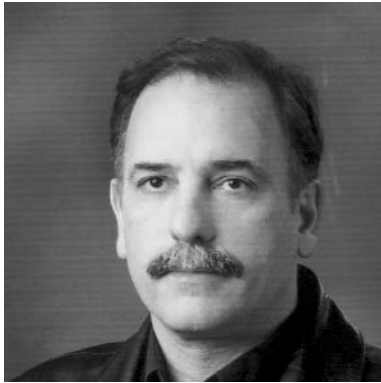


Miguel Miranda



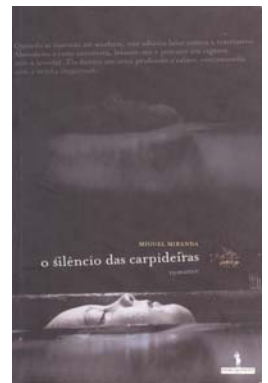
Miguel Miranda is a doctor, a head of a General and Family Medicine Unit. He has written several books, namely novels, short stories, detective fiction and books for children and young people. He has been awarded several prestigious Portuguese literary prizes. *O Silêncio das carpideiras* [*The mourners' silence*] is his fourth novel.

SYNOPSIS

This is the author's fourth novel. At the beginning of the 20th century, under a dictatorship, a tiny village in the country's interior is about to be submersed by a new reservoir. In admirable style, Miguel Miranda minutely interweaves the beliefs, values and fears of the collective spirit of the village itself, for whom modernity is a fatal threat, and the paralysis of fear a perversely powerful axis.

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O silêncio das carpideiras

[THE MOURNERS' SILENCE] pp. 214

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1

When insomnia strikes, it's no use wrestling with the pillow. I get out of my tantalizing bed and look for a cigarette without waking him up. His deep, untroubled sleep is the opposite of my agitation. Lying face-down on the rumpled sheets, he is at peace. I envy his calm, even if it's only an outward appearance.

In the study the candle's squinting light magnifies the shadows and lights up the papers strewn over the desktop. I can see the transcript from Susana's trial through the blue haze of cigarette smoke. I start going through it.

In the distance, in the bedroom, he's asleep. Something has startled him, to judge by his breathing. As if she had come to him, too, in his dreams.

I lean back in the chair and submerge myself once more in Susana's life. >>



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Let's go back, Susana, to the village, Dornelos by the Rabagno River, deep in winter snow. Let's go back to the geese and the guinea hens and the turkeys with their reddish wattles dangling from their necks as they spread their tails, stick out their chests and gargle their wild cry, shaking the lump of flesh on top of their threatening beaks. Let's go back to the carrier pigeons cleaving the sky in formation, to the immense quarry where dynamite shook pieces from the mountain's gut and rock was broken up to be ground in the throat of the crusher, where the Euclid-Hitachi trucks dumped chunks of stone that rolled into the ravine where powerful currents bore them along until they were ground by equally giant mechanical millstones.

It will be your chance to tell the story of the people who witnessed the arrival of progress in the mountain villages, including your Dornelos squeezed into the end of a valley amidst the mountains of the Barroso range, the thatched fieldstone houses where time seemed to have stopped.

Your breathing throbs in your room in the hospice. Your body is inert, as if you had lost the will to live, or they had taken it away from you. This strange lethargy of yours is no more than a hiding place, in the same way your loss of speech is a hiding place. You say nothing, Susana, but your eyes speak worlds. They are like two abysses of wisdom. The poverty and hunger of your childhood drove your eyes deep into their sockets, as if there was nothing behind them. How old are you? Forty-five, forty-eight? You look much younger: there's a fire in your eyes that consumes your body but lights your soul as if you had no age or past, as if time had passed you by and you were made of memories alone, as if you were trying to return to other times that had left their mark on you while your body still shackles you to a stagnant present, which you abhor.

Yes, Susana, let us go back to the heather-covered mountains where the wind tickles the broom in a drawn-out whistle, and in May they make yellow garlands to keep the witches at bay. Let us go back to the bulky mountains surrounding your house of loose and mossy stone and weathered thatch, to the uneven stones of the steep dung-slick paths, to the village silence accentuated by a dripping water spout. Let us go back to your Uncle Jolo's drooping shoulders, under the straw shepherd's cape that protected him from the rain whenever he was in the mountains with the cattle.

