



LUÍS QUINTAIS

(Portugal, 1968)

[Friday 31 March 2006]

Born in Angola, Luís Quintais moved with his family to Portugal after the Portuguese colonies in Africa gained their independence in 1975. He did his university studies in Lisbon and is currently a professor of social anthropology at the University of Coimbra. His first book of poetry, *A Imprecisa Melancolia (Indefinite Melancholy)*, won the Aula de Poesia de Barcelona prize and was published in 1995. His sixth and most recent poetry title, *Duelo (Duel)* won the 2004 Portuguese PEN Club Prize for Poetry and, in 2005, the Luís Miguel Nava Prize.

While other poets of his generation, dubious of poetry's traditional pretension to tell the truth and to create beauty, have retreated into a more modest program of self-expression coupled with intelligent commentary, Quintais is not afraid of addressing humanity (sometimes explicitly, in the form of 'you', the reader) with a large voice. It is a questioning voice, by no means sure of having any answers, but it belongs to someone who evidently considers the pursuit of truth, and of poetry, worthwhile. In 'Certain Innocence', the action of poetry is ironically compared to birds flapping their wings in a bag of garbage, but it is nonetheless a useful action with redemptive, transformative power.

Certain poems examine the limited possibilities of language to mean ('The Dream of Language', 'Flowers and Other Nameless Species'), but even while doing so, they are affirming their own power to say and mean. They take their place in the tradition of poetry, conceived as an art or science or discipline that is forever moving forward. But is poetry such as this, with its softly but undeniably declamatory tone, passé? Can poetry still transform what it touches and create, with words, a kind of truth or beauty? Luís Quintais seems to think so, and though his anthropological pursuits have made him (he says) a pessimist with regard to human nature, he apparently hopes that poetry can make some humans more humanitarian. Otherwise why

would he waste his ink defending animals against our butchery, in the chilling prose poem titled 'For Animals'? A poem which, of course, is not only about animals.

© Richard Zenith

POEMS

A CERTAIN INNOCENCE

FEAR

FLOWERS AND OTHER NAMELESS SPECIES

FOR ANIMALS

THE DREAM OF LANGUAGE

THE MAP AND THE TERRITORY

THE WORLD AS REPRESENTATION

A CERTAIN INNOCENCE

Birds devour the garbage.
Gluttony makes them scramble,
contriving ambushes, machinations

which the soul has no part in.
Their wings go flap flap flap
in the black plastic. You stop.

Something makes you observe.
With aphorisms you sanctify
the reasons of those who despair.

What does poetry do?
It redeems and redeems and redeems
like those wings thrashing

the black plastic, flap flap flap.
You sanctify the reasons
of those who despair,

Uma inocência

Aves devoram o lixo.
Debatem-se sob o peso da gula
investindo ciladas, disposições

de onde se isenta a alma.
Flap, flap, flap, fazem asas
no negro plástico. Tu paras.

Por vontade alheia observas.
Por aforismos sagras
as razões dos que desesperam.

O que faz a poesia?
Remir e remir e remir
como as asas espancando

o negro plástico, flap, flap, flap.
Sagras as razões
dos que desesperam,

the anguishing implications
of the imagination, the world
going out like the light

in the room of childhood,
thrashing the sumptuous plastic,
all that you turned your back on

and that doesn't demand to exist.
What does poetry do?
It redeems certain types of things

through a certain type of words a certain
type of wings flap flap flap a certain type
of desperate reasons.

© Translation: 2006, Richard Zenith

as implicações disfóricas
da imaginação, o mundo
extinguindo-se como a luz

do quarto de infância,
o sumptuoso plástico espancado,
aquilo a que viraste costas

e que não teima existir.
O que faz a poesia?
Remir por certo tipo de palavras

certo tipo de coisas certo tipo
de asas flap flap flap certo tipo
de razões desesperadas.

© 2002, Luís Quintais
From: *Angst*
Publisher: Edições Cotovia, Lisbon

FEAR

Layer on layer on layer:
the submerged remnant of your life.
Now and then
some shift, some twist, some force
that you'll know by its effect, announces
the imminent collapse.

Give what's left of your future
to that house's reinforcement.
Give it your attention and your affliction.
Give it the intelligence of your fear.

© Translation: 2006, Richard Zenith

Medo

Estratos assentam uns sobre outros.
São o vestígio submerso da tua vida.
Em certos momentos
um deslocamento, uma torção, uma força
que reconhecerás pelos efeitos, denuncia
a iminente ruína.

