WAVING AT SOMEBODY RUNNING AWAY

A novel by Paulo Faria

The delicate smoke of the burning stubble
Rising up into the misty skies, and those
Unreadable blurs at four thousand feet,
People waving at someone running away.

Fernando Assis Pacheco

PROLOGUE

Childhood is wiped out on the day we realise our parents have kept from us the most precious part of their affection. There's a holy of holies we can never enter. On the other hand, we have a free pass to the cellars and wastelands where obscene acrobats frenetically show themselves. Without knowing it, we accumulate visions that will haunt us forever. There was a moment when we would have given everything for a word, a gesture that could rescue us, place us at the centre of something, anywhere. The word was never heard, the gesture never made, our parents were engaged in a confused, intimate, exhausting struggle. Later, when a fragile and moving tenderness appeared, we firmly rejected it, like a wounded veteran when he is offered a penny. We travel along hidden paths and lanes, the backwaters

of life, and we observe them from afar, trying to understand. At night, sleep doesn't come. We keep abstaining or spoiling our votes, we reject all causes, even the lost ones. Our colonizers fled, terrified by their actions, even before it was necessary to fight them. Even so, we don't demobilize our troops. We set backfires and suffocate in the smoke. The fight goes on.

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Father and mother would close the door. They were already divorced. Father came to collect us on Friday to spend the weekend at his new house with our stepmother. They would close the living room door. It was glazed and Leonor and I could see them in silhouette, going back and forth, back and forth. Then they would disappear. Their old bedroom, that had become mother's room, opened into the living room. At first, Leonor and I didn't understand. We were very small. Mother would tell us: "Now father and I have to talk." Even without understanding everything, we couldn't help being surprised by the ease with which Father would enter a house which, in theory at least, was no longer his. But was it or wasn't it? It was and it wasn't. We learned that something could be and not be at the same time. To attempt to survive in that new world – made without my consent – in which something could simultaneously be and not be, to avoid coming undone and to avert the chaos which that pendulum of being/not being seemed to foreshadow, I became dogmatic, compartmentalised, unbending. Things, places and people either were, or were not, absolutely. Between me and each of the others there could only be unconditional commitment or detachment taken to extremes. Blood pact or quarantine. All or nothing. Someone or something could even be everything one day and nothing on the next day. Everything one minute, nothing the next. What there never, ever could be, was ambiguity. The most savoury parts of life, transitional ecosystems, the

zone between tides, grey areas, hybrid beings, I deliberately rejected all of these.

You are outside me and are therefore one of the others. The others are always a threat, a frustration, a pain. *You're* a threat, a frustration, a pain. As long as there are unexplored corners in you, as long as you have fears and desires that aren't rooted in me, as long as you make plans whose centre I am not, there will be traces of the other in you. As long as you remember your past before you met me, there will be traces of the other in you. The others exist, they're present, then they cease to exist. That is their biggest fault. You can't be like them.

Leonor and I grew up. Eventually we realised what was happening in the bedroom. First one, then the other. We didn't talk about it, not then, not ever. I don't even know if I was the first to realise, or if it was her. It must have been her, the oldest. Each one realised on their own, and said nothing to the other. One Friday or other, we saw the shapes in the dark glass of the living room, exchanged looks and each one realised that the other knew. We got up, opened the front door, went out into the stairs in the building, closed the door and sat down on the cold stone step, eyes on the landing below ours, where the stairs curved round. The walls were covered in multi-coloured pebbles, like tiny sweets, embedded in a layer of concrete. When you stroked it with your hand it was like the skin of a gigantic crocodile stretched out there. The lift was old with metal concertina doors and went "ka-ching! ka-ching!" every three seconds, going up or down. The lift shaft was open at the top of each floor, with railing up to half-way. The cable stretched and swayed, bent into a U like a python hanging from the treetops

in a tropical rainforest. A boy our age lived on the floor above, and his mother used to put him out on the stairs as a punishment. She would open the door, sit him on the first step and slam the door shut. The kid would cry, and his screams echoed through the whole building. He only quietened down when his mother opened the door, took him by hand and took him inside. Sitting in the shadows Leonor and I stayed there listening to him crying on the landing above ours. “Mummy!” he screamed. “Mummy!” It was a heartfelt weeping, uninterrupted, fierce, that no one could silence. Weeping like that, frantically, that kid excused us from showing sadness, bitterness or pain. His crying didn’t upset us. It tempered us in a low flame, like steel in a forge.

The others know things I don’t know. The others have been to places I have never been to. The others breathe, digest, excrete, sweat. The others radiate heat. The others exist without me. The others will continue to exist when I die. The others move in spite of my fears, my memories. Sitting on the stairs, in the shadows, while our parents were in the bedroom, Leonor and I were the others. We were the others of my father and my mother. It was as if we were already dead. In a sonnet to Ninetto Davoli, Pasolini speaks about the “truth that kills whoever discovers it because they are excluded from it.” So as not to be dragged down to the bottom, I became arrogant. I developed a cold, stony haughtiness, an obstinacy made of the repetitive cadence of that lift. I limited my horizons to the bend in the stairs. The others know nothing of what I know. The others don’t exist without me. Other people’s fears and other people’s memories are second-rate fears and

memories. I bear a secret able to save humanity that I shan't reveal to anyone.