Your silence, Susana, is a pain as unbearable as a scream repeated over and over again. Your face is too calm: it hides a seething sea of feelings. I see this in the shadows of your eyes: they, also, are too serene. I try in vain to catch the knife-edge of your gaze, which goes through me without stopping, as if I did not exist. And all the while, Susana, I

know that, although your lips are also sealed in the deepest of silences, you can hear me. It is as if I were in communion with your world, as if I shared your despair and pain. I know you understand that I'm trying to help you. There's a kind of wordless communication between us: some kind of magic trick makes the words go from my head to yours. We speak without need of our vocal cords, as if we moved on some other plane of understanding.

Do you remember how many men rode into the village that day in their jeep? Was it three or four? Do you remember the sound their boots made as they sloshed through the dung, or what they wanted? Yes, you remember that they were recruiting people to work on the dam, an enormous wall to block the Rabagno River and create a huge reservoir that would swallow the village whole. They wanted men for the heavy work with concrete and rock and women like your mother Mariana to keep house for the engineers in the development they planned to build on the mountainside.

Let's go back, Susana, to that ill-starred day the men returned to the village and began to tally their belongings, long lists of everything that was to be indemnified, stamped with the official government seal. Just to see them made us afraid. Let us return to the day that progress set foot in Dornelos in the rough hands of the construction foremen. Do you remember what they talked about? About how it was going to be the biggest dam in the country, a source of electricity for cities and all the towns and villages, how the reservoir would provide water for the entire region, the liquid substance that would make life in the mountains easier in the winter, and in the dog days of summer would slake the thirst of the land and of man and beast alike. This is what the men would have said who rode their jeep into Dornelos and tread the thin layer of dung on the uneven granite in their steel-shank boots: All of this means progress. They would have said it more than once, spreading their arms to take in the sinuous valley of Dornelos, the high cliffs of the Barroso range, the sky and the birds, the cicadas' languorous song, the sparkling wind that swept through fields of ripe rye, and the distant squeak of an ox-cart's wheels – as if their spread arms could promise more than their words, as if they were the scarecrows of an unchanging reality, day after day, year after year, there in the twisted and rocky valley of the Rabagno River.

ALL OF THIS MEANS PROGRESS

PROGRESS

PROGRESS

Echoing through the valley, this prophetic phrase loomed large in people's minds. >>

At that moment neither you, Susana, nor the wisest man in the village doubted that great good luck had suddenly come to Dornelos, a place lost in the middle of the mountains.

There would be work for everyone for eight years, the time it takes to build a dam. That's something else they said. Uncle Jolo agreed, his shepherd's staff hanging from the crook in his arm, which dangled from his drooping shoulder: Eight years is a lifetime. The skill of herding sheep was scarcely enough to feed his family. The idea of working only twelve hours a day and getting paid every week was surely tempting, especially for someone like Uncle Jolo, who was accustomed to sleeping in stone huts on the rocky slopes, in frosts, and tending sheep all year round. To exchange the narrow trails where gorse whipped his legs for a ride on a broad paved road to the work site, his straw cape for overalls provided by the company, his ancient fedora – half-eaten by sun and moths – for a shiny safety hat... Uncle Jolo listened with his head sunk on his chest, torn between the alternatives.

All of this means progress, the men in the jeep insisted, flourishing communiques on letterhead, documents with official seals, expropriation orders, decrees of eminent domain. One day the water will descend and bury the village, and you're lucky you're getting paid for your land and your homes. This is what the men in the jeep would have muttered to the astonished locals. Eight years is a lifetime: who knows what's going to happen eight years from now? Money is always good, and besides the move is compulsory: Government orders, they snapped. Dipping the fingers of the illiterate citizens of Dornelos in ink, signing documents with them, all the while whispering: Government orders. Eight years is a lifetime, they insisted as they blotted the India ink.

"And if the water doesn't come?

We've still got the money, and we keep our houses, too...."

This is the thought that must have echoed in the minds of Uncle Jolo and your mother Mariana when the men from the hydroelectric company drove away from Dornelos, climbing the mountain pass in their lazy jeep.

Let's go back, Susana, to that day when every single one of you went home secretly hoping that it hadn't all been a dream. Let's go back to that evil day when everyone silenced the fear and disgust they felt for the men who had arrived in their jeep armed with reams of official documents, to the day and the hour when all of you sold your future, your past, and your present for a handful of coins, in the name of a progress that would devour your land and your memories.

