Portuguese writers

[FICTION]

José Riço Direitinho

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He was born in Lisbon in 1965 and studied Agronomy, specialising in Agrarian Economics and Rural Sociology. The book *A casa do fim* [*The house of the end*] (1992) was his first published title in the field of fiction, and he later published two novels: *Breviário das más inclinações* [*Breviary of bad inclinations*] which won the *Ramón Gomez de la Serna* award and *O relógio do Cárcere* [*The Prison clock*] which won the *Villa de Madrid* prize.
He lived for a year and a half in Berlin on a *Berliner Künstlerprogramm* bursary. There he wrote *Histórias com cidades* (*Stories with cities*), published in 2001.
Some of the stories in *Um sorriso inesperado* (*An unexpected smile*) were written at Ledig House, in New York, when he stayed there in 2004 as part of a yearly partnership agreement between the Portuguese Institute for Books and Libraries and Ledig House.
His work has been translated in a number of countries, including Germany, Holland, Italy, Spain, France, the United Kingdom and Israel.

SYNOPSIS

José Riço Direitinho returns to the rural world and the hamlet of Vilarinho dos Loivos, which made its first appearance in his novel 'Breviário das más inclinações'. These short stories are imbued with an aura of the fantastic. They are also marked by the magic and telluric relation that man maintains with the unknown. The setting is always a closed, unique rural world. They are stories of loves lost and found, and stories of profound and ancient wisdom.

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JOSÉ RIÇO DIREITINHO
Um Sorriso Inesperado
ASA

Um sorriso inesperado

[AN UNEXPECTED SMILE] pp.101
Asa, 2005

AN UNEXPECTED SMILE

"There are many metres between an animal that flies
And the stairs I descend to sit down on the floor
But all I need is a square of peacefulness
For absolute distance"

DANIEL FARIA, *men who are like badly placed places*

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HE TURNED UP FLOATING IN THE RIVER ON THE SAME MORNING he was to marry, and three and a quarter hours later before the church bell announced the death of his bride. When they pulled him out of the water

– naked, his hair gone completely white –

a pretty smile pasted on his lips:

no one had every seen him give such a natural and unexpected smile while he was alive.

He had set the wedding date a little over six months before. He had gone through the engagement and observed all the rules imposed on him by both families, and apparently happy, had made ready what would be their new home. The old wool shed was almost completely rebuilt:

the doors and the old windows, the roofing timbers and moss-covered roof slates changed, some of the rougher granite stones repositioned

– those which time and the dampness of the ivy roots and moss had thrown out of kilter –.

The house stood on the Alto dos Corgos, in the village of Cortinhal, overlooking the restless willows by the river and surrounded by two and a half dozen chestnut trees and lindens. It had belonged to his grandfather.

And had ceased to belong to him a few days after they found him at the bottom of the well

(belly up, gnawed by shrews, his mouth full of rotten leaves and mud).

Since then, it had never again been inhabited. He didn't get much benefit from the furniture that remained; after the unexpected burial of his grandfather, the best pieces went, taken away by his aunts and uncles or sold off to some buyer from the city

(one of the many who in recent times would go round the villages and towns with carts and vans, in search of old furniture, corbels, high-backed chairs, china-cupboards, other furniture made from carved walnut, prie-dieu and holy images of saints).

When they found him, lying face down with that unbelievable old man's back rising out of the water, no one recognised him. Only a little later

(after they dislodged the body from the middle of the brambles and rushes, still green, with a pole)

did they turn him over and look into his face.

What really shocked me most was his head

said the sacristan, on the following day, while he thrust the plaque with the number of the plot into the ground and arranged an armful of dry chrysanthemums and camellia branches on the grave

I'd never seen anyone in their early twenties with a head of white hair. He looked as if he'd lived fifty hard years, yet all this shit happened to him on his last night on earth. And his back looked like an old man's back too.

