

Rodrigo Guedes de Carvalho



© JOÃO PALMEIRO

Rodrigo Guedes de Carvalho is a journalist. He was born in Oporto in 1963. He took a degree in Media Studies, worked at the Portuguese state-owned broadcaster *Rádio Televisão Portuguesa* and has now been with SIC, Portugal's first private television channel, since its foundation in 1992. In 1997 he was awarded the Special Prize by the board of the FIGRA international festival (France) for a documentary on hospital accident and emergency departments.

In 1992 he published his first novel *Daqui a nada (In no time at all)*, which won him the UN Young Talents Prize in Portugal. He jointly wrote the script for a television film and was the sole scriptwriter for a full-length feature. He also wrote a play, which was given its premiere in Lisbon in 2002. *A casa quieta [A quiet house]* is his second novel. The first edition sold out in less than 15 days.

SYNOPSIS

A casa quieta is the author's second novel. The action takes place over three decades, (focusing on events in 2005, 1995 and 1985). However, this is not organised in linear chronological order but centres on three central characters: the woman, her husband and the husband's brother, who take turns to narrate the family's life. It is an intimate and intense novel; in the words of the author, the "history of a great love affair" of a childless couple in their 60s, beginning with the woman's absence and re-tracing her death through the profound portrayal of the characters and the space they inhabit.

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A casa quieta

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Back inside
This chamber of so many doors
I have nowhere to hide
I would give you all of my dreams
If you would help me
Find a door
That doesn't lead me back again
Take me away

The house was not far from the hills
There was no city and the others
Still didn't question my city of god
Lord of everything I didn't have afterwards
Was it after death or was it before death?
Is there really any death?

Genesis, The lamb lies down on *Broadway*

Ruy Belo, *VAT69*

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November

Perhaps I might come inhabited
 hypothetical ghosts, who knows
 some vengeance or other to be taken
 days in which free from
 great betrayals longings
 one misfortune or other
 when you crossed
 uncrossable
 on that road that I made just making
 not very alert speechless without fear
 when I looked without really looking
 I only saw what I wanted
 even when I couldn't believe what I saw
 and it was when your smile

October

I want to believe that you would no longer be at home at the time I arrived but I can't say. The truth is I didn't look for you. Once again. I think I did the usual things, I think today when I think about that I did the usual things, I'll have left my overcoat any old place, I opened the fridge closed it opened it again, no idea what I'm looking for, it almost always happens to me.

The usual things. I wandered about without any real idea, overcoat dropped someone'll pick it up, that's your job. From the fridge I open close open again, I don't want much, I don't know what I want, I've stopped drinking I think I promised you, I don't know what to drink.

When the dog was here he'd follow me about, watching me drop my overcoat maybe my tie, maybe I'll take off my new shoes, it hurts here beside my ankle, another pain there further up everything in my body further up, the usual things. If the dog was still here he'd irritate me and relax me, but above all I didn't notice him as usual still here how long has it been, days that have turned into years, unending years I don't notice him I no longer notice him except occasionally, to relax me or irritate me it depends on the day everything depended on the day these days that are slipping away from me now, it depended on the dog, on us.

So this is death. Opening your eyes waiting for a revelation and stumbling into nothingness. Today I mean see if you understand: nothingness. Nothing you weren't expecting, not a damned disappointment. Anguish. Nothingness, how can I tell you about it. Like when we were little and shut our eyes tight closed our eyes filled with blurred colours now it's orange now red it'll be green, I swear I can see a sky blue. How I swear I don't want to swear but I'm going to, I miss you, me who doesn't go in for swearing, I'm suspicious, I think it'll always turn out badly.

I think of this when all I wanted was to write just the things that go through my head without an address addressee, message in a bottle from a shipwrecked man.

I miss
 the times I lied and said it didn't matter to me
 you.

But what I miss most whether it's a misty night or a lazy morning stretched out in the sun it's a manner of speaking of telling you, like my getting used to the harsh light. I find myself thinking you're at home as usual it's not knowing if it's really like that, I'd rather not know.