Those must be tears in your eyes, Susana: you're working hard to hold them in, and they're in no hurry, held back and kept from spilling over by your determination not to show the feelings that agitate your breast. But I see them without a

single word having passed between us. Tears of rage and pain, Susana, because you were too little at the time, because your mother and your Uncle Jolo were too gullible to understand the totality of what was at risk when they let the men from the jeep paint their fingers with India ink and stamped the papers blue with them.

Let's go back, Susana, to that ill-starred day when your mother Mariana signed the death warrant of your memories without knowing what she was doing. What might have happened if they hadn't done it, Susana? We will never know. Imagine for a minute, Susana, that Mariana, seized by a sudden insight, had ripped up the papers instead of signing them, and your Uncle Jolo and all the men and women of the village followed suite and, sticks in hand, drove the men in the jeep out of Dornelos? What would this have solved? The Republican Guard would have come on horseback or maybe by jeep and turned the flat of their swords on the populace the way they did at festivals when the ox-contest took the rivalry between Dornelos and Frines to bloody lengths. Enraged, the Guard would have charged and broken heads right and left, taking Uncle Jolo prisoner as an example to the others. Their properties would have been confiscated all the same and the payment of indemnities delayed, simply to show the people that those who defy the Government can't expect to be treated nicely.

That, Susana, is why your mother Mariana would have had no alternative, at that time and place, but to sign her name on everything they put in front of her. Even though she had not weighed the future consequences of her action, or like everyone else nursed the secret hope that the water would never rise.

"Uncle Jolo? How can the river flow uphill like those men say it can? How can that happen?"

You were too little, Susana. You were eight years old, which didn't seem like much to you but is a lifetime when you're building a dam. It's as long as several lives added together, enough to expropriate the lands and memories of the entire population of an unfortunate village buffeted by progress, stuck in the depth of a valley that the water would later fill. Yes, Susana, eight years is a lifetime. That's why your soul is aching, why you withdrew to exactly the age you were when all of this happened. Eight years is a lifetime. Nothing more can have happened beyond those eight years, the age at which you seem to have frozen.

Let us go back, Susana, to the day your mother went to work in the neighborhood where the project engineers lived. Soon she would be assigned the house of the head engineer, René Trouillet, a Frenchman with fair, close-cropped hair who rode over the snow-covered hills in a gray jeep with chains on the wheels while his wife Claudine spent hours looking out the window, sighing with longing for Paris, and her son >>

Marcel, who had blonder hair than anyone had ever seen in the Barroso mountains, cobbled things together with his father's toolbox.

Let us go back then, Susana, to this boy, Marcel Trouillet, with whom you were violently in love and from whom you separated with equal violence. Let us go back to him, to his dreamy, mischievous, and slightly ironic gaze, to the fishhook hanging from his pants pocket, to the knobby knees accentuating his skinny legs. Let us go back to his milk-white face, his nasal voice and blue eyes, that special blue that can only be described as a variety of methylene. Yes, Susana, let us go back to Marcel Trouillet's deep methylene-blue eyes, the cause of your fall.

How old must you have been at that point? Seven or eight? How can you be scarred by a love you felt at that age? How did you regress to that period, skipping everything that can possibly have happened to you afterward? What strange event extinguished your will and all of your life's experiences, the most painful ones and the others as well, imprisoning you at this still tender age in an excessive love for a scrawny little boy who babbled a Frenchified kind of Portuguese and had never seen a chicken outside the poultry section of a supermarket, a chicken with feathers?

Let us slip back to that day, Susana, when you first met Marcel Trouillet walking down the road toward the new school for the project engineers' children. A school for rich kids, Uncle Jolo called it, mumbling into the backs of his hands. Yes, Susana, Marcel went to the rich kids' school while you, when it was time for you to go, went to the poor kids' school with all the others. If it hadn't been for your mother Mariana's position as the Trouillet's housekeeper you never would have known Marcel, who was only allowed to play with the children of the other engineers in their new neighborhood. Let us go back, Susana, to that day when destiny, or someone acting at its bidding, first sent you in the direction of this boy Marcel, with his pasty complexion. I am convinced this first encounter deeply impressed you, and if we can go back to that magic moment maybe we can get to the bottom of what is going on inside you. I can see him walking along in his loose-jointed way, backpack on his shoulder, kicking stones in the road, his hair the color of flax, a short but straight-backed boy. I can see him smiling from ear to ear, showing you how white his teeth were. Let us go back, Susana, to the instant your gaze met his and you sank into the methylene blue. You were young, very young, seven or eight years old, how should I know? How could you already have known what love was, or passion? What can you remember about that definitive, devastating date? What emotion is it that has remained locked up inside you since that encounter, which sealed off your ability to love and makes you regress to that period of your life? Your emotions can be identified by the year, like vintages. What's the matter with you, Susana? Have you walled up all of your feel-

ings? Do you live on the memory of not having memories, like a tree that remains stubbornly upright even though its sap has stopped flowing inside it?