On the irremediable day of the bachelor party, they didn't think it strange to see him setting off almost at the end of the afternoon on his way to the house in Cortinhal carrying a large sack over his shoulder. The men in the tavern saw him go past

(and waved to him, laughing)

they thought those were the last things that he would take that day to his new house and then come straight back to celebrate with wine, brandy and liqueurs, as was the custom. Only after supper time when they all met up again in the wine cellar

(in which they could scarcely see one another in the white smoke from the green wood in the fireplace and the sulphur burners for the wine)

did it anyone notice he still hadn't returned.

Leave him in peace

begged the innkeeper amid shouting and laughter

– while he prepared to decant the wine into a large cask at the back of the shop.

I'll wager a firkin of red wine that right now he's down at the river having a wash. When he went past here he already looked absolutely done in.

They bore the news of his death to his bride, half an hour after she had recounted how last night she'd dreamed of lightning, which

is always a good omen

as her older sister

(her blue eyes already full of tears and wanting to forget she had heard, they were lying to her)

told her that morning as she finished starching the last lace trimmings on the dress in which they dress her just five and a half hours before the time set for the wedding.

The girl smelled of herbs. Like all dead people who kill themselves for love

said

(when the coffin was going through the cemetery gate)

the old maidservant

(the only woman in the household who managed to screw up the courage to undress her, perfume her with green essences of aloes, gentian and lavender, then insert the almost completely rigid body into the dozen and a half metres of cloth and lace).

It took more than two months to cut out and sew the dress that served as her shroud. Three or four women worked on it every night:

they ordered the cloth from the city, from one of those vendors of flannel sheets and Turkish tablecloths.

(from the cheerful salesmen who whistled and sang their way around the villages at the beginning of Spring and Autumn and who made the girls dream)

and they themselves wove, in well bleached linen thread, the eleven metres of knotted lace that made up the train

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and veiled the bride's head, shoulders and back.

It's as if she knew she would be in no hurry to take it off on her wedding day

said the old serving woman when she had finished dressing her.

No shroud ever took so much cloth and so much time.

In the big wooden and leather chest in the kitchen of the house on Alto do Corgos

– in the middle of the musty smelling sweetmeats and fatty meat for salting –

someone discovered

– on the morning when they found him floating in the river –

a notebook with recipes for herbal remedies to cure all the ills that beset body and mind. Some of the recipes were underlined in charcoal and annotated in great deal in the margins.

He was always very interested in herbs

recalled the miller's son

just like his fool of a grandfather. It's not surprising he killed himself by gnawing on the roots of some herb or other. There are some examples you shouldn't followed. This is one of them. And there are inheritances that shouldn't be accepted. They just bring misery and misfortune. Nothing can be that easy. Nothing good comes to us so easily.

The miller's son was the shepherd who kept the village flock after they had stopped taking it in turns to pasture their animals, and who on the long, grey days

– when the cold winds from the mountain brought thunderclaps and the wolves prowled close by –

(howling with hunger among the trunks of the chestnut trees and oaks)

would take refuge in the granary

(or in the wool shed)

after sheltering the animals in the little sheep fold at the top of the gully. So that recently

(while the old house was being rebuilt for the engaged couple)

they met there on several occasions. They were the same age, born on the same day.

When the rain or the howling didn't go far away, the shepherd would stay there telling stories he'd made up and drinking sips of brandy flavoured with juniper berries from the gourd he always kept hanging from his belt. One time or another

– when it happened that way –

the groom would offer him a big piece of bread baked from rye and corn

(soaked in oil that they'd heat up in a frying pan, and where they'd crush four or five cloves of unpeeled garlic)

and he'd even give him or two thick slices of bacon fetched from the salting box.

On the night he didn't turn up in the inn for his bachelor's party, he prepared an infusion of root of crowfoot buttercup in hot wine after eating stewed damiana leaves. Of this herb he'd heard old men say that

(when they got drunk in the religious festivals during the hot months and gathered around a bonfire slicing pieces of meat off a roasted kid)

when boiled in a little water and chewed slowly, it would endow all men with the mythical virility of youth.

