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Poems

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Poems

Abstract
POETRY OF VERANDAS (for Helen and Helio Alves), BACALHAU, LET ME TELL YOU, JACK ... (for, and after Jack Mapanje)

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1.
Here’s evening, pinesmoke with shafts of gold, the sheer well-being of a mosquito bite.

On the third floor up we are up among birds, not the caged canaries but martins veering so tight I could grab them like Jehengir Khan who caught the swallow at Lords.

In the haze, a pigeon stutters by, anxious and out of his depth.

Come, poetry, smoulder, lascivious as charcoal, target the ear like senhor mosquito, zoom like the martin’s shadow, skimming tessellated pavements, leaping houses, somersaulting, can turn on an escudo, is most feigning in its scything graphite when closest to matching the uncatchable.
For Luís Vaz de Camões, then, how was it quarantined just down there off Cascais all-but-home after seventeen Christmases the plague raging, Lisbon a necropolis,

how did he feel the colonial voyager with his vision of Portugal, his octavo epic sundried and nurtured through mutilation, fevers and shipwreck

in the bag? Was the court corrupter than he recalled, the clergy more ignorant, the boy king distinctly odd? Had he second thoughts about the Moor?

And was his stop-press dedication impassioned or politic? Sebastian, my King, Guarantor of our Ancient Liberties, born to extend the Empire of the Faith ... (a case of poetry making something happen? Disaster!)

Summer long on all the beaches, children sculpture in sand the Discoveries:

anchors, caravels, Henry the Navigator, Adamastor of the Cape of Storms.

Summer long on all the beaches, the sea salt with tears of Portugal swills them away.
4.

I’m still wondering about Camões, having myself (to compare great things with small) been seduced overseas by visions of home as a place where matters were better organized and returned to the grim reality. Thatcher was not unlike Sebastian, and the Falklands turned on a coin. Now we are hoist with myths of greatness betrayed, and I recall the honourable old man at Belém cursing, as the caravels waited, this lust for gold, this ambition to be lords of India, Persia, Arabia and Ethiopia, this cruel ferocity with its philosophy of death. Camões invented him and gave him eloquence, but the north wind swelled the sails (as it did) and nothing could undo the vast event (which the poet, as true historian, marvelled at).

5

Pessoa wrote in restaurants, alone with his heteronyms clamorous disquiet.

His bronze, in his beloved Chiado, loiters at a pavement table, dipping its fountain pen in wine as the estuary drifts south.

(I’ve tried this in England: people think I’m a policeman.)
And here he's again, the Father of Winds. Our matted pines heave like an ocean, the almond trees fuss prettily, ancient olives munch and fumble, blue gums bunch their shadow-boxing fists,

while up on the skyline, royal palms semaphore with their ostrich feathers to clouds scudding like clippers

on the Azores run. The Atlantic's in every blast, and how the swallows pinion it, cruising

under our block's cliff, accelerating in the domestic air, hitting the corner, and

FLAWEWEWEWEWE they are puffballs, ounces of cartilage, sheer as silk to spattering on the tessellated pavements,

feathering at the last split-second in a teetering pole-vault, swooping, skimming

the perfected charcoal of their shadows. I watch them trying on wings. I watch them

readying for the dangerous currents south.
BACALHAU

1.

Another restaurant in Alcabideche! People keep asking, where's the new restaurant? and Alice directs them confidently without having seen it.

Restaurants in Alcabideche are like chapels in Wales. There is always some new delicate doctrine involving fresh coriander and salt cod.

At Christ's birth, codfish loom on our TVs, glottal as Pavarotti, roaring Hark the herald etc. (The turkeys wilt and swoon.)

2.

Bacalhau again! I found it in Soho, but 'it comes from Hull' said Luigi, his moustache quivering at the absurdity: 'they send the heads to Portugal.'

I hugged it under my elbow, a brown paper rugby ball in a neat net of string, and set off across London.

At the F.O. they were bombing Libya. 'One moment, sir.'