What words must you have exchanged with Marcel Trouillet, Susana, that first time your paths crossed? I'm sure you yourself don't remember. What have you retained from that first encounter, Susana? A sentence, a gesture, the heat of the blood that rushed to your face? Who was the first to break the silence, was it you or he? What must Claudine have thought when she saw her son playing with the housekeeper's daughter? Did she merely shrug, sighing with longing for Paris, and raise her eyes to the jagged line of mountains on the horizon? Maybe she pretended not to have seen anything, believing that if she didn't look, you, Susana, didn't exist.

Let us remember, Susana, how you and Marcel Trouillet were gradually consumed by love, two children opening themselves to each other. Is there any of this childish love left in you, Susana? The memory of stolen kisses, the discovery of the body and of pleasure? What is the emotion discovered by a child's naivete when it is recreated in an adult's memory? How can you have been so deeply affected by that relationship, when at the time you convinced yourself you were in love you weren't yet a woman? What is the meaning of that love which you are vividly reliving now, as if consumed by fire?

On the porch of the Trouillet's house Claudine is sighing with her eyes glued to the horizon, watching the quarry— a giant wound gouged out of the mountain, where dynamite charges echo. She sighs with longing for Montmartre and the street artists' paintings, which are always the same; for long walks along the Champs Elysées, the Tuileries, and the Bois de Vincennes; for quiet moments on the Quai d'Orsay and the play of light on Sainte Chapelle; for the bookstalls along the banks of the Seine, for excursions to the Opéra and the display windows of the Galeries Lafayette with their gay dolls and puppets at Christmas time; for snowflakes and the smell of roast chestnuts in the cold air; for accordion music perfuming the street corners and fashionable shops in the Faubourg Saint-Honoré; for aimless wandering, with pauses to eat a baguette in the Chatelet or take in the spectacular view from the top of the Eiffel Tower when the late afternoon sun is fading and lights come on in the houses and shops and along the streets and, spread out below Sacré Coeur, Paris is robed in light like a sequined gown sparkling in the twilight. Claudine is sighing with longing for Paris, watching the long line of Euclid-Hitachis haul rocks to the crusher like a column of giant ants moving an anthill from one place to another. She bites her lips, suppressing a wild urge to cry. They aren't tears, she thinks as she massages her weepy eyes: They're only longing for Paris.

If Claudine lowered her eyes she would see, down below, the Rabagno River running through a tunnel that diverts it from >>

its course and a swarm of men erecting a wooden scaffold on its parched, rocky bed. They are tiny black dots against a backdrop of blanched boards, the huge coffer that frames the walls of the structure. The dam's foundation rests on a stone footing that has taken months to complete, tons of stone dumped by the trucks and sealed with more tons of iron and concrete, deforming the river like a giant dry dock. Claudine scrutinizes the Rabagno's narrow waters, a timid, gentle stream that occasionally disappears beneath the rocks, wondering how the trout can possibly make their way back upstream through the artificial passage through which they have channeled the river. Claudine gazes at the Rabagno's shallow waters, doubtful that such a small stream could ever fill an enormous lake the way René Trouillet promises it will, with a sweeping gesture that encompasses the entire valley. She stares at the twisting course of the Rabagno, ignoring Trouillet's explanations, the mad longing for the Seine constricting her chest, seeing again its deep waters, bridges, and boats.

Let us go back, Susana, to the gardens at the Trouillet's house, the borders of wisteria and cedar, Zaire the hunting dog's barking, the constant honking of the geese, the low-diving flight of the carrier pigeons. Let us go back to the warmth of Marcel's kisses, the pleasure of feeding the newborn rabbits with an improvised baby bottle made out of the rubber nipple of an eyedropper, back to the magical milky darkness of the shed where the electric incubator was kept, to the shadowy shape of the fully-formed chicks you could see inside the eggs when you held them up to the light, guessing which would be the first to hatch. Let us go back to the shock you felt, Susana, when you saw these machines that came from France, you who had watched the hens of Dornelos incubate their eggs with a different kind of care... Let us revisit, Susana, the ducks' lazy paddling on the lake, the guinea hens' speckled feathers floating on the breeze that swept the vacant chicken coop after a polecat's attack, to the purslane that lined the begonia pots, to the shoots of rye that came up in the moist earth between the trees. Let us go back to the wind tickling the leaves of the oak trees, the pine needles and the shadow of the chestnut trees lined with fallen seed pods, the nighttime croaking of frogs in distant ponds, the chirping of the tree frogs and Marcel's face lit by fireflies, his methylene-blue eyes calming your anxieties, an invitation to dreams and passion. As if at seven or eight years of age you could have known what passion was! That's what this is all about, Susana, that's all there is to it. It's all going on at the level of dreams, although they can be more real than reality itself.