He'd already spoken to me about this herb, which they found traces of in his mouth

said the miller's son when, rather sad and out of breath, he climbed up the many high steps of the church tower with the sacristan

(the same ones which the two of them had to climb three hours later, to toll the bell to announce the death of the bride-to- be).

He always spoke to me about the damiana herb with a smile, so I thought it was a joke. I never thought that one day he would actually go and chew it. Impotent, like a castrated ox. The preparations he was making for the wedding must have caused him tremendous suffering. That's why he aged so much, but he held on to the end, right until the very last night, hopeful to the last that he would manage it.

When at mass on that unforgettable Sunday an acolyte climbed up to the pulpit

(red with embarrassment and pimples)

and whispered to the priest that there was a naked old man floating in the river, the priest never thought to witness the only improbable thing he'd see in all his life on that day:

the withered body of an old man, his hair completely white, his back all wrinkled, and who he knew had just completed twenty-three years.

After they had pulled the dead man out of the water, everyone knew he'd poisoned himself with crowfoot buttercup. He still had that unexpected, foolish, pretty smile playing around the corners of his mouth.

All his life he was sad. He only laughed once he was dead, the stupid sod, it took that bloody herb that only makes the dead laugh

said the priest when he returned to the sacristy and while he rummaged

(amid the disorder of the trunk of vestments)

for the purple funeral stole.

He just had to die that way:

with his mouth full of shit, mud and herbs, like that stupid bastard his grandfather.

There are things that no one can change! There are things that aren't easy to go against!

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THE ROCK ROSE FLOWERS CAME WITH THE MORNING

What must be done is done!
JOHANNES DE DWERG, *The Improbable Story of Ulysses*

EVERY SUNDAY, shortly after the end of the first mass of the day

(and during almost fifty years)

she would arrive at the church square wrapped in a long dark burel cloak.

She had her hair covered so as not to show the garland of dry orange blossom and artemesia

(with which she amused herself on Saturday afternoons

– after starching, sewing and fine-mending what was left of the old wedding dress –

and setting out on the long kitchen table two honey and nut cakes, two little plates with blackberry jam, a dark loaf of rye bread, goat's cheese melted in the oven, and two or three jars with sarsaparilla and gooseberry juice to receive anyone who wanted to come to the wedding on the following day).

When almost five decades before she had remained sitting on the seat of her father's carriage for more than two hours

(outside the church)

no one imagined that her life would end on that day.

When they brought her the news that the groom

– the night before –

had taken from the house where he lived the same two wooden suitcases with which he had arrived ten months before, she jumped down from the carriage, shrugged her shoulders before all the guests, and without shedding a single tear set off slowly on foot for her house.

She lifted up the long train of the dress

(hiked up to her knees so that the stones and spiky bushes wouldn't tear it)

and said

it'll come in handy again, even if I have to go half way round the world; because for the rest of the turn, I'll be getting on and old enough to keep my legs tight shut.

On the morning when the circus folk arrived, she woke up to an intense aroma of rock roses

(which crept into her room through the gaps in the roof and the chinks in the window boards)

– for the first time that year –

and she thought that she'd been asleep for a month.

It was February, and the white flowers on those bushes with sticky leaves usually only come out in the month of March. So she got up quickly, made her way into the kitchen and

(leaning against the lintel of the fireplace)

looked around and saw that everything was the same as she'd left it the night before:

the water jug waiting to be filled on top of the salting box, and a clay pot on the trivet

(with the lunch to be cooked that morning)

beside the spit and the shovel still full of the ashes from the fireplace to be kept for the weekly wash.

Her parents had gone out to weed the rye field.

In the street she heard the creaking of wagons and a pack of dogs what wouldn't stop barking. Then she opened the postern gate and saw the man she would never forget

(and for fifty long years would make her put on her bridal dress every Sunday, and go to wait for him at the church door after the first mass of the day ended).