There is a profound, silent reserve in you that I need to overcome. There are streaks of subtle resistance in you. The other lives on in you, out of habit or idleness. I have to bring it to the surface, tie it up, oblige it to confess, then familiarise myself with it.

The first time Leonor and I went out on to the landing and waited there, we sensed, after a certain amount of time, hasty movements and panicked tones from inside the apartment. At last the door burst open and mother looked out and said "Ah, there you are. What a fright you gave me!" And she laughed with the nervous relief of someone who hears a crash, feels the car lurch, brakes sharply, gets out and sees that after all, it was just a hole in the road, she hasn't run over anyone, not a cat, or a dog, or a child. From that day on, as if it was the most natural thing in the world, our gesture of silently excusing ourselves was incorporated into the Friday ritual. Father, as always, was the first to reappear. He would open the front door looking pleased, adjusting his tie, invariably good humoured in those moments, look at us sitting there, and ask "Well, pitigrillis, shall we go?" Mother would appear in a rush, smiling, hiding her embarrassment, run to fetch a woolen hat for Leonor, a scarf to wind round my neck, she would see us out. We would say goodbye to her and for an instant there hung between the four of us the communion of a shared offence, the mute complicity of hardened delinquents, professional criminals. Leonor and I wanted to get out of there, hasten to Father's new house, the place where we were asked to pretend we hadn't seen or heard anything, that we knew nothing. But

there was always a forgotten textbook, a sweater for the cold, a late-coming toothbrush holding us up. We had to wait. We learned to settle snugly into that rhythm of waiting in those moments when Father and Mother said goodbye to one another, embarrassed. He hid his shame with haughtiness, she seemed completely bewildered. We interpreted each gesture, each inflection of their voices, we built up muscle at their expense, we covered ourselves in scales, we compiled a catalogue of offensive weapons for future attack.

I wasn't prepared for Mozambique, Amália. I came here looking for my childhood. I, who had never set foot in this country, came here in search of my childhood. Or rather, I came here in search of a childhood before my childhood. My father and mother cannot be those two flustered beings I always knew, resorting to subterfuges. It's impossible. They're my parents, I want them to be perfect, shining bright. Tragic, perhaps — a little touch of tragedy is always good. I refuse to be the son of a comedy of errors. Mozambique is the country where my father spent two years when my childhood was still a broth of words and images that had not yet crystallised, not yet migrated to the territory of the conscious. I came in search of a land that could speak to me, paint for me with exotic and sublime colours the way it all began. When my father was here, the lie hadn't yet taken charge of him and my mother. At least, it hadn't come to the surface. It hadn't yet been fully accepted by them both like a second skin. They still preserved, perhaps, a certain innocence. There was a colossal lie, that Portugal extended from the Minho region to Timor. This lie was divided into smaller lies, some of them enormous, even so. Mozambique

was a lie of three hundred thousand square miles. But my father and mother still hadn't allowed the enormous lie to take root in them and become lies made to measure. When my father was here, their lie was still incubating.

Without your knowing it, I invaded your email account and cannibalised it, formatting it so that all the messages you received would be forwarded to my address. I scented in you a profound reserve that, in my opinion, only remorse would explain. I needed to check things out. I went into your email by stealth because, grudgingly, despite my efforts, I was overtaken by the taste of things that are and are not in the same instant, that are given and denied in the same breath. A little afraid, trembling like someone revisiting a known place where memories sneak into the corners, I found myself turning you inside out, looking for the backstitches of your great love for me, a life cycle far from my light, dreams that grow and die in you without you letting me taste them.

Death was with us from the start. When I met you, you were a widow, you were in your early thirties, and I was married, also young. I didn't know your husband, Jorge, I just saw him in photographs, he died in the prime of life, as they used to say. He was a hunter, there were lots of hunting photos. Once, when we moved house, you threw some photos out and they were of a hunt and I caught a furtive glimpse of them, they seemed to document some kind of initiation rite to commemorate the first boar killed by a novice to the hunt. The lad with his face smeared with the animal's blood. The lad walking with a dead boar hanging from his back, bowed under the weight of

the carcass. Your husband the master of ceremonies, his arms soaked in red up to the elbows, the blood thick and dark as clay. In the early days of our marriage I kept dreaming that many years had passed and you would die before me and you would arrive at a very green hillside with a wall at the top. He was there at the foot of the hill, just like in the photographs, bearded and wearing glasses, in the shade of a huge tree. He hadn't aged and you realised right away he'd been waiting for you all those years, decades on end, walking backwards and forwards in that place, and your voice dried up in your throat when you realised that you would have to tell him that in the meantime you had remade your life, that you'd found someone else and you couldn't go through the gate up there at the top of the path hand in hand with him because you wanted to wait for me outside. Although you died an old woman in my dream, you hadn't grown old. When we die we become young again, thirty something years old.

