe no tabuleiro as outras peças

rebenta-lhe na mão; há entre as peças e o mar cumplicidades de que só quem joga estima o peso em cada lance.

© 1984, Fundação Luís Miguel Nava
From: *Rebentação*
Publisher: & etc., Lisbon

The Strewn Body

His body was getting lost in the desert, which kept gaining more ground and redefining its borders inside him, causing his organs, isolated by the surrounding sands, to reverberate in a strange new way. Day by day he was getting more strewn out. The various parts of what could only abstractly be conceived as a whole were beginning to spread apart, such that the ocean tides were soon foaming between them, and the Milky Way itself started cutting through. His flesh, in fact, exerted an enigmatic attraction on the stars, which in due course it managed to assimilate, exhibiting them (to the unknowing) as so many luminous scars whose glow, transformed into blood, slowly dwindled. On these occasions he was no more than an ember among the ashes, though one could still make out the faint throbbing of his guts, apt to be quickened by the slightest change in the wind's direction. So he decided on a plastic-coated self. He began with his extremities, his fingers and feet, but soon he was meticulously wrapping his lungs, intestines and heart in cellophane, against which the waves made a frightful sound.

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Two Rivers

With my body split into two halves
locked up
one inside the other, I advance
in a double heart as if
in one boat plying two rivers.

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O corpo espacejado

Perdia-se-lhe o corpo no deserto, que dentro dele aos poucos conquistava um espaço cada vez maior, novos contornos, novas posições, e lhe envolvia os órgãos que, isolados nas areias, adquiriam uma reverberação particular. Ia-se de dia para dia espacejando. As várias partes de que só por abstracção se chegava à noção de um todo começavam a afastar-se umas das outras, de forma que entre elas não tardou que espumegassem as marés e a própria via-láctea principiasse a abrir caminho. A sua carne exercia aliás uma enigmática atracção sobre as estrelas, que em breve conseguiu assimilar, exibindo-as, aos olhos de quem o não soubesse, como luminosas cicatrizes cujo brilho, transmutado em sangue, lentamente se esvaía. Ele mais não era, nessas ocasiões, do que um morrão, nas cinzas do qual, quase imperceptível, se podia no entanto detectar ainda a palpitação das vísceras, que a mais pequena alteração na direcção do vento era capaz de pôr de novo a funcionar. Resolveu então plastificar-se. Principiou pelas extremidades, pelos dedos das mãos e pelos pés, mas passado pouco tempo eram já os pulmões, os intestinos e o coração o que minuciosamente ele embrulhava em celofane, contra o qual as ondas produziam um ruído aterrador.

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From: *O Céu Sob as Entranhas*
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Dois rios

O corpo dividido em duas partes
fechadas
à chave uma na outra, avanço
num duplo coração como se fosse
ao mesmo tempo num só barco por dois rios.

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