At the end of that afternoon, the circus folk put up a tent in the school yard, beside the covered wagons decorated with branches of rock rose that hadn't yet blossomed. In front of the tent, a muscular man

(naked from the waist up)

his skin turned brown by the many days of sunshine

(and his skin oiled)

was puffing out flames from his mouth and contorting himself like a creature without bones. Another man was calling people to

the unforgettable spectacle of the electric chair... , ladies and gentlemen... boys and girls... the unforgettable... the only one in the world... spectacle of the electric chair...

two women covered in strange little birds, with metal stars glued to their foreheads and navels, standing on either side of him.

The man who one week later would ask her hand in marriage, she'd only see him at night, inside the tent, moments before he sat down in the chair.

For as long as the lights were remained on, she couldn't stop staring the man in the eyes

(so that she wouldn't miss the exact moment when he noticed her)

– as she knew would happen –

sitting in the second row of benches and dressed in organdie and raw linen lace.

(The dress her mother had bought her in the city which she was keeping for the Saint's Day procession).

She followed all his movements in front of the chair with thick leather straps, not yet knowing what would happen in that circus tent:

two hooded men took off his shirt and made him smoke a cigarette, while a voice coming from on high asked for absolute silence and recommended that people of a nervous disposition shouldn't be present at this part of the show

the ticket money .. paid for by you... ladies and gentlemen... boys and girls... will be returned to you if you leave while the condemned man's cigarette is still lit.

She felt a tightening in her chest when the lamps went down for a few brief moments

(just long enough for him to sit down and reappear soon

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afterwards under a spotlight, duly tied to the chair with leather straps and a black bandage over his eyes).

He took gulping breaths and many of them.

On that sunny, pleasant September morning when he didn't turn up to the wedding, no one thought it would rain. So when a moist wind began to blow

(an hour after the bride went back to her house)

many of the guests were still talking in amazement in front of the church door, while others were helping to dismantle the long table and the many benches that had been run together between the two linden trees in the square

(beneath an shelter improvised from long strips of cloth to protect the plates, platters full of meat and sausages, and the many jugs of wine of the wedding party from the bird droppings and rotting leaves).

It was the unexpected announcement of the rain that would begin that afternoon and continue to fall, heavily and without interruption, for three long days

(the same days during which she stay shut inside the baker's oven)

and which were necessary for Father Moisés had to commit the sin of lying, and shout out in front of the little door that they'd found her fiancé's body

(fallen from a rock, caught between two stones, his face and eyes swollen from the venomous bites of the scorpions and already half eaten by the hungry wolves and vultures).

It was the only way that the bastard priest could stop the fucking rain

said the innkeeper, to whoever would listen to him, soon after she had moved the bread shovel

(which she had used to bar the oven door from inside)

and come out

because at that point it wouldn't long before the high altar, baptismal font, images of the saints and alms boxes, pennants, vestments and the priest's bed would appear floating downriver in a strange, hurried procession.

In the tent when his body was transformed into a skeleton

(sitting in the electric chair, under the dim white spot light)

the tears rolled down her cheeks. She dried them with a handkerchief

– half ashamed –

when she noticed that everyone watching the show was laughing and showing absolutely no signs of disturbance. Then she understood that it was just a trick, and half an hour later he would reappear, at the exit

(stuffing a dead lamb into the lion's cage, and moving the wagon of the women covered in birds, to make it easier for people to go through).

Soon after the number with the condemned man, she stood up and making her way between the rows of chairs, went out into the night. Again she smelled the fragrance of rock roses which had arrived with the morning and made her think she'd slept for a month.

They'd already taken down the decorations from on top of the wagons and placed all the bushes beside the walnut tree in the yard. She leaned against the tree and waited.

She observed the flurry when the lion entered the tent, and the way that the woman with the poodles combed them and dressed them in ridiculous woollen garments, managing to keep them all together for the whole time she waited for them to perform.