I arrived in Nampula this morning, I'm in the hotel, it's night time, my second day below the equator is running the shutters down. Tomorrow I leave for the north, for Cuamba. I'm trying to learn to live with this country, I'm trying not to lose my composure in this roller coaster of euphoria and fear. I'm trying to rise to the occasion. I'm trying to make Mozambique live up to my demands. In my nightmares I'm often naked or half naked. I'm walking along the road or I'm in a café or at the football and I'm not wearing any trousers or underwear, just a long tee-shirt that almost covers my sex but not quite, and I walk around among the people like that. I want to get home quickly to put on some trousers, end the anguish that is eating me up, but my house is far away and all I can do is walk along, tugging at the

hem of the tee-shirt, trying to hide everything. People walk by me, some make remarks, look sideways at me, but all of them, without my really understanding why, pretend not to notice how ridiculous I am, half naked. You might say they're waiting for the right moment to round on me, mock me. You might say they're taking part in an elaborate staging. You might say they're waiting for a signal. In the end, that signal, always on the verge of appearing, never comes. Instead of turning straight for home, I take long detours, I follow the groups of people who cross my path, I prolong the torture as if I too were part of the conspiracy. As if I too were waiting for the signal. As if, after all, it were up to me to give the signal. As soon as I got off the plane in this country I felt as if I were in that recurring nightmare, naked from the waist down, wandering among people dressed from head to toe. Here, however, unlike in the dream, the others don't avert their gaze out of pity for my naked belly, there isn't a momentary truce, no one seems inclined to put off the roar that will start the chase. They all stare at me avidly, like newcomers in my nightmare who don't know the narrative conventions. Here, in Mozambique, the much feared signal has already sounded in my nightmare, people are pointing at me, they laugh, there will be not a shred of pity. Waking from the nightmare, I push it away from me. I can't lose sight of what has brought me here. I've come to Mozambique to walk in my father's footsteps. He was forced to come here because of the war. I came because I wanted to. Of course, he came here to fight a war. The danger was greater for him. I console myself, telling myself that for a white man in Mozambique there is always war. Even so, I wasn't expecting what I found here. I vacillate, I hesitate, but I can't give in to weakness.

I wasn't prepared for Maputo, for Polana. The houses in Polana look like decrepit versions of the dwellings in the Arco do Cego neighbourhood in Lisbon. They are houses from colonial times, little houses with two storeys and a little yard at the front, a high wall, an iron gate in the wall, and one imagines a garden at the back, but they all look time-worn, browned, chipped away over time like a poor man's teeth. They all have patches, mismatched tiles, bars grafted into windows, and all of them have an electrified fence along the top of the wall, with yellow plastic panels caught between two wires saying Danger – electrified fence. The drawing of a silhouetted hand, open, and around it a crown of black sparks similar to the rays in a comic strip for children, deceptively childish. Maputo begs of me a brutality that I do not have. It begs of me an implacable side I thought I possessed and which perhaps was, after all, only an illusion.

Mozambique is the other in its purest state, undiluted. Mozambique throws me to the ground and walks over me with no explanations. Mozambique is childhood, yes, but a late, unprotected childhood made up of images that fade and tinge everything around them, images that, more than seen by me, seem to stem from me. Once, many years ago, in Mafra, I went with three people into a huge enclosure inhabited by a pack of wolves. No sooner had we closed the double mesh door behind us than wolves appeared on a hillock in the middle of the eucalyptus trees and came running down to meet us. They exuded the unbridled excitement of a group of thugs looking for a brawl, and the alpha male came right up to me and reared up like a little horse and put his front paws on my chest, trying to knock me to the ground. I pushed him brusquely away and he did the same thing again. I

pushed him again and he stuck his claws into my chest and after half a minute of this dance he bit my left arm and wouldn't let go. It doesn't matter why I went into the enclosure or who was with me, nor does it matter how I got out of there, what does matter is that I felt the wolf's jaws squeezing my arm and I felt my bones taking shape inside the muscles. I saw the wolf's yellow eyes cloud over, I heard a snarl issue from his throat and I was suddenly aware of the incredible fragility of my body. All the wolf had to do was squeeze just a little more and my arm would snap in two like a dry twig. When I got out of the plane in Maputo, even before leaving the airport, even before showing my passport to the woman behind the counter, still in line, I began to feel the immense fragility of my bones, my tendons, my skin. It's an impression I absorb from the air around me, my peripheral field of vision, the smells, everything happening around me. Here in this place I'm at the mercy of the images, in this place I'm at the mercy of the others. Perhaps Mozambique is the wolf of my childhood sinking its teeth into my arm with its clouded eyes and a muted snarl in its throat.

