

# CHILDHOOD

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*Dois capítulos em tradução de Maria de Lourdes Pereira*

## CLOUDS

My earliest memory is of a glazed earthenware vase, full of soapberries, hidden behind a door. I could not tell where or when I saw it. And I would think the vase had been a dream if a part of this remote tale had not mingled with a later one. Perhaps I do not even remember the vase very well: it is possible that the bright, slender image remains only because I have mentioned it to people who later confirmed it. Therefore, it's not the image of a strange object I have, but of its reproduction, confirmed by people who have helped me fix its contents and shape. Anyway, the vision must have been real. By then, notions of soapberries had been drummed into my mind, and soapberries became my reference for all spherical objects. Later, I was told that generalisations were a mistake and this disturbed me.

There was a second opening through this thick veil of clouds that covered me: I could see many faces, hear foolish words. How old was I? According to my mother I was about two or three. But I do not suppose I had a keen memory just because I was able to remember one hour or

some minutes of an event in a distant past. No. It was – as far as I can remember - quite common. I believe it has turned into a poor one. But, that moment, those minutes, I can perfectly recall.

I found myself in a large room with dirty walls. It was certainly not as large as I believed. I must have been to other similar rooms, quite mean too. Yet the room seemed huge. In front of it, a yard growing wide, huge too, and at its end, lush soapberries in full bloom. Suddenly, someone replaced the soapberries by oranges. I didn't like that. Oranges – probably already known – meant nothing.

The room was full of people. An old man with a long beard, towering over a black table, several boys, seated on backless benches, held sheets of paper and screamed:

- A "b" with "a" – "b,a" = "ba"; a "b" with an "e" – "b,e" = "be".

And so on, up to u. I had heard spelling being chanted in many ways, in primary schools in rural areas. But never like this. The tune, the letters, the soapberries convince me that the room, the soapberry trees – replaced by orange trees – the benches, the desk, the teacher and the pupils existed. Everything is quite clear. Much clearer than the vase itself. Standing close to the bearded man, a tall young lady, who would soon acquire all my natural sister's features, was holding a booklet in her hand and groaned:

- A, B, C, D, E.

All of a sudden, I felt myself far away, at the back of a house. Still, I could not tell how I got there or who took me there. Two or three people went down to the backyard of wet red soil, one of them slipped, a deep crack was opened up in the ground. Someone told me to go down too. I did not move. The step leading down to the ground was too high for my legs. I was carried – and slept. I did not step on the red mud. I woke up in a kind of kitchen under a low straw ceiling, among men wearing white shirts. One of them asked how the dried codfish should be broiled, another

one answered: - We make a wooden " 'amper" " 'Amper"? What could an " 'amper" be? I soon fell back asleep, a deep sleep.

Later, I learned that the school had been one of the places we took shelter during our journey. We had left the small village where we lived in Alagoas and were heading towards the backlands of Pernambuco. "I", my father, my mother and my two sisters. But father and mother, dominating figures, the two sisters, one illegitimate, older than me, the other one legitimate, two years younger, were only motionless spots.

There were definitely soapberries and a slender earthenware vase, hidden behind a piece of furniture which experience taught me to call door. All of a sudden, the large room, the old man, the children, the young lady, benches, chair, trees, men in white shirt loomed before me, as well as strange sounds like letters, syllables, mysterious words. Nothing else.

The hibernation went on, an inertia rarely disturbed by shivers that I recall as long tears on a black cloth. Faltering figures move through the tears: Amaro Vaqueiro, a sad man, wearing a shabby leather vest; his wife Ma'am Leopoldina, dressed in a showy, red, chintz dress; women smoking pipes. Livelier than all, a strong, upright, cheerful, strapping fellow with blue eyes stands out. He was wearing sandals and a white cotton shirt that poor rural men wear in the northeast of Brazil: rough, soiled, unbuttoned and tied at the sides by two knots. His name was José Baía and he became a friend of mine: making noises, exclamations, onomatopoeias and sonorous bursts of laughter. He would sit, put me on his back, shake me, stomp, imitating a horse; then he would stand and hold me by the arms and twirl me singing:

I was born two months premature  
and never sucked  
I drank milk from a hundred cows.  
At the barnyard gate.