Moments after the end of the spectacle, at last she had the proof that his body still existed beneath the skeleton. She watched him arrive at the entrance to the tent and gather up the material of the door, rolling up it. She remained leaning against the tree, arms crossed and staring fixedly at him.

One week after he had walked to the walnut tree

(and told her that when he saw her, through the slit in the cloth that covered his eyes

– sitting in the second row of chairs –

he had felt that he could leave the circus in order to stay with her)

he asked her to marry him.

She accepted when she learned that the wagons were going to leave, and that he had taken to a house

(in the square where the whipping post used to stand)

everything he owned in the world:

the two wooden chests full of clothes and some enamelled goods from the market.

During the six months and more of the engagement she visited him in that house more than twenty times, when she returned from the hillside at nightfall.

But on the afternoon when she locked herself in the baker's oven for three days

(and that was after returning home with the long train of the bride's dress hitched up around her thighs, showing her lace-edged knickers, just before it began to rain)

she remembered that that morning she had awoken once more with that same

(and unusual)

fragrance of rock rose.

And then, that she had dreamed of huge black birds

(which according to her mother

– she recalled –

is always a sign of ill omen

but this she only remembered too late

it was then that she looked

– with her eyes misted with tears –

for the bread shovel in the middle of the bundles of wooden firewood still be tied up with the string bindings scattered on the earth)

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and all the more so when the bloody birds shit on us. And they shit the real stuff, green and white, with purple streaks and very dark.

But she also remembered that birds fly in a circle.

Which sometimes is a forerunner of happiness.

(Also according to her mother).

And so she rejoiced in that.

SOBER, PREMEDITATED AROMAS

We always wait until the day when it no longer makes sense. But during that day we still wait. The few moments we have left.

Franziska von Herz-Hardenbert, *Love could be a hexagon*

THEY MET THREE DAYS LATER.

He was dead, sitting

(his thin, bony back leaning against the wrinkled rough granite of the stones in the wall)

bolt upright on the only kitchen footstool. A ray of light lit up the transparency of the dull skin of the long hands and fingers stretched out on the tabletop covered in an old linen cloth.

He was facing the bundles of roots and leaves in sackcloth bags that covered the old black soot of the walls of the hearth

(which hadn't been lit for the last three years, since the illuminated night when his mother died).

The glazed earthenware bowl

(which seemed to have been set down with care on the hard earth of the kitchen floor, beside the stool)

contained what remained of the infusion he had drunk.

On the soiled cloth

– which barely covered all of the table –

the oily sheen of the stain from the vomit he had brought up soon after he stopped feeling the pain had already dried, in the same instant as his chest ceased to heave. The many moths and the passing days had torn the old linen of the cloth which seemed to be still trying to hide the boards

(which were being eaten away in the dark by the silent damp which descended from the shadows that fell from the top of the roof, and by the sadness born of the many tears he had shed).

She'd arrived in the village at the end of April, four years before.

She'd been brought by the family of the old shoemaker

(who'd come that year to keep a promise made at the pilgrimage to the saint, in the Alto do Cervo).

It was the first time they'd returned since slipping over the border many years before. They entered Vilarinho dos Loivos by the road that came down from the hamlet of Soutelinho

(between thickets of oaks and cane breaks between the walls of the fields that had recently been sown with rye or beans or corn)

in a big red and black car, what left a white trail of dust and noise in the cheerful brightness of the day

(a single cloud that lingered on the narrow new macadam highway).

They stopped in the chapel square

(closed, as always happened at that time of day)

and knelt in front of the stone image which still stands over the entrance to this day. Only the girl remained standing, not crossing herself, leaning against the dust on the back door of the car and looking around with curiosity.

In those days, he'd been to the army selection board just over a month before, and exempted from military service on the grounds that he should

take care of his elderly mother.

He was an only child, his father having died eight months after he came into this world.