When I divorced Fernanda I went to my father's house to let him know. I preferred him to hear it from me. For the first and only time in his life he talked to me about his own divorce and offered an explanation. "When I came back from the war I thought I didn't have to put up with certain things." But that's as far as it went, he didn't go any further. He didn't explain why his marriage continued under the form of adultery. It was as if he said: "When I came back from the war, that great lie, I believed I'd earned the right to lie too." Sitting in that living room in the flat in Olivais, I was ready to ask him: "What about us? What about me and Leonor? What

about the landing? Didn't you see us there?" But I chose to keep quiet, as I'd always done. Putting the past into words, asking my father for an explanation, would be to throw out decades of a delicate balance, wisely constructed, a non aggression pact based on great swathes of silence that he undertook to conceal, while chattering on. Pointing a finger at him and asking him to explain himself, strange as it may seem, would be to display my wounds, lower my guard, give in. It would be like saying to him: "You know, you hurt me."

The epilogue to my dream as a newlywed depended on the night. Sometimes, Amália, you couldn't summon up enough perverse strength to tell your dead husband the truth and you ended up giving him your hand and you climbed up the hill and went through the gate at the top just so as not to wipe off his face the smile of relief on seeing you arrive. But most times, the dream ended in suspense, without an ending, you and him face to face, he with a trace of panic on his face when he sensed your hesitation, you paralysed by the enormity of the gesture demanded of you, and gradually everything blurred like the shadows of foliage cast upon the ground by the sun beating down, which the wind then comes to stir. This dream came to occupy pride of place in my mental furniture. I started thinking that if you died before me, I'd have to find a way to die straightaway, without wasting any time, so as not to let you run away, for you not to arrive alone at the foot of the hill with the wall at the top. With me beside you, you wouldn't have to say a word, he'd realise as soon as he saw us, he'd hide his face, turn into the shadow of the foliage trembling in the sun. But there was something about this solution that made me uneasy.

Everyone wants to know what brings me here. Whether I have come on business, to work, to earn money, whether I have come to kill big game. And if I wasn't even born in this country and I haven't come in search of memories of my childhood and youth, well then, they are surely thinking I must be stupid to come and get myself into a hole like this. I must be crazy. Or else I've come to expiate my sins. I have a lot of sins to expiate, certainly, mine and other people's. Artur's story doesn't convince anyone. The child, son of a prostitute, who my father adopted jointly with lance-corporal Gamito in Chicôco, and neither had the courage to bring to Portugal. At the decisive moment, sitting side by side in the Berliet army truck with the column ready to leave for the south, they let the kid walk away across the football field of beaten earth, neither of them raised his voice to call him, neither of them gave him a hand to climb up into the truck. Neither of them wanted to take on that responsibility, both took fright when faced with the dizziness of the irreversible, neither of them wanted to take back to Portugal a living body, the eyes and ears and mouth of a black child of the war, someone who, growing up, would hold them to account every day, would force them to be better every day. In their luggage they brought the spoils of war, simple and easy to pack up, handmade arrows and spears, grenade pins, empty cartridges, porcupine quills. And lance-corporal Gamito, instead of Artur, brought back in his luggage the miniature uniform he'd had made up in the fabric of a camouflage shirt by the tailor in the native village, the uniform the kid is wearing in so many photographs where he appears with my father, with lance-corporal Gamito.

People ask me: “But is he your brother? Oh, he isn’t? Even so, you’ve come looking for him, you want to meet him, is that it? Hmm…” They find it hard to understand what I’m doing in Mozambique, perhaps they think I’ve come here to show off the dilettantism of a war tourist, an English lord savouring the delights of a night of debauchery in a nineteenth-century London slum. A holidaymaker in a penal colony, a white man voluntarily chained up in the hold of a slave ship trying to understand how one survives the Atlantic crossing, a healthy man going about in a wheelchair, in a hospital ward for patients with spinal cord injuries. My presence in this place is slightly insulting to those who live here. I deserve everything that happens to me, I’m asking for it, I’ll pay for it all, through me the accounts will be settled. Through me, even if only slightly, the gap that separates two worlds will be closed. Through me, everyone will be able to get even for a whole genealogy of betrayal, deceit and arrogance. I´ll be made to keep the promises my white skinned ancestors could not or would not keep. In me the intimate lie will rediscover its universal vocation.

The alpha male of the pack immediately spotted me from far away, from on top of the hill, I was the tallest, I was the alpha male of that band of intruders. Here it’s the same, they all see me coming, all the heads turn in the street when I pass. Yesterday at lunch, Cristina Matos, professor at the Pedagogical University of Maputo, whose contact was arranged for me back in Portugal, turned to me with a slightly worried look, and said:

“You mean you’re going to Niassa…”

Then she asked:

“But is it an academic project? No? Ah, it’s really just curiosity…”

And that fleeting, glazed expression passed through her eyes, the look of someone who sees a man walking along the road in shirtsleeves at the height of winter, or a mother letting her infant lean out of a very high window. A look that seemed to be saying: "Well, it's none of my business, you know what you're doing. You're on your own." The true reasons for my visit cannot be confided to anyone. I can't share the images that bring me here with anyone. They're like the Roman frescoes exposed by the tunnelling machine in Fellini's *Roma*. Laid bare to outside gazes, they turn to paste and suddenly fade away.