And yet, Susana, I feel it is important to go back with you to that time, to re-live something that could never have taken place but is inside you nevertheless, wounding your soul and lacerating your conscience, bottling up your emotions and draining your will to live the way René Trouillet's

men drained the Rabagno River to build a dam.

Let us go back, then, Susana, to the time when it all happened, when you built a dam for your feelings, cutting off the river of your life to form a lake without emotions.

3

The blunt shapes of Dornelos faded into the cliffs of the Alturas do Barroso. Jolo held his hand to his forehead, protecting his eyes from the blinding sunlight, focusing on the cliffs. In his view the houses of the village were far away and out of focus: his years as a shepherd had worn out his eyesight, which had once been as sharp and farsighted as a hawk's, the days and nights spent staring into the mountain silence broken by a moaning wind that brought tears to his dry eyes, eyes wrinkled by worry for the straying cattle, eyes scorched by the winter snow which blanketed the peaks and tree branches, the rockroses and the broom. His eyes did not see things so much any more as intuit the identity of things. He could guess the shape of his house in the distance, with smoke from the chimney rising among the peaks. He could imagine the heavy aroma of the smoked meat hanging from the ceiling beams and the pot bubbling on its tripod. Mariana stirred it now and again with an enormous wooden spoon.

It had started to rain. Jolo's shoulders trembled beneath his straw cape, a chill ran through his body and gusts of wind blew freezing rain from his hat into his face. It dripped from his vest, which had been woven of stalks of rye, and filled his wood-soled shoes. He took refuge under an oak tree, waiting for the spring downpour to abate. The rain came down harder, driven by the wind, mercilessly hammering the leaves of the tree. Jolo thought about the sheep that had wandered away in the middle of the storm, and how it would take them twice as long to find their way back to the flock. He thought, too, about the oxen scattered over the hillside: they would know how to follow the path back to the pasture, where they would spend the night.

The wind and rain soaked into his bones, chilling his blood. Jolo had never felt this tired, tired and sick of a life tied to the mountains and the cattle, this dog's life that had weighed him down body and soul ever since the men from the hydroelectric project had come to offer him a job. At night, in the middle of the mountains, with the starry black-satin sky overhead, Jolo mused about working on the dam, about the heat from the fireplace replenishing his strength and the cash in his pocket at the end of the week. He dreamt about the serge dungarees and the shiny safety helmet and riding the jeep which effortlessly climbed the rocky paths. He dreamt about all the things that money could buy. The straw mat in the shepherd's hut poked into his bones, slowly tormenting his whole body. He was tormented all the more by the image of the dam's retaining wall, which he couldn't get out of his head. He had never noticed the discomfort of a >>

shepherd's life, which was the only life he had known, having learned it from his father, José Mário. He remembered how when he was a child he had always dreamt of being a shepherd like his father and living on the summits of the mountains.

"Take a look, my boy: we live on the roof of the world".

Leaning over the edge of the highest ridge in the Alturas do Barroso, José Mário and Jolo used to watch the wild hills below their feet, the winding valleys, the twisting Rabagno River gathered into waterfalls, lakes, and rapids, and the sky and the belt of clouds on a horizon of jagged mountains.

Jolo had always dreamt of being like his father José Mário. From him he had inherited the knack of carving a piece of cane into a pipe that breathed a mournful cry, an undulating music that filled the silent spaces of the mountain. Jolo despaired of making the blade do what he wanted: he failed to get the same sound when he split the cane to make a flute. All he got was a hoarse whistling sound, a pale imitation of the melodies his father wrung from nature. Old José Mário, hands wrapped around his shepherd's crook, a shrewd and knowing smile pasted on the corner of his mouth, squatting on the grindstone in the terrace next to the village's communal granaries, his bones twisted by rheumatism, chest wheezing with asthma, eyes watery with longing for the hills, that unspoken and distant challenge.