At that moment, lost in the abandonment of the afternoon – sitting on the stone wall in the square and enveloped in the sounds of the damp wood of the chestnut branches –

he learned what he would never, ever forget. The shadow of the branches, still very broken by the absence of green in the last days of April, was full of the buzzing of bees in the dark yellow of the catkins which the wind stirred against the sparse leaves. He ran after the car

– without it being necessary to think –

as far as the ruin of the old house where that family had lived before emigrating; everything to see her again, in the dizzy hope that his gaze would meet hers. When she went through the gate

(opened by heavy hammer blows on the lock rusted by years of rain and rust)

the foreign girl smiled, and made a quick grimace in apparent surprise at seeing him.

(He didn't notice that a child, leaning against the broken frame of the postern gate of the house opposite

– behind his back –

was waving to the girl and showing her a tongue unexpectedly covered with blue ink. It was the child she was smiling at).

But he went away happy. He didn't know that this moment would mislead him for ever.

Soon after the pilgrimage to the saint

– and a week had passed since their arrival –

all the roofing timbers and the windows of the house were replaced. On the following morning, after drinking the two glasses of absinthe in the tavern in the church square, which for a long time had made it easier to get started in the mornings, he found out that the former shoemaker's family had left at dawn. And that the girl was now the only person living in that house beside the village oven.

In the months that followed

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– until he heard those half dozen thunderclaps which always announced the beginning of the Autumn, and even before the leaves decided to quickly cover the earth with a rotting yellow –

at the end of every afternoon, after returning to the village with the three or four cows and the calves he kept up on the untilled hillside and shutting them inside the cowshed, he would sit down on the stone slab of the bread oven, spinning a top in a circle and waiting attentively for the moment when she would appear in the windows to close the shutters, or perhaps

– if he was lucky –

or come out of the gate to go to the tavern, or to the store to buy oil for the lamps.

When Autumn arrived, he began to draw in charcoal pencil on leaves of brown paper which

– during the night or early hours of morning –

he would slip under the door after jumping over the high garden wall under cover of the night murmurings of the chestnut trees and birds of ill omen.

He would sketch her face with many quick meticulously drawn strokes, sometimes amid clouds, sometimes looking at a Christ agonising on a rough cross on top of an unlikely hillock, and sometimes he would crown her with a garland of unexpected flowers, or he would draw her dressed like the saint on the side altar of the church:

with the same iron crown, majestic sceptre and badly worked serpent beneath her bare feet. On an almost warm afternoon, around the end of March, when the hills are quickly covered with the sticky white flowers of the rock rose among the thorny brush

– the scent of rosemary was already making the blackbirds and magpies dizzy –

he followed her as far the river.

First he saw her stop and stand looking at the water, then sit down on the pebbles in the little stream

– where the women from the neighbouring hamlets often went to do their weekly wash, drying the clothes and letting it bleach in the days of sunshine.

He nestled among what remained of the flour-whitened walls of the old watermill; he stayed watching her for a long time. He only stirred when she undressed and went naked into the water, holding her long red hair against her very white, freckled back with both her hands. He saw her swim, come out of the water, and walk slowly to where she had left her clothes; then dry herself in the slow heat of the afternoon.

For long hours he thought he'd gone mad; only with great difficulty did he manage to leave the mill and walk without haste to the village; this happened a long time after the sun had disappeared among the hills on the other side of the border.

He reached the house at the end of the night, in that short unique moment when the dogs fall silent and the silence swallows up all the noise. A plague of fireflies lit up the back garden; it shone as if the earth had been sown with little lit wicks and the trees were bearing fruits of light. But he was so stunned by what had happened to him in the afternoon, that he didn't have sufficient understanding to read the sign. Only when he got up mid morning from his pallet of corn husks and noticed that the fire had not yet been lit did he realise that his mother was dead.

After the funeral he shut himself inside the house for more than two months. He drank water from the well, and just ate herbs from the garden, lying face down in the shade of the trees.