I deal with the fear of death by constructing elaborate fables, composing, in order to calm myself, fictions based on an exclusively aesthetic criterion. Like Sebastian Flyte, who tells Charles Ryder that he believes in the story of the Three Wise Men and the Star of Bethlehem and the donkey and cow behind the manger, because they are beautiful tales and that is how his faith is, he believes in things because they are beautiful. I too believe in the Three Wise Men and the donkey and the cow, but in relation to death and what happens afterwards I don't look to the Bible, I dream things up in order to take air time away from my inner demons. Dying and going to the other world is like re-entering the earth's atmosphere at the controls of a space ship, except that instead of re-entering the atmosphere, we enter the other world. It's a dangerous journey, the least error of calculation can destroy everything, we can disintegrate, die again, this time definitively, and end up locked in a dark room for the whole of eternity. But there are noticeable differences depending on the way one dies. Those who die through illness or accident make the crossing to the other

world in passenger ships commanded by experienced pilots, while suicides find themselves alone, at the controls of a little module, with a panel of instruments with dozens of coloured buttons and flashing lights in front of their eyes, and a voice saying in their ear: “Now sort yourself out.” I began to think I wouldn’t be able to commit suicide after your dying, you’d be taken one way and me the other way, you to the transatlantic ship, me to the space scooter, that I would inevitably end up crashing and getting locked in the dark room, peering through the keyhole or the letter slot, watching you arrive alone along with your first husband, watching you go up the hill side by side once and again, and again, incessantly. That was when I embraced you strongly in the kitchen and asked you in a quiet voice to swear we would die hand in hand, on the same day, at the same hour. You immediately said yes, and it struck me that you weren’t surprised by such a morbid, sick request. It even seemed to me that you had been waiting for me to come up with it, and that you would have been disappointed if I hadn’t. There’s a black and white photograph of Stefan Zweig lying in bed beside his wife, both of them dead, open-mouthed. If we kill ourselves at the same time, we’ll find ourselves in a little two-seater ship, a shuttle, with me sitting at the controls and a voice saying in our ears “Now sort yourselves out.” That way, at least, if something goes wrong on the crossing, we’ll end up locked in the same darkened room. We’ll talk to one another in the darkness, we’ll be able to touch each other’s face and hands, make love from time to time. I don’t think they’ll deny us that. I don’t think they’ll separate us.

I'm always asking you: "And when I'm no longer capable, will you still love me?" You always say yes, call me silly, I always doubt you. It's so important, the physical act. Perhaps in that darkened room making love to you would be just touching my foot against your foot, without any other effort, without any other demand.

I've been in Mozambique for two days and I have loved you more in these forty-eight hours than in a whole year in Portugal. I've loved you more in this country because I look around and like to imagine you transplanted here, fragile and defenceless in this fierce place. I imagine you disorientated in the middle of this chaotic traffic, making yourself strong before the electrified fences of the houses in Polana, teaching our daughters, still babies, that they must not touch those wires. I love you in the deformities of this land because here you would be more defenceless than ever, and I like to see you, so frail and so delicate, making yourself brave and strong. I love you in the dilapidated buildings, in the slums, in the rubbish that is piled up everywhere, in the barefoot crowds, in the cars that seem caught up in wires, in the puddles of filthy water, in the air of abandonment in everything, in the presidential peacocks scratching about in the middle of the swarms of flies and plastic bags. I love you in the obscene contrasts, in the new Maputo tower blocks, hideous skyscrapers surrounded by shit, looking as if they were made of cheap plastic. I love you in this hotel in Nampula with a pseudo-English name, the Indicus Hotel, enormous, shiny new, the sullen-faced Indian owners behind the reception desk while, on the other side of the avenue full of holes, the decaying houses from the colonial

era stand in line, now inhabited by wretchedly poor people, a siege mentality, like a field laid out in the middle of the savannah.

After my father died, my stepmother gave me his war diaries. In his insanely tiny handwriting, between jottings on telegrams, letters and aerograms he sent and received, references to hunting expeditions, military operations, football results heard on the radio, the medical treatment he dispensed to the soldiers and the natives, the books he read and the films he saw in the bush, among caustic observations and praise for people and places, my father wrote, on the day when second lieutenants Gomes and Matias returned to Chicôco, after three whole days wandering through the bush, without the guerrilla fighter who had been taken under arrest to show them a weapons cache: "The blackest day of my tour of duty to date. Return of Gomes and Matias. They didn't bring back any weapons and from this operation on they can no longer have a clear conscience. I feel the most wretched of men for having got 'involved' in this mess. Will I be able to put today behind me?" Reading this was liberating for me. I can talk to the most wretched of men, exchange impressions. I can offer the most wretched of men consolation. The most wretched of men bears inside him a dose of unhappiness as big as mine, we are companions, we understand one another, between us there is a bond that no happiness can undo.