One day I'm no longer my body. They tell me that yes, it's like saying indissociable, but perhaps you know there isn't a moment in which everything impossible can become possible, I've abandoned myself, just imagine. I can move myself, get up bend a thousand joints that no longer respond, I'm already far away from this confusion. If you want to know.

Is this how death is
 quiet without any pain.

If I remember your last words don't read anything special into it, they were just your last words they didn't do much for you. What's enough when you die isn't that it can't be just that a mere whisper, which lives on rhythmical and resigned but no more than a whisper in this case the last one, you said so much that we can't we mustn't attribute any meaning to it, like I still don't know to this day what irritated me or relaxed about the dog the dog always following me about, and me always thinking that I didn't like him that he annoyed me and today.

The clock on the wall
 just like my grandmother's I don't think it's the same
 it brings me a beat of fear
 just like the other one but it's different it can't be
 every quarter of an hour you see
 it's the same, all that was needed.

That's enough when we die it has to be, me listening tick tock, it seems very quiet but if we listen hard (careful don't breath)

it's a booming tock tock,
 but it wasn't this one, it was a different one
 bong bong, louder

see how night rushes into dawn, a poet would say that it's committing suicide, I do what shall I what do I still have to do.

You were. And I quote a fleeting smile, you would clasp your hands that you squeezed between your legs when you were cold you were always cold, you liked to laugh but you complained that now there wasn't much to make you laugh that's a pity you enjoyed it so much and I enjoyed it so much, so serious waiting for you to laugh more on any occasion one of the mistakes I left and you sorted out whenever you could, me being serious despite you knowing that I all of me

corpses
 that inhabited me and you knew and you knew so much
 you'd noticed that I hadn't acquired >>

so many corpses

they turn inside me somewhere inside me, I don't know where they come from how should I know where, perhaps from the places that terrify us from all of them, they pile up with time, with age again age, they would begin by they began by being small, diffuse

not very ghostly

they were impressions, or things that impressed me, just that, because they attack me now all together

all together.

You'd think I have things to tell you, call them revelations, ideas, whole sentences, thoughts, ways of reaching you in language, knowing that they didn't invent a better way for us to get close to one another, to make ourselves understood. I put it off because it wasn't the best moment in time because it wasn't yet that, I didn't have the details, that detail that makes what we say absolutely clear, precise, something which really translates

what I meant to say was

no, listen, seriously, pay attention.

I didn't look for you because looking for you would show me the exact size of your absence, I could wander for minutes hours, look for you who knows call out for you say your name, I'd know that it would do me no good, that's what it would be question or the exact size affirmation that you aren't here.

You hardly know you didn't have time to know, what can be such a stupid hesitation between walking between among our remains or staying

Sitting

Leaning against the kitchen worktop

Absorbed in igniting the lighter a thousand times

In the end you've reduced me to taking these steps, all my doubts of the moment are here, I sit down, I stand up, why bother sitting down I get up to go where, the dog always following me about it seems to me he's looking for you in some gesture I may make, the dog that doesn't know he never knew how to say your time but for whom all his life you were you, are we so different in the end that's all I've got left to ask when in the end like him, just like him, I don't know how to say your name either, I don't have that detail that really defines you, a detail so that you can be absolutely

exact, clear

how I envy people who know how to translate.

I'm not going to look for you. And I came home knowing for the first time I wouldn't do it, asking myself how you do this, note the impossibility, learning how not to do. So this is death. That's twice I've told you that. Not being able to look for you because now you're nothing, death is a dog's eyes at the foot of your side of the bed, looking at me, looking for where he used to see you. And it's striking the quarter hour.

Bing, bong

I wait after the echo to see what happens. Muffled noises from the flat upstairs, a toilet flushing in the distance, the door of the

building which opens it'll be the post. Then nothing again.

Question: these little nothings which were our life will through your death be the death of us?