Consagra o que te resta do porvir
ao reforço desta casa.
Consagra-lhe a tua vigília e a tua aflição.
Consagra-lhe a inteligência do teu medo.

© 2004, Luís Quintais
From: *Duelo*
Publisher: Edições Cotovia, Lisbon

FLOWERS AND OTHER NAMELESS SPECIES

Nothing in nature has a name.
As if it were a botanical garden
with only the vaguest indications, preferably in
Latin.

Linnaeus would laugh at my happy ignorance,
at this knowledge that blithely
delights in not knowing.

Colors, shapes, inebriating fragrances,
the senseless, sensation-filled vertigo of a
forest,
the vegetable atmosphere of a greenhouse,

the flowers like open sex organs – are they
sex organs? – which I dive into as visitors look
on.
They'd be shocked to find out that nothing in
nature –

is 'nature' this voluptuous game
of self-ignorance? – has a name. It's all organic
essence
not found in herbariums, all disproportion,

all a dream of indecipherables slowly rotting
before this virtuous classificatory ignorance
bursting with life inside me.

© Translation: 2006, Richard Zenith

FOR ANIMALS

For animals eternal Treblinka

The memory I've been given is rife with
martyrdom.

Mother took me by the hand. We had reached
the sacrificial perimeter. The
sound of chickens facing the end. Their
innocent clucking. The hushed violence of
exposed carcasses. Guts, the stench of

Flores e outras espécies sem nome

Nada na natureza tem nome.
Como se de um jardim botânico
sem indicações precisas – em latim de
preferência – se tratasse.

Lineu rir-se-ia da minha ignorância feliz –
deste conhecimento que complacente
se diverte no seu desconhecimento.

Formas, cores, a ebriedade dos cheiros,
a insensata vertigem sensitiva de um bosque,
a atmosfera vegetal de uma estufa,

as flores como sexos – são sexos? – abertos
onde perante visitas mergulho.
Atónitos ficariam se soubessem que nada na
natureza –

é “natureza” este voluptuoso jogo
de se desconhecer? – tem nome. Tudo é
orgânico recorte
que o herbário não contém, desequilíbrio,

sonho do indecifrável que lento se putrefaz
perante a virtuosa ignorância classificatória
em mim se animando.

© 2002, Luís Quintais

From: *Angst*

Publisher: Edições Cotovia, Lisbon

For Animals

For animals eternal Treblinka

Está repleta de martírio a memória que me
deram.

A mãe levava-me pela mão. O perímetro
sacrificial era já ali. O som das aves
antecipando o fim, os gorjeios inocentes, a
emudecida violência das carcaças expostas,
as vísceras, o fedor das vísceras gritando. Fúria

screaming guts. Fury and sound collapsed into rotteness. There were stands within the perimeter calling for truth and commerce. The plump, flayed meats lightly swayed, hanging from large metal hooks. Soaked feathers littered the ground. A decapitated chicken embraced the world. Narrow furrows inside the perimeter carried off the blood to a place I imagined to be far away, as far as a faraway country.

The guttural agony subsided. People were drawing their drapes for the peaceful midday meal.

© Translation: 2006, Richard Zenith

e som esgotavam-se em podridões. Em certos ângulos do perímetro bancas clamavam verdade e comércio. Copiosas, as carnes esfoladas surgiam suspensas em metálicos ganchos. Penas e plumas encharcadas pejavam o chão. Uma ave decapitada abraçava o mundo. Em certos pontos do perímetro estreitos canais expulsavam o sangue para um sítio que me pareceu distante, tão distante quanto um país distante.

A gutural agonia apagava-se. Fechavam-se as cortinas para a tranquila refeição do meio-dia.

© 2004, Luís Quintais

From: *Duelo*

Publisher: Edições Cotovia, Lisbon

THE DREAM OF LANGUAGE

You'll write about the subjection of animals.
But not today. Remember how the panther
still moves in the literature-free cage

it inherited. You'll remember. But not today.
Because today's the day when metaphors
awaken, the chest opens up, and language

resembles an invention in progress.
A vigil of metaphors filling up the night,
as if it and its mantle and its symbols

were covered by an eternal Saint Elmo's fire.
Today's the day when night becomes day,
when language celebrates animals

after the animals have perished
but with no trace of them surviving
in memory or in longing. Just language,

just meaning and sound echoing inside
meaning, with no possibility of a beginning
asserting itself, no possibility of an end.