In Maputo airport I caught a yellow and green taxi that was falling apart. The taxi driver was called José Muerere, a young man, with a reluctant smile. I sat in front, beside him, my door would not close, he got up and came around to slam it shut — "There's a knack to it" — we went down Avenida Joaquim Chissano and at the roadside there was earth, a lot

of red earth, low lying clay brick houses mixed with corrugated metal huts, a sea of huts as far as the eye could see, and I think that this was what shocked me most in the beginning, this tone which my eyes had already become unaccustomed to seeing, the colour of raw earth inside the city, the colour of misery, the colour of the earth shaken off and trodden by a thousand feet that we expelled methodically from Lisbon, covering it with asphalt, with concrete, with Portuguese paving, with cobblestones, with green grass, hiding it in the suburbs, far from the city centre, and there it was offered up to my gaze, red as brick dust, promising to become mud in the rainy season and to break down into columns of dust in this month of August. And everywhere on the edge of that huge, poor neighbourhood there was rubbish piled up in heaps, and women walking about with reflective vests collecting the rubbish with buckets and spades which they then went and emptied into huge metal containers, like skips for the rubble from building works, but much bigger, and you could see right away that they would never be able to gather up all that rubbish, and you could see right away they knew the task was inglorious and useless and it wasn't worth making much of an effort and they all seemed very tired. And José saw me looking at the rubbish and the women, and he said:

"That's our reality."

On the radio, a rapper was shouting out the story of a night out on a binge when he'd got drunk and thrown up in the middle of the dance floor, and every so often he repeated the refrain: "I'm all fucked up."

Many years ago, on our first holidays abroad, we travelled around the north of Italy, passing through Venice. We were still finding ourselves. I

could contemplate you at my leisure, you wore short skirts, I confirmed that you had a nice pair of legs. You had a birthmark on your left thigh, high up, a great café au lait-coloured stain, quite visible, sometimes darker, sometimes lighter, depending on your heartbeat, one might say, depending on your emotions. I didn't mind, even so your legs were magnificent, you showed them off without appearing to show them off on purpose, as if they had nothing to do with you. And you were quiet, you didn't talk much. This was the most important thing. That, and your not making fun of me. I chased the cats of Venice through the narrow streets, they paid no attention to me whatsoever, as soon as I reached out my arm, they ran away from me. You watched me for as long as necessary, without irony or annoyance, never rushing me, never telling me "Hurry up, won't you?" or "Stop that." As if everything I did interested you. Loving you was sleeping with you in an inn hidden in an alley in Cannaregio. No one had ever accepted me as a whole, without choosing one bit and rejecting the rest, without peeling me, without spitting out the pips. You weren't ashamed of the birthmark on your thigh, so big and so obvious. You didn't flaunt it, but you didn't hide it either. You gave me short discreet lessons about the best way to live with our own body. You seemed available to let yourself be annexed without making a fuss. You didn't bother about money, you spent it without any great distress. All the same, we never got to go on a gondola in Venice, because it was expensive and the tourists were looking and pointing and photographing the other tourists in the gondolas, and I didn't want to put on a show. The fear of ridicule paralysed me, repugnance for what my father called "making a scene." A "scene" was everything that drew other people's attention. I fell in

love with you because you don't cause "scenes", we fell in love discreetly, hidden from one another, we held off as far as we could from giving voice to our love, I resist telephoning you, sending you text messages, dowsing us in the banality of "I've arrived", "I'm arriving", "what time do you arrive", of portable technology.

Completely wiped out after the night flight, I began to contemplate the Indian Ocean from the terrace of the Clube Marítimo, in Maputo, where Cristina Matos took me to lunch yesterday. There wasn't a single black person sitting on the terrace, Amália. All the waiters were black. At one point a mixed-race woman arrived and sat down. At one fifteen in the afternoon I noted in my travel notebook the ethnic makeup of that place. Twenty-seven clients on the terrace: the mixed-race woman who had just arrived, a woman of Indian descent who was Cristina Matos herself, four Asians, very probably Chinese, twenty-one white people, including myself. I learned in the past, it must have been at university, that statistics, to be scientifically valid, must be based on quantitively relevant numbers. But, you know, for a long time I've not given a damn about the scientific validity of things. I am interested in small numbers, fleeting impressions, out of focus photograms, unrepeatable moments. Twenty-one whites, four Chinese, a mixed-race woman, an Indian woman and not a single black person sitting on the terrace of the Clube Marítimo at precisely one fifteen in the afternoon on an August day in 2015 in Maputo. And all of us served by black waiters. Other blacks could be seen down below, far away, on the enormous muddy beach exposed by the low tide, collecting shellfish. The chef came to talk to

us at the end of the meal, asking if the prawns were good. He was white, Italian.