Supposition: your death has killed us.

Despite myself, despite the dog, despite the clock, the neighbours, the plants on the patio
you never explained when to water
the muted television, your clothes waiting in the wardrobe, the shelf that the maid never dusts
she runs a cloth over it, absent-minded, bored

I stand up. I sit down. I arise. I walk. I turn round. I go back. The dog's footsteps behind me. His nails clicking on the floor. Perhaps I could say your name. If I were a poet I'd believe it would bring you back to life. Saying your name. Thinking about what we always heard said. That people don't die as long as we think about them. As long as we keep them close to us, as long as we say their names, which would prove they exist and are unique and aren't anyone else.

Calling you. Relishing all the letters and then speaking. But then like the dog called you, I want to be like him, today be just like, like him, and recommend that we'd both better keep quiet Mariana

The two together prowling round the flat, my boots and his nails Mariana

I managed to say

The two looking, the two no longer looking, the two knowing that it's no use looking because death isn't what they taught us

It isn't what they taught us

I thought I knew what it is, he doesn't even realise, he's just surprised at your not being here, at this time he'd be walking around the neighbourhood with you at the other end of the leash, I remember seeing him looking at you from time to time, just making sure that you're still there

Mariana holding his leash

I understand today I understand that it's one of those things you do when you're alive, looking back and you being there and smiling.

You invariably smiled

You were there and the dog looked ahead again, reassured.

So this is death. You not being there and at the same time not being anywhere, in the bathroom, in the living room, straightening the patio tap, watering the plants, in the supermarket, not even in the neighbour's house, you haven't gone to visit your poorly distant cousin, you aren't waiting for a taxi in the avenue, you're not here Mariana.

Mariana again

>>

I could start running down the road calling for you and I'm sure that nothing, because they always told us then it was enough to cradle you close to my heart, in the space for memories, I could care less about memories, I could burst out shouting for you looking for you, the dog knows more than me he always knew more than us because every absence hurts him and he never bursts out calling for you, even if the two of us walk about together, me not knowing what I'm doing I just do my boots and him with his nails

perhaps if you don't mind we'll lie down on the floor, beside your side of the bed, from this angle I can see the wardrobe where your clothes remain hanging up, lying beside the dog now that you're not here

Mariana

on the other end of the leash.

September

He's sitting on a chair in the waiting room. They told him, as you'd expect. to wait. He tried to leaf through some magazines, checked that his mobile phone was switched on, thought, on the other hand, it would be better to disconnect it. He arranged his hands in different positions. He counted people, trying to guess why they were there, knowing perfectly well why they were there. There are two doors in the waiting room, one on one side, one on the other. It's through this door that, every so often, nurses hurry in and out.

"Just a short while"

The little whiles are for everyone in the room, for all those who know why they are there. He doesn't know whether to remain seated or stand up, little knowing that this doubt will come back and take over his days.

"Look, if you don't mind"

"It's just a short while"

And the doors closing and opening and there inside, from either one or the other, an odour that he can't explain but to which he has rapidly become accustomed, so much so that it will seem to follow him wherever he goes. A vague thing that he has never smelled anywhere else. An almost sweet mixture of medicine sweat and disinfectant.

"Now we'll see"

and the nurse shuffles the sheets of paper she has in her hand, in different colours (why should that be?), hesitates, shakes her head, will tell her colleagues that the doctor is disorganised

"Is Mariana's husband here?"

and another man suddenly stands up, desperately anxious, Salvador also raises his hand and both of them standing look at one another

"Let's see if we can clear this up"

and the situation would almost make you laugh if they weren't all waiting, all of them desperately anxious, just like the man who had stood up first, erect and ready to receive the first stone head on.

"I see that there are two Marianas, what's your name, sir?"