"Go on, Jolo, up the mountain you go. Take the cattle to pasture".

His voice shook with the authenticity of age, trembled with excitement and rage as if he was doing battle with the mountain by proxy, as if he were using his son Jolo like a battering ram against a sullen stony giant. Old José Mário's hands had become two twisted, knobby vines that could not hold a knife or whittle a piece of cane into a pipe that was bursting with music. His ruined lungs could no longer draw a melody from the mouth of the pipe, even with assistance from his hands.

"Cut a piece of cane, son, strip it down for me, make a proper flute..."

Old José Mário, squatting on the grindstone, in confrontation with the mountain, coaching Jolo in the art of shepherding, through him living the life that had faded within his own body.

"Music is a signal, son. The animals will follow the sound..."

Mariana peeling potatoes in the hollow of her apron, wisps of smoke curling up the kitchen wall, Susana playing with a rag doll. The door of the stove where the broth is simmering has cracks caulked with ox dung. A cricket sings monotonously in its birch-branch cage, on the table an unlit oil lamp with dirt-smeared glass is waiting for night so it can send out its flicker. A portrait of Américo Tomás hangs crooked on the wall.

"The President is going to inaugurate the dam in person,"

said the men from the hydroelectric company, pointing at the slanting, blackened, and dusty picture frame as they spread papers and promises on the table. The frozen beatific smile of the admiral's cap floated in the smoky air of the room, glorifying the promise of employment and the budget for buying up their houses. Old José Mário, too old to make decisions, squatting on the stone trough where the animals slaked their thirst, his eyes too dry, his voice too hoarse, his chest too heavy...

"His Excellency, Admiral Américo Tomás, will inaugurate the dam, this great project that will bring progress to the country and to the entire region".

Jolo set off for the mountains with old José Mário's sad eyes and Américo Tomás's beatific smile bearing down on his back, urging the cattle up the ridge with the tip of his crook.

Rain swept over his memories, filling his eyes. His father's voice echoed through the mountains like a living mountain peak, a spoken fatigue bidding him do its will,

"Go up to the pasture, son, take the cattle up there..."

a faraway voice humming in the gurgling springs, whispered by the wind, breathed by the earth, as if José Mário were still alive on the other side of death.

Like all old people, his father had died in the winter. Coughing had corroded his lungs, and his voice faded away between desiccated lips, parched by fever. The slanting flame of the oil lamp flickered in the dark, the crackling coals in the stove perforated the silence, and the hoarse rattle of asthma wheezed in the old man's lungs, the flame going out as fast as the life in his body. The battle was reenacted every night, receding with the light of dawn. Day after day old José Mário fought off death. Mariana's blank eyes were bewitched by the curving light of the fireplace. She remembered thinking: "It's as if his soul refused to leave the shell of his body, no matter how much it rots".

Winter nights are all the same in Dornelos. Winter days, too. You can see the animals' breath in the barns, the moaning wind winds through the deserted streets, and acrid smoke from the fireplace irritates everyone's eyes. The veil of night ushers in the oil lamps and José Mário's hoarse fluttering as he wavers between life and death.

"Do you remember, Susana? It's hard to make out the exact shape of memories, time frays them around the edges..."

until one night, which was the same as every other night, a little colder, perhaps – who knows? – one freezing night when the snow lay over Dornelos like a white shroud, a deep and lethal silence snuffed extinguished an old man's breathing. Mariana and Jolo, all too used to José Mário's loud purring as he battled death, woke up deafened by the funeral silence. They jumped out of their beds at almost the same moment, looking and listening carefully in the hollow, cavernous silence that resounded in the house like a dull >>

thunderclap. They exchanged a swift, anxious glance. So ominous a silence misted their eyes and made their voices catch in their throats, rooting them to the floor.

"Come on".

All the color had drained from Mariana's face. Her voice struggled to make itself heard, as if there were a clamp on her throat. Jolo shivered and followed after her. When he saw the old man, he was paralyzed with fear. He had never seen anyone who had just died. Old José Mário looked like he was asleep, though far too quiet. Mariana was his oldest sister. She had already buried her husband Lúcio, her mother Maria da Anunciaço, and two aunts, and she was no longer upset by the presence of death. She turned the oil lamp up and issued orders that shook Jolo out of the numbness that had come over him. They dressed the old man, shaved him, put cotton swabs in his nostrils and mouth, wound a kerchief around his head and jaw so his mouth wouldn't fall open, and laid him back down in bed. Susana had fallen into a deep sleep, unconcerned that the reaper would come to take grandpa José Mário with the night's harvest. Mariana gently stroked his face, thinking of the best way to explain to her daughter the next morning that José Mário had gone away to a place from which he would never return. She shrugged and let out a sigh: she would think of something tomorrow. She lay down, pulling the covers up the her neck. At sunrise they would go to Montalegre to look for the priest, and even if he didn't come – if he was visiting someplace else – there would be a wake and a burial in the village cemetery. There would be no lack of weeping and gnashing of teeth, as tradition required. This was the job of Josefina and Adélia, the official Dornelos mourners. Mariana turned over and fell asleep.