Here I am the white man. Here I see myself subsumed into a category with many others, as if I was connected to them by some bond – the whites. I'm not used to this. Here I am me and I am also the white man, I am two things at the same time. In fact, I am more things. I am me, I am the white man, I'm Portuguese, I'm well-off, I'm male. Each of these added conditions, from which I cannot manage to escape in this country, entails privileges, responsibilities, risks. I am obliged to keep them all in the forefront of my mind, always. This overload leaves me exhausted. Unheedingly, while I was growing up, I learned to be me. But I never learned to be the white man, the Portuguese, the well-off man, the male. The gazes that seek me out here are building up at each step a new person I didn't know existed beneath my skin. In this country, the other is embedded in me. As in a good horror film, the poison that will kill us is found in our very depths.

At the exit, when we went back to the car, on the coast road, some boys came up selling coconuts, and Cristina talked to them the way you talk to poor people, in a loud tense voice: "Wait a minute, let's calm down", she sat down at the steering wheel, closed the car door, I sat on her left-hand side and also closed my door, then she wound the window down a third of the way and asked one of the boys how much the coconuts cost and began to haggle about the price, "No, that's too much", put the key in the ignition and pretended she'd lost interest, they lowered the price straightaway and she said "Go on then, give me two coconuts" and told them to open a hole in each coconut with the machete and said not to forget the little plastic straws

and she lowered the window a little further so the coconuts could be passed through and immediately wound it up again and held out the note and received the change through the crack and we pulled away and one of the car's wheels went into a hole, giving a sudden jolt and half of the water from my coconut spilled and soaked my trousers and ran into the bottom of the car. But it was so hot it evaporated in an instant and my trousers were in fact "quick dry", as their label promised.

At first sight, you let me occupy a lot of space inside you. I carefully delimit the space I allow you to occupy inside me. I have very little space available, I am not a spacious person inside. I am very compartmentalised, things don't flow from one drawer into the others. You understood that I am this cramped thing, squeezed, as my grandmother used to say, and you still loved me. Not as if I were a cripple or someone needing treatment or a cure. You accepted my narrow reality and moved in, into the corner I pointed out for you, without complaining or demanding more room, with an almost suspicious readiness.

After lunch Cristina dropped me off at the hotel, I asked her where the Natural History Museum was, she told me it was at the end of the road, "you can go on foot", I took another shower, always spitting in order not to swallow the water, brushed my teeth with bottled water, left the hotel with my camera hanging from my shoulder. With the museum already in sight I sat down at a terrace, asked for a can of coke, then stood up and went into the café to pay. The owner was white. I got into conversation with him, asked him if the electric fences around the houses were switched on during the day. "The electric wires was one of the things that shocked me most

when I got here," he began to speak eagerly with me, "yes, the law allows it," as if he'd been waiting a long time to let off steam, "what's more, there aren't any laws in this country. Everyone does just as they like", he spoke in lowered tones, "I don't have an electric fence at my house because children go by on their way to school and sometimes they jump over the fence to pick fruit from the trees in my garden and if one of them died it would be 'Jesus, that Portuguese is a bastard'", he lowered his voice even more to a conspiratorial whisper every time one of the waiters came up, "if they die at a Mozambican's house there isn't any problem, no one told them to jump over the wall, but if it happens at the Portuguese person's house, I'm done for", the waiters were all black, of course, "I've been lucky, I've never been burgled", he was like a Robinson Crusoe, "I have a pair of really fierce guard dogs, I let them loose at night, they won't accept food from anyone", he was like a Robinson Crusoe stranded for many years on his desert island, visited by cannibals, "I got a couple because they warned me that with just a male dog the thieves could bring a bitch in heat to distract him, for him to go after her to mate, and they could break in quite easily", a Robinson Crusoe coming face to face on the beach with another white castaway, "there are burglaries every day, they put rugs on top of the barbed wire, cut the bars on the windows with enormous bolt cutters, go into the houses and steal everything", a happy and relieved Robinson Crusoe, but still fearful that at any moment he might spot the cannibals' canoes, "here in the café I always have to keep an eye on the waiters or else they'd steal the money out of the till, they steal the products, they steal everything", he stroked his moustache and looked over my shoulder at the waiters, "I don't trust