Salvador thinking there was only one, there could only be one, imagining her in there, drowning in sweat and disinfectant, in there, dizzy with the sweet taste of the medicine, perhaps a needle in her arm, a tube in her nose

"Then it's your wife, the doctor will soon be along to talk to you"

and then she disappears inside one of the doors, the one that is at the side, opposite the other. Salvador sits down again, attempts a smile, so unusual for him and all the more so in this situation, he looks at the husband of the other Mariana, he who thought there was only one.

It must be around seven o'clock in the evening. Nurses have been coming in and going out, leaving behind that aroma which will never leave him. People have been leaving the room, others coming in. Through the door which opens, on one side of the room, he's spotted the husband of the other Mariana weeping, beside the glass machine into which you put coins and get out fizzy drinks and chocolates.

"Mariana's husband?" Your wife's just coming."

And now it would be everyone else's turn to look at him, but Salvador notices that no one is paying any attention to him. They look out of the window, leaf through the same magazines, in the same haste without paying attention, without noticing the legends below the photos. They look at the doors, both of them, waiting for yet another nurse or the same one to call out another name

"Let's see now"

he also flicks through the magazine from which a Brazilian with the calm expression of a wise man gazes at him, guarantees the magazine

Believe in your dreams. God is just and would not place in your heart a wish that can't come true
a Brazilian who writes books that everyone reads, a Brazilian who talks to trees and praises the enormous wisdom of the earth, mother of us all, who guarantees

Our dreams are fulfilled through the strength of our faith our will believe always believe

A child is playing on the floor, two toy cars, the mother or someone who he thinks is the mother looks at him without looking, stunned by the smell of disinfectant. No one looks at him, no one wants to know that it's him

"Mariana's husband"

so that he goes out and notices the pains in his back, how long has he been there, he goes up to the machine, already outside the doors that opened and closed, the chocolate machine. And he thinks that it really is a good place to weep.

What the presence of information and expectation wrecks within us. Were it another place, another situation, it would seem to Salvador that the woman looked just the same. A girl with creases at the corner of her eyes, her hair tied back in her race against the clock

>>

we have to go we have to go we're already late
like the white rabbit in Alice in Wonderland
the woman with the same slow, gentle walk, which he had
always seen as a glide.

Standing up, leaning lightly against the drinks machine (the
pains in his back), he watches her approach, he watches her listen
to something the doctor says, he watches her, God knows why, smile.

What changes inside us with information. If only Salvador
had known nothing, if he'd come up to the woman at home, in
the street, going to collect her from work (her getting into the
car) and he thinks he'd give her a long kiss, make a joke, make a
clever comment, he'd smile as well. And she, who was already
waiting for this, would laugh and ask how his day had been. But
now that she draws near his throat goes dry and he doesn't know
if he should ask now or leave it for later, she comes up and the
best he can manage is the saddest smile he's given in his entire
life and two kisses on her cheeks. He wants to ask right now
what the doctor said

"Don't you want to put your coat on?"

he wants revelations, details, answers

"Won't you be cold like that?"

and the woman smiles, the girl with creases, and it occurs to him
that he could never smile like that, he would never manage

"Can we go? Is that everything? This way, I left the car in the
street down below"

and out there he is faced with all the people who haven't been
in the waiting room, getting up and sitting down, waiting for the
nurses, people who go past, the sound of buses, tall curved street
lights that go on, people on their way to the underground, cars
honking their horns, people, he looks and he doesn't see a single
one that he recognises

"Do you remember the smell? The disinfectant, almost
sweet?"

he looks ahead, concentrating on the way

"Are you sure you aren't cold?"

concentrating like never before, mind the pavement, mind the
hole, mind that parked car, people going from one side to the
other, people around whom he has to swerve, desperate to see
whether the woman manages to swerve as well, he's sure that
he left the car around here, or perhaps further down, two driv-
ers insult one another, the woman smiles,

how she's kept those young girl's eyes, surrounded by the
wrinkles, he thinks that he has to ask her, to know what they are
dealing with but he thinks rather of long walks beside the sea,
or at least among the summer broom, the two silent like now,
breathing deeply, he thinks of it in the time when he never
dreamed of waiting in a room, with the husband of the other
Mariana