When he set me free, I would totter, dizzy. One day, I got giddy from being twirled around, I staggered, tumbling and hit my head against a strut. A lump grew on my forehead. My most remote memories, come from this time, from an environment where I grew up like a small animal. Up to then, I had been aware of some people or fragment of people, however they remained beyond my sense of perception. Little by little, I became aware of them. This unsettled me. Many pieces of blurred places emerged before my eyes. They were cloudy spots, islands sketching themselves in the empty Universe.

The thick lump on my forehead helped me fix the image of the porch that was supported by sturdy pillars of sumac trees. The living room with ever shut windows lay within some distance; there were also, if I am not mistaken, guns, bridles hanging from hooks, spider webs, a hammock held by wooden hooks, rough wooden green boxes, a grain warehouse. The hall gave access to gloomy small rooms and to the dining room. The kitchen disappeared, but the yard still remains, tough and barren. Neither flowers nor vegetables grow there any longer. Standing at the back, next to piles of rubbish, the only ornament was a Turkish tree, a good hiding place during periods of persecution. From this side of the world the Turkish tree marked the limit of the world. On the other side, the land stretched out into the distance. The house made of sturdy material was complete from the inside. But from its outside it looked awkward. The property left line side wall had an unusual height. On its right the wall was too low. I can not figure how the roof kept its balance. Perhaps corrals and pigsty built in the neighbourhood hid one of the walls. Suddenly, pigsty and corrals vanished.

During a wild whirlwind I noticed strange things happening. Clouds of dust twisted on a fierce dispute; it got dark, a rumble different from the others grew strong, it spread, and in the middle of the turmoil an ox

rawhide broke the cowhide whip that was binding it to a branch and flew away in the swirl. A slim lady, my indistinct mother, tried desperately to close the door swinging in the wind. The room was filled with leaves and twigs, an angry animal blew or hissed; the woman became desperate dangling the key. When the disturbing event was over I saw the poor woman with her hand wrapped with a cloth. One finger got so swollen that her ring had to be cut off with a steel file. Afterwards I lost track of the lady. And the lethargy went on.

The yard in front of the porch was huge, I do not believe I would dare cross it. Its end reached the sky. One day, however, I found myself beyond the yard, beyond the sky. I could not explain how I got there. Some men were digging the ground; a frightening hole was being opened. I was terrified before a precipice that shrank me, among mountains that stood on the borders. What were they digging that deep burrow for? Why were they building those hills, enveloped by dust as smoke? (22) I was awed into silence by the sight of the extraordinary anthill. The ants sweated; their white shirts turning black, dyed; tools digging into the soil, others flinging away the dense fog that shaped the hills.

A new disruption. Shadows wrapped me, almost impenetrable, intercepted by weak rays of lightning. Ma'am Leopoldina's earring and her brown face; Amaro Vaqueiro's vest, José Baia's white teeth; the figure of a beautiful girl, my natural sister, husky voices, animal's howls merging with human voices. José, the young boy, had not bloomed yet. My father and my mother still puzzled me and inspired fear in me. I can see pieces of them again, wrinkles, angry eyes, resentful mouths, no lips; thick and callused hands; thin, light and transparent hands too. I hear bangs, shots, curses, tinkle of spurs, stamping shoes on the worn brick, fragments and sounds dispersing. Fear, that was what guided me in my earliest years,

terror. Afterwards the smooth hands split from the rough ones and two beings imposing submission and respect upon me slowly took shape. I got used to those hands, I even learnt to like them. Never did the smooth hands treat me well, but sometimes they got wet with tears – and my fears dwindled. The rough ones, very rude, grew gentle at times. Every now and then, the thundering voice that commanded them would soften and give way to a naughty smile, and the hidden dangers surrounding the place would fade away. They would forget all about the least important people in the house: some dogs, a couple of boys, two girls and me. Suddenly, the third sister arrived, a trifle thing in Ma'am Leopoldina's arms. I did not care a damn about it.

But what amazed me was the dam: a wonder, endless water where domestic and wild duck swam. Those creatures able to live in the water amazed me. The world was complex. Up to then, the biggest amount of water I had seen was the one in the pot. And that huge vase stuck on the floor, covered with green leaves, flowers, fowls that dived upside down. That scenery mixed up my sense of science. After much effort I was able to establish a relation between this unique phenomenon and the smoky burrow. The latter had been opened in a distant place. While the dam was in front of the house. It was there but it had moods, it kept moving, it did not keep still. It was a lousy thing.