O sonho da linguagem

Escreverás sobre a sujeição dos animais.
Mas não hoje. Lembra-te de como se move
a pantera, ainda, na jaula sem literatura

que lhe legaram. Lembrar-te-ás. Mas não hoje.
Porque hoje é o dia em que as metáforas
despertam, a arca se abre, e a linguagem

se assemelha a uma invenção em aberto.
Uma vigília de metáforas preenchendo a noite,
como um Fogo-de-Santelmo que, eternamente,

a cobrisse, a si e ao seu manto e aos seus
símbolos.

Hoje é o dia em que a noite se faz dia,
em que a linguagem celebra os animais

depois dos animais terem perecido,
mas sem que haja memória disso,
sequer nostalgia disso. Apenas linguagem,

apenas sentido e som a ressoar dentro
do sentido, sem que a hipótese de um princípio
se imponha, sem que a hipótese de um fim se

You too will have to wake up
to the vigil of metaphors,
to the dream of language.

© Translation: 2006, Richard Zenith

THE MAP AND THE TERRITORY

Boredom was the space where we waged
the battle of our lives. The teacher
talked and we didn't listen
enthralled as we were
by the time contained in our graph paper,
by our guesses and our criss-crossing shots.

Today we know (from habit or evasion)
that the metaphor is this: a blind attempt
to hit the objects floating
on the grid, battleships
that will sink, if we're adept
at drawing and reading shapes.

Most of us, however, discover
the greater difference: the map is not reality.
Reality meanders over a vast territory
for which there is no metrics,
only a dream of metrics.
The heavy shadow covers the little truth
we manage to salvage and, moving,
destroys its legacy.

You know nothing because you remember
nothing.

© Translation: 2006, Richard Zenith

imponha.

Haverás de despertar, tu também,
para a vigília das metáforas,
para o sonho da linguagem.

© 2004, Luís Quintais

From: *Duelo*

Publisher: Edições Cotovia, Lisbon

O mapa e o território

O tédio era o espaço em que arriscávamos
a batalha das nossas vidas. O professor
falava e nós não escutávamos
presos que estávamos
à presença de um tempo em quadrícula,
às adivinhas e arremessos cruzados.

Sabemos hoje (por hábito ou fuga)
que a metáfora é esta: cega tentativa
em acertar nos objectos que flutuam
na esquadria, vasos de guerra
que irão naufragar, assim tenhamos
êxito no desenho das formas.

A maior parte de nós descobre, porém,
a diferença maior: o mapa não é a realidade,
a esta enovela-se num largo território
para o qual não há métrica
senão, e apenas, sonho de métrica.
A densa sombra cobre a pouca verdade
que recuperamos, e móvel,
destrói o seu legado.

Nada sabes porque nada lembras.

© 2004, Luís Quintais

From: *Duelo*

Publisher: Edições Cotovia, Lisbon

THE WORLD AS REPRESENTATION

“The world is my representation.”

What type of image
flashes in my mind
when, at night, a dog howls
as if its flesh
were not flesh of its flesh
but a thick veil
covering its pain
and making it sharper?

I fling open a window
and pursue the trail and the rage
of that extraordinary dog,
that dog that exists somewhere
past seeing.

The night I’d ignored becomes visible,
but not that rage, that dog’s absolute rage,
even though my eyes go blind
from searching, with a desperate will,
for light.

© Translation: 2006, Richard Zenith

O mundo como representação

“O mundo é a minha representação.”

Que tipo de imagem
eclode na mente
quando, de noite, um cão uiva,
como se a sua carne
não fosse carne da sua carne,
mas um véu espesso
que cobre a dor
e a torna mais intensa?

Uma janela abre-se de par em par,
e eu persigo os sulcos e a ira
desse cão mirífico,
desse cão que existe algures
para lá do ver.

A noite que ignorei torna-se visível,
mas não a ira, a ira absoluta do cão,
ainda que os meus olhos
ceguem numa exasperante vontade
de luz.

© 2004, Luís Quintais

From: *Duelo*

Publisher: Edições Cotovia, Lisbon

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Poetry in Portuguese

A Imprecisa Melancolia, Teorema, Lisboa, 1995.

Lamento, Cotovia, 1999.

Umbria, Pedra Formosa, Guimarães, 1999.

Verso Antigo, Cotovia, Lisbon, 2001.

Angst, Cotovia, Lisbon, 2003.

Duelo, Cotovia, Lisbon, 2004.

Poetry in Spanish

La Imprecisa Melancolía, Lumen, Barcelona, 1995.

Links (In Portuguese)

[Poesia & Lda](#)

Biocritical information