The same herbs that the goats eat in bad years... and the donkeys... when the rye stops tickling their bellies...

said the innkeeper to whoever would listen to him tell the story, on the nights when the brandy fumes guided the conversation and everyone forgot about contraband and the opening and closing of irrigation channels during the dawn hours.

He only went out into the street in the week that it rained so hard that the river waters threatened to raise the dead in the Cortinhal cemetery and bring them down to go through Vilarinho dos Loivos in a funeral procession of rotten coffins.

In the dawn that followed that July morning when the foreign girl overbalanced and fell from the bridge, and he watched her die impaled on a stake

(the only one that someone had decided

– unexpectedly and merely guided by destiny –

to sharpen like a dart)

in a fence near the river reed bed, it occurred to him that more than four years had passed since she arrived in Vilarinho dos Loivos.

During the last three years

– after the death of his mother –

he grew in the garden

– with great care, deliberately –

various plants

(belladonna, thorn-apple, damiana, crowfoot buttercup, purple foxglove and wormwood).

The ones he remembered hearing named by a Spanish woman, a goodwife with knowledge of simples

– and, so it would seem, other promising and conspicuous virtues –

Purísima de la Concepción by name, who many still remembered as the *Galician widow*. She had told him that, taken in the right doses, and with care

– and then she said which ones

– for two times seven days in a row, with intervals of three days, they would give him great courage.

(This woman, with an almost biblical reputation who had been the lover of a *saint*

– born in a far away place in the Galician province of Pontevedra, who when she smiled had a strange absence of

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colour in her eyes, in addition to the noticeable lack of an ear, which they said had been cut off out of sheer devilment by a band of bloody-minded gypsies in a market brawl –

had lived for half a dozen weeks in the Quinta do Seixo, at the expense of dona Benigna, in a hovel behind the cowsheds).

He sowed almost all the herbs around the middle of the month of March; only the belladonna seeds were buried in October. He prepared the earth in the garden slowly and carefully. When he dug,

– following the advice of the apothecary in Vilar da Ribeira –

he placed a mixture of dried horse or bulls' dung and some dozen handfuls of gypsum at the bottom of the trenches so that the herbs would grow lush and thick, not lacking the usual virtues. After the sowing, he covered the earth with rye straw

– that which was always left over after thatching the roofs

– so that the frosts wouldn't burn the seeds.

The first herbs were born in the garden plots at the beginning of April, the time when he moved the belladonna and thorn-apple, leaving them lined up between the furrows

– not too densely packed –

so that they would thrive.

There too, May was almost always the month of the first watering; there, in that garden of dreams to come true, which he had decorated with many sober and premeditated aromas that would madden the cockerels in the dry months of summer and increase the cats' urges at the onset of winter.

So, halfway through dawn on the following day that followed the one on which the foreign girl died, he added to the boiling water in a basin

(of rough glazed earthenware)

without rhyme or reason, the green leaves and the dried ones, the withered stalks, some flowers, as well as roots and seeds from the different herbs

– that were hanging inside sackcloth and in bundles –

concealed the old soot on the blackened walls of the fireplace. He managed to drink

– before his chest began to heave –

more than half of that infusion.

The neighbours found him three days later; he was sitting on the only stool in the kitchen, his stiffened arms resting on the table top

– covered with what was left of the linen cloth

where the oil vomit stain had dried.

The door

(a little low for a man's height)

that gave out on to the back garden, was four boards held together by a crossbar that now only served as a refuge for dry rot; and it was pushed open half way through the afternoon on that day when a strong, sweet smell

(just the same as that of salted meat that goes off when it's been badly seasoned)

had begun

to disturb the dogs' rest a few hours before, at almost the same time as the night birds began to stir

– for no good reason –

on the roof beam of the oil press and the new roofing timbers of the church tower.

(...)

Translated from the Portuguese
by Patricia Odber de Baubeta, 2005