(so there's another one)

he thinks that he never wept beside the machine in the corridor,
quietly, hidden so that no one would see him, like the other
Mariana's husband

"If you like we can eat out"

If it weren't for the information, knowing why he was there,
in that street at dusk, horns in the air, the sound of arguments,
drivers stopped at the traffic lights, looking in the rear-view mir-
ror, listening to the radio, people in a hurry who hadn't been
with him in the waiting room, if he didn't know the words would
sound different not like this evasion

"If you want we'll eat out"

"We'd better to go out to dinner"

"It's late let's eat out"

He doesn't know, after all these years, whether he should hold
her hand, reach out for her in all this end-of-afternoon confu-
sion, the city taking leave of the day, the people, the people, the
noises, the smells (no disinfectant, no medicine), petrol sweat the
river algae, reach out for her hand and grab it, without a word, to
never let go of it, no matter how much the traffic lights change
colour, no matter how much the child on the floor plays with the
cars and the mother looks at him without looking, lost in the
waiting room, like him feeling nurses bursting in

From one door to the other

stopping, shuffling papers, adjusting their spectacles, telling off
the doctor, disorganised, he leaves everything all over the place
and then it's difficult to work out who is

"Mariana's husband"

Salvador wants to give her his hand, he hasn't done it for a long
time, perhaps that's why he can't do it, so as not to seem
strange, so it won't be understood that he is in possession of the
facts (all the information), so that they don't remember that
they both know, give her his hand, seize it again, as if he can't
remember the last time, seize it this time for ever never to let go,
no matter how much he remembers Mariana's husband weeping,
hidden, no matter how much they try to persuade him that
everything is bad, everything's fine, seize it and think the should
never have let go of it, search for her hand (mind the rubbish
bin) without her suspecting why he is doing it, he who knows
everything without knowing, without asking, because he wanted
to ask but only

"See how cold it's turned?"

and in the little moments of confusion, in which they skirt
around people, prams, young people with mobile phones on their
way to the cross-river ferry, bursts of laughter and arguments,
he glances sideways at her looking for tubes in her nose, needles
in her arm, a suspicious doctor holding x-rays up to the light

"What is it, doctor? Just what's going on?"

when she seems to be the same, the same person as always

"Mariana"

the only one since he didn't think there could be another, the
walks along the sea-shore, nights spent reading, together each
one on his or her side, listening to the silence with the dog at
their feet, still so far from her listening to the doctor, God knows
how smiling, watching her down at the end, without suspecting
the pains in his back, walking as if suspended in her young girl's
eyes, whom he doesn't dare ask for once and for all >>

"What was it? What's happening? What's the matter with you?"

the car which wasn't where he thought it was in the end but two streets down, where more people were elbowing each other in their haste, and before taking the key and realising that he hadn't held her hand at all, he hadn't held it and never let go, the desire to walk all the way back, to push people who were queuing for the tram, waiting for the bus, looking for a taxi, arguing in the traffic, run all the way back, in the hope of getting back to the hospital, pushing the doors

"Hey, friend, where are you going?"

running upstairs two and three steps at a time, what happened to the pains in his back, find the floor with the waiting room, where the child fell asleep in his mother's lap, made dizzy by the sweat and the medicine, avoid the doors with the nurses and stay there, protected by the coin machine, weeping.

August

Mariana

Nothing

Mariana

What is it, Salvador

Don't you want a tea?