The low damp lands, where the pumpkins grew, were located far away, I would not be able to reach it alone. They comprised of ten or twenty marrow vines and creepers in the alluvial soils. Amaro had said that just one tree would be enough. If winter came the excess would be spoiled. If drought came there would be no harvest at all, even if all seeds were absorbed by the soil. My father disregarded the yokel's advice, and the result was a pumpkin glut. At first, small twigs twisted in the carve, small yellow buds blooming. A scowling man examined them,

striding slowly. It was an uncle of mine, a guest, invited to be the godfather of the trifling baby who screamed in her nappies. He offered me a box of fireworks. He disappeared. And at that very place where I met him the scion flowers grew, they became furry stout hale strings. And the pumpkins grew, so many that we walked through the backwoods plantation field stepping on them. They got stuck together in a block, two or three of them; they displayed a beautiful moving sidewalk. The panniers were filled up. I was given a load and up we went, jolting, the animal and I, through a path full of holes. The living room was crammed with wooden boxes; granary crept up through the porch in the bedrooms. And the yield stirred up, spread around, devalued. The gates were opened; the people were given permission to get their lot. Useless. When the scarce population and the few pigs of the town were fed the useless crop rotted in the field.

At that time I had a very well-defined picture of my parents: father, a solemn man with a wide forehead, one of the most beautiful foreheads I have ever seen, strong teeth, stiff chin, extraordinary speech; mother, a peevish, aggressive, crabby woman always moving about the house. Head full of lumps that the thin hair could barely hide, an acid tongue, evil eyes which, in moments of cholera, became inflamed with a gleam of madness. Those two ill-tempered beings complemented each other. In marital harmony, my father's voice grew less violent; it gained an odd inflection, babbling moderate endearing words. Her bad temper smoothed out and her ever folded fingers which had a stiffness of a hammer, would loosen. Any thing, however, as a hinge creaking, or child's sobbing would bring back her sourness and anxiety.

She would get angry if someone walked away from her odd talking. I guess there has never been talk like that. The syntax and the vocabulary also differed a deal from what we are used to in everyday conversation. With this lame language Lady Maria harped on a long-four-volume novel,

carefully read, re-read, pulverised and tales that sounded nonsense to me. I remember vague expressions such as "toll", "rat-eater", crazy words that come back, go away, come back again. I try to push them away, to think about the dam, the divers, at José Baía's songs, but the nonsense chases me. Slowly they start making sense and a short song is sketched:

Wake-up, eater

Eater what? At first I think it is about fig-eater. I understand I am wrong, I remember rat-eater and finally host-eater, I have no doubt now:

Wake-up, host-eater

In the arms of

New pause. Three or four whining syllables stubbornly disguise themselves, I remember some syllables that I consider then find useless and forget them. I try to divert my thoughts but my spirit is taken over by insolence, it takes me to a dim room, full of pumpkins. Suddenly the runaway syllables return and with them the beginning:

Wake-up, host-eater

In the arms of the Horny-Lady

At this point there is a change:

Get away, host-eater

From the arms of the Horny-Lady

Another change: The habit of correcting oral language compels me to fix the first line:

Get-up, host eater

I flounder for a minute, trying to remember what my mother used to sing. Then I persuade myself that she used to say:

Get away, host eater

And the following adventure takes place, which Lady Maria recited rocking herself in a hammock close to some green wooden boxes: "A vicar, who had taken a mistress, had kindly fostered a poor boy. Afraid that his most private vices became public, he taught the boy a weird slang vocabulary that was supposed to hide any indiscretion. He said his name was Host-eater, and his mistress he called Horny-Lady, the cat was rat-eater, and fire was tool". That is all I remember. I cannot recall anything else and I can not figure out why tool was chosen to refer to fire. Sure that the young boy would not give away their secret, the priest and the young lady started abusing him. The kind of abuse was never mentioned, but I guess they were similar to those my parents inflicted on me. Slaps, whippings, raps on the head, ear-pulling. I was subjected to this kind of treatment from early age. So I admired the poor boy who, after enduring too much hardship, carried out such a remarkable deed. He tied a cloth wet with queresone to the Cat's tail, lit it and ran away shouting:

Get away, Mr. Host-eater  
From Mrs. Horny-Lady's arms  
Run to see the Rat-eater  
With a tool on his tail.