'It's bacalhau,' I said. 'Sir?' 'Salt dry cod.'
Gingerly, he weighed the device, gave it a gentle wobble, smelt it and held it to his ear listening to the music of the seas.

‘Salt. Dry. Cod, sir?’
‘They send the heads to Portugal under the Treaty of Windsor.’

He kissed the air and a dog, special breed, tall as the hat stand ambled from the office, taking control.

My casket was offered knee high like myrrh or frankincense and I thought of the hundred recipes simmering in the brown egg

– bacalhau
   in the glorious names
   of Bulhão Pato, Gomes de Sá, Balalha Reis. António Lemos, Zé do Pipo and Brás.
– bacalhau
   with cheese, with onions, with potatoes and spinach, with milk, rice, leeks, oysters, parsley, prawns, flour with egg white
– bacalhau ‘with everything’
   in the peasant style
with carrots
in the manner of heaven, in twists like a corkscrew, from Trás os Montes Guarda, Porto, Lamego, Ericeira, Alentejana, even
The despoiled Algarve, And our winter favourite
– bacalhau que nunca chega,
   ‘the cod that’s never enough’ –
I watched them hatching in the dog’s nostrils, clamouring to spawn in the cold seas of their birth.

(Ghadafi’d have surrendered on the instant, adding his own touch of tabina and walnuts.)

The Alsatian took a quarter sniff turning its tail contemptuously. Cook, poet, comedian, I was harmless. Our government’s in safe paws.

(Alice White faults this poem for not including Bacalhau à moda da Guida, as prepared by Margarida Maria da Cruz Mergulhão of Casal Verde, Figueira da Foz.)
LET ME TELL YOU, JACK ...
(for, and after Jack Mapanje)

Let me tell you, Jack, what’s beyond the veranda
Where I write most days, except when the north wind
Blasts from York across Biscay to ravage
Our pottery garden of the plants you know from home
– Hibiscus, elephant ears, Mary’s milk, piri-piri.

I’ve lost count of the half poems launched to probe
For metaphors to enshrine what’s out there. Enshrine!
Don’t giggle! Obsolete words, like enamelled
Or the painter’s palette, invade them for colours no one
Younger than 50 in England has ever exclaimed at!

And you know well enough I don’t just observe
From a height. I’m down there daily, like Wordsworth
In the gap between stanzas, peering short-sightedly
At silks thrusting from the earth, and interrogating
Passers-by for the word, though they often don’t know.

So my diary is of distances, of fragments and hesitations,
About white walls daubed with laundry and geraniums,
About the moss-green valley, where nettles even in winter
Surge knee-high, and snakes fat as pythons coil in the sun.
Pine trees cast shadows blacker than Alentejo bulls,

And spring’s sequence of flowers is like a carpet somehow
Lit from within, changing not by the month or the week
But hourly between daybreak and noon and dusk
As the massed gold or china-blue or tortoiseshell petals
Open, revolving with the blossoming sun, and fold and decline.

I watch the cat boxing her kittens. Boys yelp like peacocks.
Cocorico happens too often to be any use as a clock.
Oh, but laugh at this! Our morning parade, as housedogs
Walk their mistresses, each circumscribed by her territory
Marked by a tree, a lamppost, and a raised hind leg.

You would hardly know the Atlantic is just a kilometre
Off, until the stump of a hurricane howls from New York
And the rain clouds scud like caravels, their hulls
Careened by the moon. Skies are important here, stars
In their consternations, flagging imperial destinies,
So I use you as reference point, your well being differently
Based, knowing our love (another jaded word, with its
Dangerous afterlife) will survive this latest exchange
Of countries and poems. This valley beyond my veranda
Is my newest mystery, my second-hand Brazil,

Where I’m less ex-patriate than in York. Out there
Between the almond trees and blue-black cypresses
Is a field of flowers where the Angolans are playing football.
Language will come. I want to continue living
Where I will always marvel at precisely where I am living.