You've woken me up to ask if I want a tea

I didn't see you were already asleep

A tea for what

To sleep better, sorry

She sits up in bed, picks up the cup

Mariana

What is it, Salvador

Shouldn't we set the alarm for earlier

I don't think it's necessary

It'll give us more time

Do what you like

But you'd better get to sleep, it's late

She drink the tea, he looks at her

What is it, Salvador

Nothing

Why are you looking at me

What if we get caught up in traffic

Forget it, in a while we'd better go now

It's just that I'm afraid of not finding a space by the door

You can't be sure of that

He looks at the television, again at her

You know what I'm going to do

What

I'm going to put on the mobile alarm as well

Salvador, you don't know how to do that

And if the electricity goes off and the radio doesn't work

It'll work, why should the electricity go off

She's almost finished the tea

I'm sorry I woke you up, I didn't even notice

Doesn't matter now

Do you think you won't get off to sleep

I don't know Salvador, I hope not

He looks at the television, then at her again

You're afraid

It's not the same as going to the cinema

Don't forget that the urine sample has to be before you have breakfast

I know

Do you want me to put the bottle beside the wash-hand basin

Not necessary

You're sure you won't forget

Ok, put it then

There's a road near by where there's bound to be a parking space

Great

He looks at the television

Do you want to talk about this

I don't think so

Don't be scared

I'll try not to be

She puts the cup down on the bedside table, he lies down

You're cold

No, I'm fine

She lies down as well, she closes her eyes

Mariana

What is it

I can't sleep

The blindness doesn't come from the dark. It may be this.

"Yes it is, Mariana"

A surfeit of light. A very white glare that was switched on above me.

"You can't say it's good news"

I'm blind. Illuminated down to the very vomit. Unable to see, dizziness, I shan't even try to move. I'm lying down, I have the fury of a thousand spotlights pressing on my eyes.

"We have a problem here, Mariana"

I'm deaf. I seem to have heard a voice but I can't say for sure. If I had heard anything, anything which broke through this buzzing which grips me, it might have been something like

"There's a new method now, of course it's still in the experimental stages, but it doesn't cost anything to try"

I can state with all certainty that I'm dumb. Even if I had something to say, it seems to me that I wouldn't be able to manage it. My mouth has closed for ever, dried out by this huge white light, this light which is blinding me. I gently flex my fingers, waiting for a sign which will let me know if I'm alive. I'd like to touch myself, if I were allowed to do so. I have to keep still. I'd like to make a gesture, touch myself. Check whether I am still me. I'd like, if it were possible. They told me not to move. It's very important that I don't move. It's something to do with the precision of the tests.

>>

"Even so, I'd suggest you come in two weeks from now"

I'm blind. I'm sure of it. This flash has destroyed my sight. I can't see what's happening, that's why I want to touch myself. How long have I been here, I've lost count. Touch myself. Feel myself. I hope I'm not naked. I'm afraid of being naked. Panic. It's one of my worst childhood fears.

(Me a child)

I liked to walk about naked in my room, on my own. When I was growing up, they called it the time of discovery. But I had nightmares in which I was naked. In the middle of the street, everyone staring, me running away with nowhere to go. Covering myself

touching myself

with nothing to cover myself, one hand in front one behind, there were people laughing, others just looking, me not knowing what they thought because all I could think about was running away, hiding myself. I'm panicking.

"The best thing is not to move for now it would be a good idea to see a specialist do you know a specialist?"

If I could be sure that they're not looking, if I sensed that their attention has lapsed, I would raise one hand (one is enough) and touch myself. Beginning with my face, feeling my nose, the deep cavities of my eyes (open? closed?), run down an arm in search of my fingers

are they all there?

My breast, feel my breast, my breast, both of them, flatten my hand against my belly, calm down, be able to say I'm all here me a child me little

I'm deaf, I don't know if I have a specialist. I want to leave but they won't let me, I want to get up and go out but part of me is almost serene, lying here

blind

I'm paralysed. An enemy is stirring inside me. So it won't do any good to touch myself, I can still be all here and it won't do any good. It won't do any good if they take the light out of my eyes and I can finally look at myself again (I'll be naked). I would stroke myself, if I could, and perhaps I'd be relieved to feel all my fingers, my belly still smooth, a slight slackness in my arms. An enemy is stirring inside me. It'll allow me to comfort myself by seeing myself, touching myself, persuading myself that everything's fine when proof to the contrary is building up.