Jolo could not fall asleep. He got up, his throat burning, went to the kitchen and vomited over and over again into the sink, until it seemed his stomach would come out his mouth. He poured cold water from the pitcher into the hollow of his hands and scrubbed them several times with a pumice stone, trying to purge them of the bitter odor of death. His raw flesh stung with a sharp, piercing pain that imposed some calm on his panicked heart. Overcome by exhaustion, he slept a dreamless sleep.

In the morning, death had no importance in Dornelos. The first rays of morning light illuminated the village among the cliffs of the Alturas do Barroso, dissipating the night and its fears.

The entire population of the village accompanied the coffin to the simple tombstone in the village cemetery. Josefina and Adélia kept on keening with their wrinkled mouths, howling like she-wolves, smashing the silence of the mountains. José Mário was to be buried between Maria da Anunciaço, who had been carried off by typhus a few years back, and Lúcio, dead of the croup. All of his ancestors were in place at his side, all their names rubbed from the grave-stones and from memory by the passage of time. Before closing the coffin, Mariana lifted Susana so she could give her

grandfather a final kiss. She brushed her lips against the corpse's frozen face, placing a little piece of paper with a drawing on it between his bloodless fingers.

"A present for grandma, when you find her up there".

The miner Jono, who doubled as gravedigger when the breath of death was felt in Dornelos, lowered the casket on ropes to the bottom of the grave. The hollow sound of soil grinding against the boards of the coffin echoed through the mountains, announcing the shepherd's death.

"This was your first encounter with death, Susana. Might it have left a deep scar in you, an abyss into which you fall when you are looking for yourself?"

The gravestones are close to the ground in the Dornelos cemetery, sunk into hard ground with a sparse covering of grass. The names of the dead were written on wooden boards hammered together in the shape of crosses. Jolo sensed the voice of his father, the shepherd José Mário, following him as he climbed the peaks of the Alturas, a voice whispered by the wind that tickled the broom:

"Go on, son, put some muscle into it",

feeling that he was almost a traitor, thinking about giving up shepherding, weighing the pros and cons of working on the dam,

"lean forward when it starts getting steep..."

there were so many advantages, and he couldn't think of any disadvantages. He imagined that his father would be proud of him, standing at attention to receive the President of the Republic, his Excellency Admiral Américo de Deus Rodrigues Tomás, in the company of Cardinal Cerejeira, who would sprinkle holy water all around, blessing the project and the men who had made it possible, men like himself, Jolo, a former shepherd as roughhewn as the mountains that had made him.

And if father José Mário was in some world from which he could look down on the earth, he would have to be proud of his son Jolo, standing tall next to the head of the Estado Novo. Cardinal Cerejeira's warped hands made the sign of the cross in every direction, the stone in his ring sparkling like the morning star. The Cardinal waddled like a duck, the miter affixed to his skull, decked out in purple, tapping the ground with his golden cane, mumbling prayers in Latin, a language intelligible to priests and gods alone. This was how José Mário had described the inauguration of the Caniçada dam to him, the shepherd having chanced to pass by there on the way to the Rio Quase in a hired car to douse for water. The driver had pulled the old Anglia over at a curve in the road near the end of their dusty journey in order to view the inauguration of the dam, and the scene was carved in José Mário's memory for the rest of his life. He was amazed by the sight of the digni- >>

taries of State and Church, the black cars they traveled in, the well-dressed members of the greeting party, the many police together in one place, the horse guard with its ceremonial harnesses and metal helmets with plumes waving in the wind. He had never seen the Republican Guard looking like that: they were not in formal attire when they rode in to break up the fights that broke out when the ox-contest started at the festivals. They rode in spurring their mounts, simple berets on their heads and plain spats on their feet, bashing skulls with the flat of their swords instead of nightsticks, clearing the square with no thought for who had started the trouble. They seem harmless now in their formal dress, though it was never good to trust them too far.

