



SOPHIA DE MELLO BREYNER ANDRESEN

(Portugal, 1919-2004)

[Friday 2 April 2004]

Some poets make poems the way a builder builds a home – verse by verse, brick by brick. For Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen, the whole world was home, and poetry just a matter of seeing and of being. The act of poetry and the act of living were to her inseparable. She defined poetry as “an art of being” that “does not require my time and labour. It does not ask me to have science, or aesthetics or theories. Instead it demands the entirety of my being, a consciousness running deeper than my intellect.”

Born in Oporto in 1919, Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen moved to Lisbon to study at the university, and remained in the city. Considered one of Portugal’s most important 20th century poets, she was awarded numerous literary prizes and is widely translated. Her poetry, imbued with a rare luminosity and precision, is at once ‘profound’ and ‘superficial’, effectively eliminating the distinction between inner and outer.

“Poetry,” she explained, “is my understanding with the universe, my way of relating to things, my participation in reality, my encounter with voices and images. That is why the poem speaks not of an ideal life but of a concrete one: the angle of a window, the resonance of streets, cities and rooms, the shade cast by a wall, a sudden face, the stars’ silence, distance and brightness, the night’s breathing, the scent of the linden and of oregano.”

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POEMS

DISCOVERY

FURIES

MIDDAY

PORTRAIT OF AN UNKNOWN PRINCESS

SIBYLS

THE GREEKS

THE KING OF ITHACA

THE NAVIGATORS

TRANSPARENCY

WE WILL RISE

Discovery

Green-muscled ocean
Idol of many arms like an octopus
Convulsive incorruptible chaos
Ordered tumult
Contorted dancer
Surrounding the taut ships

We traversed row on row of horses
Shaking their manes in the trade winds

The sea turned suddenly very young and very
old
Revealing beaches
And a people
Of just-created men still the colour of clay
Still naked still in awe

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Descobrimento

Um oceano de músculos verdes
Um ídolo de muitos braços como um polvo
Caos incorruptível que irrompe
E tumulto ordenado
Bailarino contorcido
Em redor dos navios esticados

Atravessamos fileiras de cavalos
Que sacudiam as crinas nos alísios

O mar tornou-se de repente muito novo e muito
antigo
Para mostrar as praias
E um povo
De homens recém-criados ainda cor de barro
Ainda nus ainda deslumbrados

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Furies

Banished from sin and the sacred
Now they inhabit the humble intimacy
Of daily life. They are
The leaky faucet the late bus
The soup that boils over
The lost pen the vacuum that doesn't vacuum
The taxi that doesn't come the mislaid receipt
Shoving pushing waiting
Bureaucratic madness

Without shouting or staring
Without bristly serpent hair
With the meticulous hands of the day-to-day
They undo us

They're the peculiar wonder of the modern
world
Faceless and maskless
Nameless and breathless
The thousand-headed hydras of efficiency gone
haywire

They no longer pursue desecrators and
parricides
They prefer innocent victims
Who did nothing to provoke them
Thanks to them the day loses its smooth
expanses
Its juice of ripe fruits
Its fragrance of flowers
Its high-sea passion
And time is transformed
Into toil and the rush
Against time

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Fúrias

Escorraçadas do pecado e do sagrado
Habitam agora a mais íntima humildade
Do quotidiano. São
Torneira que se estraga atraso de autocarro
Sopa que transborda na panela
Caneta que se perde aspirador que não aspira
Táxi que não há recibo estraviado
Empurrão cotovelada espera
Burocrático desvario

Sem clamor sem olhar
Sem cabelos eriçados de serpentes
Com as meticulosas mãos do dia-a-dia
Elas nos desfiam

Elas são a peculiar maravilha do mundo
moderno
Sem rosto e sem máscara
Sem nome e sem sopro
São as hidras de mil cabeças da eficácia que se
avaria

Já não perseguem sacrílegos e parricidas
Preferem vítimas inocentes
Que de forma nenhuma as provocaram
Por elas o dia perde seus longos planos lisos
Seu sumo de fruta
Sua fragrância de flor
Seu marinho alvoroço
E o tempo é transformado
Em tarefa e pressa
A contratempo

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Midday

Midday. A corner of the deserted beach.
The huge, deep, open sun on high
Has chased all the gods from the sky.
The harsh light falls like a punishment.
There are no ghosts and no souls,
And the vast, ancient, solitary sea
Loudly claps its hands.

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Meio-dia

Meio-dia. Um canto da praia sem ninguém.
O sol no alto, fundo, enorme, aberto,
Tornou o céu de todo o deus deserto.
A luz cai implacável como um castigo.
Não há fantasmas nem almas,
E o mar imenso solitário e antigo,
Parece bater palmas.

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Portrait of an Unknown Princess

For her to have such a slender neck
For her wrists to bend like flower stems
For her eyes to be so clear and direct
Her back so straight
Her head so high
With such a natural glow on her forehead
It took successive generations of slaves
With stooping bodies and patient rough hands
Serving successive generations of princes
Still a bit coarse still a bit crude
Cruel greedy and conniving

It took an enormous squandering of life
For her to be
That lonely exiled aimless perfection

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Retrato de uma princesa desconhecida

Para que ela tivesse um pescoço tão fino
Para que os seus pulsos tivessem um quebrar de caule
Para que os seus olhos fossem tão frontais e limpos
Para que a sua espinha fosse tão direita
E ela usasse a cabeça tão erguida
Com uma tão simples claridade sobre a testa
Foram necessárias sucessivas gerações de escravos
De corpo dobrado e grossas mãos pacientes
Servindo sucessivas gerações de príncipes
Ainda um pouco toscos e grosseiros
Ávidos cruéis e fraudulentos

Foi um imenso desperdiçar de gente
Para que ela fosse aquela perfeição
Solitária exilada sem destino

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From: *Obra Poética III*
Publisher: Caminho, Lisboa

Sibyls

Sibyls inside adamantine caves,
Totally loveless and blind.
Feeding emptiness like a sacred fire
While shadow dissolves night and day
Into the same light of bodiless horror.