"More tests we need more tests you see the new method"

It's inside, in the labyrinth of veins and tendons

"Without a specialist I really don't know"

Inside there, where only complicated mechanisms can reach, probes, x-rays, CAT scans, a simple prick may bring the monster out, part of it, reveal it but little more, the rest

only a specialist

Touching myself thinking that I'm all here.

The rest remains there, an oily affected enemy, which slides and multiplies, despite the urine tests, another probe, more tubes. This is me. A body lying down, which they've blinded and is unable to hear. A body that doesn't speak, silent while a monster stirs

inside

even if a specialist comes, even if one day they let me touch myself again, let me feel, I'm surely naked the same fear as always

A small child trying to hide myself

"It's very important not to move just a bit longer"

A little bit the same for everyone, how many women have been here, blind, waiting for a specialist, a new method, which will overcome the beast that eats people inside for once and for all

Where, I cannot touch feel that everything's alright

"Don't move now if it hurts just say"

I have it somewhere there, in a box. I think I still have it. The photograph. A tiny little bit torn on one corner, it happened when I tried to take it out of one album and move it to another. My parents are smiling, my sisters are little, Matilde can still hardly walk, Joana lying on a blanket, in nappies. We're all there. On one side you can see the limpidity of the river, on the other all of us on the fresh grass. There are blankets on the ground, two picnic baskets, my mother kneeling, would carefully take out the jams, orange juice and the bread, my father lying down, leaning on one elbow, looking at me. We're all there. Casting a shadow over the scene, an enormous tree, which I happen to be beside, wet, standing up, my hair dripping down my back. It was killingly hot, I'm naked. I'm the only one looking at the camera, it was my aunt Rose who took the photo. So that my parents are looking at me and I'm the only one who looks who can look at the photo. I have it put away safely, I must go and see it. I'm naked. And yet, no fear overtakes me. No panic. I'm almost, I want to believe, more secure than ever. Naked, at eight or nine years old, biting into a huge slice of water melon, a red and green half moon. I look at the camera with assurance. My father and mother's smiles, I didn't even notice them at the time. I didn't notice them for many years. I notice them now, that I remember the photograph, I know I have to go and rescue it from the box, mend the corner with sticky tape. My parents look at their girl. And they can't contain their smiles, on a summer afternoon, on the soft grass, in the shade of the tree and the smell of the bread, with the river beside, pellucid. Their girl, perfect, who had just had a refreshing dip and is devouring the water melon. The healthy girl, confident, unafraid to be naked, looking straight into the camera. I want that photograph, I want me like that, to know I was like that. I want that moment, the only one in which I was naked with no need to conceal myself, with the grass tickling my feet, little, safe, perfect. I look. With all clarity, my aunt not asking me Don't move Don't move now, my father smiling at me, my mother spreading marmalade on the bread, my sister falling over in her first stumbling baby steps. I see a swarm of ants at the foot of the big tree, the stones on the river bank. I listen. The click of the camera, my aunt saying It's turned out nice. I hear my sister's tiny chuckle, a flock of birds that takes flight, my mother saying Right now let's have lunch. I feel. The water melon in my mouth, made of cold >>

water and seeds. The heat, The itching in my feet, the first shivers, my body asking for a towel. We stayed like that, in a photograph that I still have somewhere, in a box. The only one in which I'm naked, whole, although no one has ordered me

"Don't move it's just a little while that's it"

Would it help, I wonder, to tell them I can't feel anything. That I can't see, I can't hear the slightest trace of a monster slithering inside me.

"You can get dressed next week at the same time don't forget it has to be a morning sample"

Perhaps it would help, I hypothesise, if I asked them to touch me, assure them that I don't feel anything well we needn't be here doing these things, feel myself and when I make sure I'm all there, refuse to believe that my leaving has begun.

(...)

Translated from the Portuguese
by Patricia Odber de Baubeta, 2005