Old José Mário did not know how to get a good price for his strange, rare skill with dowsing. Jolo remembers going deep into the forest with him, searching for a stick of the right size and shape. He cut a forked branch of willow on the rocky banks of the Rabagno, shaped the points with his blade and removed the bark, revealing the white wood underneath. Under the shimmering veil of night José Mário went off in search of water as if he had suddenly gone mad. Holding the rod in front of him, he sleepwalked around the countryside, impervious to the sharp thorns of the broom. When he came to a certain spot, which looked identical to all the others, the rod began to vibrate in his hands like a living thing, curving toward the ground and bending his arms with uncanny force. And if the miner Jono were to take his pickaxe and dig a well at the place pointed to by José Mário's wildly trembling rod, a spring of cold babbling water would spurt from the depths of the earth. José Mário never benefitted much from this art that was born of his hands. He had never thought of getting rich by demanding a good price for finding springs and pools beneath dry places. In Dornelos a dowser couldn't earn a cent: the water poured off the mountains there in cool torrents, and brooks bedewed the moss that grew in the shadow of the cliffs. Water from the Rabagno was rerouted and collected in reservoirs: deep canals directed it from there to the fields, and a stone channel created a millrace for the grinding stone that turned grain into flour. He had never placed much value on his gift, and when they came looking for him to find water in other locales he never quoted a price. He didn't want money. He returned from his work with a string of onions or a pair of blood sausages and wine, trophies to hang in the kitchen, where they framed the picture of his Excellency, Admiral Américo Tomás.

Jolo climbed steep paths lined with heather, dodging tufts of broom and creeping gorse between rock outcroppings where his father's voice sounded in the shadows, humming in the silence of the Alturas the way his dowser's rod had hummed to announce it had found a river inside the earth. He was exhausted but felt there was something else he had to do, though he didn't know what it was.

The wind raised the flesh on the back of his neck. Jolo remembered how the cold scalded his back the night the wolves

attacked Dornelos. The shuffling of the frightened cattle, the famished howling of the wolves piercing the twilight, his terror-stricken legs wobbling against his pant legs, the ghostly image of José Mário chasing after the beasts with a kerosene-and-oil torch and his own harsh cries distracting him from his fear and the skulking shadows of the wolves, the image of an eviscerated lamb dying as the blood gushed from her body, and the repeated waves of shivering that paralyzed his body. Jolo shrugged his shoulders, shaking off the unpleasant image of the pack attacking the herd. For many years now no one had seen a wolf in these parts. They lived someplace else, high up in the mountains, and never came near the village. The numbers of people in Pistes and Frines, construction of the retaining wall for the dam, the roaring of the trucks, the dynamite blasts in the hard rock and the sputtering of the jeeps on the mountain roads seemed to have scared the wolves away.

Thinking about the wolves made him remember. Jolo and José Mário had dug a grave in the dry bed of the Rabagno and buried Dolly, the lamb that the wolves had eviscerated. They had shoveled a foot of dirt over the animal's body, and while Jolo wiped the sweat from his face José Mário dragged over two enormous chunks of rock and placed them on top of the mound of dirt. He stepped back two paces to admire his work and said:

"If there aren't rocks on it, son, when the river rises in the winter the force of the water will wash the creature right out of her grave".

Jolo remembered the lamb's stone burial site in the riverbed as he hurried down the rocky slope toward Zé Mano's mill. He found the man in the middle of a cloud of flour. The deafening roar of the water and the grindstones grinding the grain almost drowned out their words.

"What do you want the stones for?"

"I don't know".

"It's a crazy idea... All right, you can have them. I'll take a lamb for the two of them."

Jolo left a hobbled lamb on the miller's doorstep and walked back to Dornelos. He hauled the two millstones to the cemetery in a handcart and used poles to roll them over José Mário and Maria da Anunciação's graves. It was difficult and tiring work. Bathed in sweat, he decided it was good enough, admiring the heavy wheels of stone face-down on the packed dirt of the burial sites. Jolo felt light, as if he had taken a great weight off his chest. When the reservoir water rose, flooding Dornelos, the mortal remains of José Mário and Maria da Anunciação would be held in place by the millstones. The tombs would not be desecrated by the raging waters. Jolo smiled in relief. Tomorrow he would go to Frines and sign the contract to work on the retaining wall.

(...)

Translated from the Portuguese
by Ken Krabbenhof, 2005