There are half dozen lines missing, I do not remember them. But I know that all clothes and furniture were burnt down, the story ends fiercely, like that:

Damn, someone help

This masterpiece of the popular art has remained unpublished. It was hard to remember it because the boy's deed made me feel ashamed of myself and I might have tried to obliterate it from my memory. I believe that after learning about the modest epic poem, I must have felt like

showing some energy and determination. Unfortunately, I was never able to resort to violence. I used to crouch in silence and bear the abuse, the boy's boldness made me have a high opinion of him. Later, when leading my own life, I went on praising his decision and heroism once this event is recorded on paper and cats became Rat-eaters. People able to tie a cloth to a Cat's tail and set fire to it, for the simple sake of it would never gain my admiration. In fact, I loathe them, but we must look at facts in retrospect, as they stand now.

## MORNING

I dived into a long winter morning. The swelling dam, the green, yellow and red plantation, the narrow paths, turned into streams, remained in my soul. Soon, after this, drought arrived. Trees went bare, animals died, the sun grew strong and drank the water, and warm winds spread a grey dust throughout the land. Looking into my feelings, I realise how I dislike the second scene. Havoc. Searing heat. In this slow motion life, I feel compelled between two contradictory situations: a long night; a huge and irksome day, good for dozing off. Cold and Heat. Thick darkness and dazzling light.

At the time darkness spread slowly. I woke up, gathered pieces of people and things, pieces of myself that were floating in a topsy-turvy past. I put everything together and built my small weird world. Sometimes the pieces shift places and odd changes took place. I could not tell one object from another and mankind, made up of both: people who harassed me and people who didn't, lost its feature.

Good and Evil still were to come and there was no need for whippings and tellings off. However, the whippings and tellings off were there. They always came from the same people; the same way rain and

sun came from sky. The sky was frightening and the householders were powerful. However, every now and then, my mother's temper suddenly cooled down and my father, the quiet, bad-tempered man, decided to tell me stories. I would get astonished and take the new order; naively I would think that nature had changed. The sweet period would finish and this puzzled me.

In the winter mornings, fences and plants almost melted. Mist dressed the field. A smoke rose from piles of the backyard rubbish. The odd drop fell from the gutter, the drizzle bit us. Big cowboys boots left thick layers of mud on the bricks. Wet clothes left large stains on the benches in the porch. The damp walls went black. I lay in the hammock, crouching and rolling up in the porch. A querosene hanging lamp would lick the mist with its trembling flames.

Some elderly people arrived, went away, came back again after long periods. Of one of them, my grandad on my father's side, I remember blurred pieces of information and a faded picture in an album kept in the truck. I inherited his nonsensical call for useless things. He was a shy old man who, I suppose, did not have a good reputation in the family. He had owned mills in the woods, but had been deceived by cunning friends and relatives and went bust, so he lived off his children.

At times he would straighten his spine and the former mill owner would take over, but this was only peevish illness, it would soon end and the poor man would slide into his pettiness and his hammock. He was a good musician and specialised in chants. I can see again, in blurred memories, women kneeling around an oratory, my grandfather standing, singing – and he had grown very big. How on earth could a person shout like that? Today, his height and the odd harmony show a groaning and shabby figure of a man, usually busy making odds and ends despite his illness. He had great skills and a lot of patience. Patience? now, I believe

it is not patience. It is a stubbornness, a long peacefulness that external events do not disturb: the senses grow weak, the body stiffens and bends, the whole life gets stuck in a few points – eyes that shine and fade, hands that drop cigarettes and go on with a task, lips that mumble unhappy words. We feel dismay or anger, but this is only noticed through our quivering fingers, through our wrinkles. Apparently we are at ease. If someone talks to us we will hear nothing or ignore the meaning of what is said and, because work will come to a halt, no doubt people will say we are lazy. We really feel like quitting it. However, we spend ages putting trifles in order. Trifles that match and bring about a trial and flawed work. My grandfather had never been trained for any profession. However, he was acquainted with many and lack of masters did not hamper him. He worked very hard to make fibre sieves. If he decided do undo one, he would study the fibre, the rim, the fabric. But he believed this was a plagiarism. He was an honest and neat worker who found a way of making strong and safe fibre sieves. It is very likely that people did not like them. They would rather see them ordinary and standardised, adorned and fragile. The author, indifferent to the criticism, went on making strong and clear fibre sieves. Not that he liked them, but because they were the easiest way he expressed himself.

