



SHADOWS OF THE RIVER

RONALDO CAGIANO

TRANSLATED BY ALINE LITTLEJOHN

*This is your river, your home, your mistake,
your death, that which will forget you..*

Luis Quintas

Now I know that was called parting: the silhouettes that I could see on the waters of the River Pomba as I crossed the Old Bridge taking my brother to his final resting place.

It was a walk that made no sense, the grave faces of the people, a silence that spoke volumes, the solemn gestures and glances, and all of us, saturated with disbelief, making our way on a path we had never chosen.

I have not forgotten how João Cabral's poem resonated within me: "this river/ lies in the memory/ like a living dog/ inside a room". A sentence that would forever remind me of the longest day of our lives, which were intertwined with the life departing then, defenceless against the inexorability of the Unwelcome One. The Parcae, faithful partners of Chronus, had dealt the cards once more, and I could not in any way understand of what dust we are made.

So much of me travelled along with that casket.

The feeling of deepest unease began when my youngest brother came to get me at the bottom of João Peixe Hill and I had to interrupt the game of hopscotch and run down the cobbled paths of Granjaria, the loose satin ties of my pumps pirouetting in the wind, in a bewildering dance, as lost as I was in the murmurings of sinister and diffuse thoughts that would follow me all the way home, where I arrived not knowing for sure why mother had called for me at that time.

And everything was intensified and made clearer, when a few metres from the porch, I saw her from the back, enveloped in the chaotic desperation of talk broken by screams, a vain attempt to comprehend why someone went out to never come back.

The look of grief on each of my kin's faces and of those who carried some small, but unforgettable, share of the loss marked the cohort at that moment when a destiny was cut in half, but the cutting blade would inhabit our flesh foretelling an endless twilight in our lives.



The river flowed down below, our attention absorbed by the tenuous shapes of bodies piercing silhouettes on the liquid serpent, that followed its course untouched by the pointlessness of life or its end, reflections of the transitory nature of everything. This other river rushed on by, like the being we accompanied, so prematurely drained of life and his wonderfully expansive dreams.

And in pain and discomfort, those who remained couldn't yet take in the interrupted smile, the happiness halted by an accident. The island within us obstructing our dreams, the spoon stuck in the mouth, a son who never saw past a broken horizon, for he was taking his first steps in the absolutes of existence, searching within the tides of his convictions, for all the times of a life. "A life that could have been but was not" as the poet had revealed about the lessons of the airports, the train stations, the terminals that herald farewells, about the sense in not being seen, in being silence, nothingness and the blind spot after the bend, all so inescapable and so unfair, because there is no greater mistake than draining a youthful dream on the deadly lane of an unknown road, where we are clandestine passengers with an uncertain destiny or no destiny at all.

On that day I died every death, and the certainty of its intangibility multiplied endlessly during the cortège between the chapel and the necropolis. But the spectres that echeloned on the water told of a prolonged dusk in our stories, prelude to a night that knew no time, but that would harbour betrayals even before dawn broke.

Those shadows are still looking at me, prescribing a descent into the waters of forgetfulness where mistaken souls are ferried holding hands with Charon, this reviving Lethe, these shadows still look at me in contemplation, like my brother when he sowed the verses of his poetry in a grocery bag, foreseeing that the hieratic seeds of his mad hope would not be watered each day, to sustain those who remained, for his time did not allow for pretence, the coffee would remain cold in the cup on a table somewhere in the house, the dog, Getúlio, would gaze dolefully at the silent bicycle in the corner, the pile of newspapers waiting to be delivered, the blackberry bush forgotten by the girl who used to make it her ivory tower, the dishonour of the shock on the faces of so many of those who would return after consigning the body to the earth amalgamated with the humus of familiar tears or of spontaneous weeping, my mother's panic-stricken legs searching for support, the first defeat in our abundant family history, as my father projected his gaze towards a distant world, trying to fathom the irrevocable desert that inhabits all losses.

He did not have to go away, much less so on that Sunday of pale sunlight, cryptic mysteries and sad news. The heavens could have waited because there were more urgent wrongs to right.



Those shadows still prevail within me. They linger over me like surplus winged ghosts. And even though the tragedy of losing a brother so long ago on that afternoon of a lacerated month in Cataguases still colonizes me, and us all, like denuded, skeletal autumn trees, I recall the vibrant memory of another day, when I scrutinized the poetic beauty of death with a friend. It was on an August day long since swept away with the years. At the margins of the Paranoá lake, Juliano, who had also lost a brother (assailed by the grimness of lymphatic cells that entered the blood stream and killed him in days), and who, not wishing to witness the burial, had opted instead to preserve his last memory of Marcelo rather than delivering him to the Field of Hope (preferring the bend in the road, where everything disappears leaving no traces), confessed to me: “Life is a good place to die, my friend. One day I said this to my girlfriend, at this very spot, between the ruins and skeletons of this hotel that chases away our glances from the other margin of this lake. As she-and-I, struck dumb before the dusky rose of a de(dis)composing afternoon on the plains of Brasília, sat on the edge of a quarry gazing at the feverish horizon, it occurred to me that there, too, would be a good place to die. If I went to that place on my own and threw myself off the cliff edge, no one would ever know what had happened to my body, an ideal death and one that would suit me very well”.

This shadow is now bigger inside me. Now I know its name is longing. And it has been written in the crooked calligraphy of God.