Bring out here that monstrous dew
Of interior nights, the sweat
Of powers tied to themselves
When words strike the walls
In blind swoops of trapped birds
And the horror of having wings
Screeches like a clock in the void.

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The Greeks

To the gods we attributed a dazzling existence
Consubstantial with the sea the clouds trees and
light
In them the waves' glinting the foam's long
white frieze
The woods' secret and soft green the wheat's
tall gold
The river's meandering the mountain's solemn
fire
And the great dome of resonant weightless free
air
Emerged as self-aware consciousness
With no loss of the first day's marriage-and-
feast oneness

Anxious to have this experience for ourselves
We humans repeated the ritual gestures that re-
establish
The initial whole presence of things –
This made us attentive to all forms known by
the light of day
As well as to the darkness which lives within us
And in which the ineffable shimmer travels

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Sibilas

Sibilas no interior dos antros hirtos
Totalmente sem amor e cegas.
Alimentando o vazio como um fogo
Enquanto a sombra dissolve a noite e o dia
Na mesma luz de horror desencarnada.

Trazer para fora o monstruoso orvalho
Das noites interiores, o suor
Das forças amarradas a si mesmas
Quando as palavras batem contra os muros
Em grandes voos cegos de aves presas
E agudamente o horror de ter as asas
Soa como um relógio no vazio.

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Os gregos

Aos deuses supúnhamos uma existência
cintilante
Consubstantial ao mar à nuvem ao arvoredo à
luz
Neles o longo friso branco das espumas o
tremular da vaga
A verdura sussurrada e secreta do bosque o oiro
erecto do trigo
O meandro do rio o fogo solene da montanha
E a grande abóbada do ar sonoro e leve e livre
Emergiam em consciência que se vê
Sem que se perdesse o um-boda-e-festa do
primeiro dia –
Esta existência desejávamos para nós próprios
homens
Por isso repetíamos os gestos rituais que
restabelecem
O estar-ser-inteiro inicial das coisas –
Isto nos tornou atentos a todas as formas que a
luz do sol conhece
E também à treva interior por que somos
habitados
E dentro da qual navega indicível o brilho

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The King of Ithaca

Our civilization is so out of kilter that
Thought has separated itself from the hand

Ulysses King of Ithaca carpentered his boat
And also boasted of his ability
To plough a straight furrow in the field

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O rei de Ítaca

A civilização em que estamos é tão errada que
Nela o pensamento se desligou da mão

Ulisses rei de Ítaca carpinteirou seu barco
E gabava-se também de saber conduzir
Num campo a direito o sulco do arado

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From: *Obra Poética III*
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The navigators

Multiplicity makes us drunk
Astonishment leads us on
With daring and desire and calculated skill
We've broken the limits –
But the one God
Keeps us from straying
Which is why at each port we cover with gold
The sombre insides of our churches

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Os navegadores

O múltiplo nos enebria
O espanto nos guia
Com audácia desejo e calculado engenho
Forçámos os limites –
Porém o Deus uno
De desvios nos protege
Por isso ao longo das escadas
Cobrimos de oiro o interior sombrio das igrejas

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From: *Obra Poética III*
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Transparency

Lord free us from the dangerous game of
transparency
There are no corals or shells on the sea floor of
our soul
Just a smothered dream
And we don't really know what dreams are
Silent conductors faint songs
Which one day suddenly appear
On the broad flat patio of disasters

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Da Transparência

Senhor libertai-nos do jogo perigoso da
transparência
No fundo do mar da nossa alma não há corais
nem búzios
Mas sufocado sonho
E não sabemos bem que coisa são os sonhos
Condutores silenciosos canto surdo
Que um dia subitamente emergem
No grande pátio liso dos desastres

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From: *Obra Poética III*
Publisher: Caminho, Lisboa

We Will Rise

We will rise again beneath the walls of Knossos
And in Delphi the centre of the world
We will rise again in the harsh light of Crete

We will rise where words
Are the names of things
Where outlines are clear and vivid
There in the sharp light of Crete

We will rise where stone the stars and time
Are the kingdom of man
We will rise to stare straight at the earth
In the clean light of Crete

For it is good to clarify the heart of man
And to lift the black exactness of the cross
In the white light of Crete

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Ressurgiremos

Ressurgiremos ainda sob os muros de Cnossos
E em Delphos centro do mundo
Ressurgiremos ainda na dura luz de Creta

Ressurgiremos ali onde as palavras
São o nome das coisas
E onde são claros e vivos os contornos
Na aguda luz de Creta

Ressurgiremos ali onde pedra estrela e tempo
São o reino do homem
Ressurgiremos para olhar para a terra de frente
Na luz limpa de Creta

Pois convém tornar claro o coração do homem
E erguer a negra exactidão da cruz
Na luz branca de Creta

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