My grandad on my mother's side, a tall and lean man, hair and beard like pulp cotton, differed a lot from this ill-treated being. He would not waste his time either singing or working on trifles. Wearing leggings, vest and a jerkin, the rims of his leather hat pulled towards the neck, framing his red face, he asserted his authority. The slow nasal voice, hoarse due to too much tobacco, would flow with an unhappy purr that scratched our ears, and then it would imply things, grow sweet and become gluey. We were under the impression that the crabby voice fondled and scolded us. His gestures were slow. He was a man full of strength who

withstood drought, went through periods of wealth and poverty, boldly rebuilding his wealth, but not always succeeding. He listened to the conversations quietly - a scarf tied at his neck or knee, the blue eyes lost in the everyday family life – grasping signals the ordinary watcher wouldn't. He had an inborn knowledge of everything referring to animals. He would show the offspring of the cows bred in the wood and accurately guess the weight of bulls. He never needed a scale to sell his cattle. This grandfather paid too much attention to the civilised, skilful and singing one. And this perhaps showed surprise, contempt and fear of hurting him, of spoiling him with his rough hands.

My grandmother was an aloof, skinny woman, with bumps on her forehead and callous eyes. Years later she told me her secret sorrows. The jealous husband harassed her too much. It was only then that I learnt she had undergone pain and was good, but at that time I could not notice her kindness. There were also a couple of great-grand-parents. A dark, droopy saint-like lady and a bossy elderly man that picked on my father. Besides these people and the farm dwellers; crowds of gypsies, cowboys dressed in leather looking after the bulls, and the odd traveller would turn up in the yard. Two of them remained in the family's tales. The first, a sullen and suspicious man, was not welcome. My mother looked for Amoral or José Baía in the neighbourhood, and sat at a corner of the living room, close to the guns. The fellow crouched by the door. And so they remained: he, spoiling the flint with a rifle, sucking his cigarette; she, watching his moves, protected by blunderbusses, trusting her grip and her sense of direction. In the afternoon the sullen fellow told my father that the lady was ill-tempered.

The other visitor showed up two or three times, dozed off lingering in the porch and was gone taking some money with him. This money was the tax rural landlords paid to squads of brigands that ran through the

backlands; they were not very demanding when compared to the later ones. With some cash, a lamb or a young cow one would buy affection and useful friendship. When we moved to the village, five or six highwaymen that were wandering around the neighbourhood made way for us, they hid in the woods, not to scare the woman and the children. When there were no guests or travellers around we went back to our humdrum lives. The same tasks of tidying up, marking and milking animals: bolts creaking at dawn and sunset; husky voices, unclear demands. There were parts of animals all over the place: whitened bones along the paths, bulls' skulls on stakes, stretched rawhide, leather bags, leather clothes hang down from lathes, rattles with horn clappers, piles of whips, rawhide whips harnesses, hair halters.

Now the world stretched itself out beyond the backyard rubbish dump, but we wouldn't dare trespass into that unknown area. The Turkish tree was my haven. The girls scampered along the kitchen and the porch. José, the boy, was turning into a young man. My natural sister was growing up, always having her feelings hurt. The hatred she aroused was showed through taunts and smacks; when she was crossed, she would bounce back and come to attack us. If this sin didn't exist, I am sure my mother would have been more human. My father seemed to behave well indeed. But there was this evidence of old misbehaviour, a strong one, with black hair, red lips, challenging eyes; my mother had not been gifted with any of these features. And I am sure the poor woman got very upset, seeing herself in us, being realised on the outside, ugly bits released from her own flesh and blood. She punished herself by punishing us. I guess we had to bear floggings for not having the good looks of Mocinha.