

Little Fortified Stories

Barbara Black

Caitlin Press

The unnatural and the strange have a perfume of their own.

—Fernando Pessoa

ORIGINS

Deep in a corner of the dimly lit Port Wine House in an eighteenth-century palace in the Bairro Alto district of Lisbon, the waiter sets down before me three small glasses with different samples of Portugal's most famous spirit: port. I settle into the quiet room, with its wood-beamed ceilings and shelves of illuminated bottles. My intention is simply to sip, to savour. But as the wines wet my tongue and their flavours blossom in my mouth I discover that each small glass contains more than the origin of a unique taste and aroma. It contains a story. A little story, its words fortified by voices and images rising as if in a séance, from a very particular Portuguese spirit.

After Lisbon, stories based on spirits kept materializing. Gradually, the collection grew to include pieces derived from my ancestry—liberally interpreted—as well as stories inspired by music, travel, artwork and dreams.

DISTILLATIONS



VISITATION

Words and Music Barbara Black

very meditatively

Swainson's Thrush

in the milky light of

Visitation *from Songs of Childhood*

Summer night, a girl
sleeps in the milky light
of crescent moon.

In the dark, seasons change
and snow fills the room.
Pygmy owls tap their song.

A presence is there,
neither fire nor air,
observes her eyelessly
till she is altered.

A white moth comes
in the wind, one silvery wing,
brushes her skin
in moonlight.

—Barbara Black

Port

Burmester LBV 2007, Porto Rosso

OLD LOVE

Let me tell you about old love. Half of the sun still glowed on the horizon. There was a drop of olive oil on her bottom lip. I loved opera, but his soul was fado. I was arias. He was laments. Warblers hiding in the oak trees stopped singing. The air swelled with a cessation of sound. Her voice, which once vibrated the chandeliers of the Teatro Nacional de São Carlos, now seemed to come from a very deep well. When we met, notes fell like dark fruits from the sky. She swept her hand and the birds in one motion flew away. But I knew in his veins there was a black river. So one day I said, 'I love you. You are free.' Now I kiss only the air.

Gran Cruz Tawny 10 anos, Porto Branco

AMBER-TINTED TEA

He hears a faint heartbeat. Above the plane trees. Clutching and releasing. The rhythm of Lisboa. Seated at the Miradouro de São Pedro de Alcântara, he is courting a rose. A rose whose perfume has distinct boundaries and proprieties. He can't just lean in to drink it. He has to approach with an invitation, which he doesn't have. And already he's too late. Sadly, the rose has just passed the peak of her fragrance. He will have to remember how, every morning, she would sit in this garden, sip amber-tinted tea, and place the teacup on a glass table without making it clatter. And how, down below in Avenida da Liberdade, someone was always baking a dish containing cloves.

LAKE CREATURES

The Three Faces of Fear. These were the names their father had given them. Not Sofia, Rosa, Vitalia. The sisters' greatest secret was to have their ears pressed up against the wall of their father's library. They did not swoon over boys (forbidden) or fancy clothes (forbidden). Despite their young age they were elegant, intense. They loved, above all things, books. They craved the touch and smell of inked paper and the words that rose from it, like a strange perfume. But despite their desire to consume all the world's books they were barred from the library. Only men and cigars were permitted and complex considerations on the goodness of God, the benefits of slavery and which Portuguese pastry was better: *fat from heaven* or *a nun's belly*. There was the question of the lake and the part it had played in the girls' disappearance. It was designed to be viewed from the library window and to reflect the sun at an exactly calculated time of the day. At this time, as the father stood looking out the library window, the footman would go down to the dock with the wheelbarrow and dump censored books into the water. Some said the girls had turned into lake creatures and fed on the pages at the bottom.

Vista Alegre 20 anos, Porto Branco

FERNANDO ANTÓNIO NOGUEIRA PESSOA

It's midnight. He's gone to the docks at Rio Tejo, wheeling his wooden trunk. It's heavy and awkward but he enjoys the burden, hefting it past the cranes and warehouses. It contains, perhaps, all that he is, all that he conceals. All that he yearns for and all he's come to despise. He would like to disburden himself of it. Rain patters on the planks of the dock. His silhouette is reflected in the warehouse windows, multiplied in facing panes, each one a different version of himself. His boots don't fit, as if they belonged to someone else. He steps away from the trunk and stoops to adjust them. It reminds him of the white-skinned redhead he once loved. Malvasia. How she would genuflect to tie his shoes, her amber hair falling around her shoulders. How she played only the white keys on the piano. He'd shown her the wrong version of himself. A fiction. *I am no one*, he mutters. His one and only love married an opium-addicted monocle-wearing naval engineer, a man so unlike him and yet similar in some inscrutable ways. Now she spends her life by the sea watching ships pass in the night, loving a man whose shoes fit perfectly. He leans far over the dock railing, contemplating the depths. Below, a multitude of minnows shine in the light of the street lamp. *Is each one identical to the others?* he wonders. His round glasses, like two loose portholes, fall into the waters of the Tejo. He slips over the railing to retrieve them, despite being unable to swim. The old trunk full of unfinished writings sits on the dock. In the light of day, somebody will find it.

Gran Cruz Colheita, 1992, Porto Rosso

DOCE

Feral dogs surround the fruit vendor, their teeth like daggers. The boys laugh, slip around the back of the shop and grab armfuls of mangos and oranges, perfectly ripe, tear off the skin, leaving a trail of peelings all the way to the Piscina Municipal. She's there again, the thin-legged girl, her long legs brown as cinnamon sticks. When she walks by, a fragrance lingers in the air. Something sexish, irrepressibly alluring. *Doce*, like candy. Sitting by the shallow end of the pool in their torn leather jackets, a wordless craving pours into them. They stare like animals tracking prey, waiting to see what she looks like wet. Stern words are posted stating to shower before swimming in the pool, but she doesn't shower and nobody says anything. She stands in front of the sign, only the words "strictly prohibited" visible, pulls an elastic band from her hair in the most theatrical way and dives liquidly off the deep end. The rippled pool dazzles like a knife blade. She emerges from the water and walks toward them with a smile resplendent as an Algarve tangerine. When she passes she flicks her long hair, whipping the water across their faces.