anyone, there isn't a single bloke here I can trust, there's no one I'd stick my neck out for," he talked about 'them,' the Mozambicans, the blacks, in the tone of frustration and controlled anger used by someone talking about irresponsible relatives who have fallen to our lot, "what are you looking at, don't you have anything to do? There are clients waiting out on the terrace, can't you see?", he talked to me without looking me in the eye, "it's always like this, always gawking, but they know it all", he spoke to me as if he was apologising for being there, "this country has everything, everything waiting to be developed, to be rich", he didn't ask me who I was, "it even has oil", he didn't ask me what I had come to do in Mozambique, "these blokes are dumb as hell, the guys in charge just want to steal, the others follow their example", it was a covered terrace, there were two enormous television sets mounted high up, both tuned to a Portuguese news channel, "I don't go to hospital here, no way", forest fires in Portugal, "I took out an insurance policy with a company based here", forbidden to harvest clams, mussels and other shellfish in the Tagus estuary, "if I, my wife or my son have a health issue, we are evacuated right away by plane or helicopter to South Africa", Duarte Lima sold a Brueghel painting, "you wouldn't catch me in the local hospitals, only if I was crazy", Américo Amorim has lost money but he's still the wealthiest man in Portugal, "I came to Mozambique to help out a friend, I didn't mean to stay", the Mullah Omar is dead, "I am fifty-six years old, four years ago a fellow from my hometown went back to Portugal and asked me to take care of this café, so that it wouldn't all go down the drain", the Benfica pre-season, "I was counting on it being for a year or two, until he found someone else," Jorge Mendes is getting married, "but I brought my

wife and son, the boy started to go out with a girl here, now he wants to marry her", sitting at the tables on the terrace there were only white people, "he's an only child, my wife only has eyes for him, it's 'my boy' here, 'my boy there', he'll probably always be 'my boy', even when he's forty", not one Chinese, "and then we stayed on, but I live in fear, you know", not a single Indian, "I live in a lot of fear".

The Maputo Natural History Museum is a macabre relic. I wanted to go there because of the slides my father sometimes showed, on holidays. The lights would be turned down and images would be projected on to the white wall: Leonor and I as children, in the Little Portugal tourist attraction or in the Estrela mountain range, playing with the snow, outlined in front of the white Volkswagen Beetle or on our mother's lap, always with screwed up faces and a tortured expression because of the sun blazing into our eyes. The pictures followed one another on the wall in vivid colours, brutal in their purity, reds, blues, immaculate whites, clear colours, sharp silhouettes, faces in the foreground, undisguised gestures. Then came three photographs my father had taken in Lourenço Marques, on his way to the war or coming back, on a stopover of the *Vera Cruz*, a scene immersed in a halo of darkness, the light filtering down from above, soft and limpid, highlighting the animals against the very black backdrop like figures emerging to meet us in a canvas by Caravaggio. It was a life and death struggle between a Cape buffalo and a pride of lions, photographed from different angles. The animals, although embalmed, seemed to be alive. Or rather, petrified by magical arts, just waiting for someone to cast a new spell for them to resume their interrupted gestures. The buffalo had huge bleeding gashes on

his back, but had managed to bring down a lioness who was lying between his front hoofs and, with bared teeth, was trying to defend herself from an imminent goring. There was a lion with a luxuriant mane, suspended in the air in mid jump, ready to sink his claws into the buffalo's hindquarters. And there was a lioness with her intestines spilling out lying to one side, in the shadow, in the middle of the tufts of fake grass.

The museum is very pretty from the outside, in a pseudo-manueline wedding cake style. Inside, it drags along, poorly made and mouldy because that's the way it is, because there's no money or energy to turn the page, because the strength of what exists weighs down on things and stifles what could exist, because the violence is unremitting and doesn't let you serenely revisit the past and sieve through it in order to keep the little gold nuggets and throw away the rubbish and wash the floors and air the rooms. The animals are full of dust, rotten with gangrene, there's a grey leopard who's lost his spots, with a broken tail and the straw showing through. The buffalo and the lions that my father photographed are still in their place, in the main exhibition room, beneath a huge skylight, in the same position as fifty years ago, but seen close up in the cruel sunlight that penetrates the filthy windowpanes, the scene has no charm whatsoever, they look like people wearing badly fitting animal skins, in some cases too tight, others hanging off their bodies, the glass eyes bulging out, their eyelids dry and peeling. The lions involved in the melee have their claws freshly painted with Ferrari-red paint, so thick that the streaks of the hairs of the paintbrush with which the work was done can be seen. The buffalo has smears of the same colour glistening in the wounds on his back.

I've come to Mozambique in search of the time when Leonor and I still hadn't poisoned our rivers with heavy metals or cut down our virgin forests. Our parents were already who they were, everything they would do was already inscribed in them, but Leonor and I were not yet able to understand. We played with the snow in the Estrela mountains, we felt the icy water running down our arms. We picked up dry leaves from the ground in the Campo Pequeno garden, we rolled the petiole of the leaves between our fingers as if they were pinwheels. The snow and the plane tree leaves saturated our senses, intoxicated us, they were a powerful drug. They were the antidote to what we had sensed from early on in the substance of things, in our father and mother's gestures: burrs, splinters, sharp edges. When we grew up and there was no more snow and dead leaves, all we had left, full of revulsion, in the absence of any alternative, was to try to be like them.

At the entrance they allocated a guide to me, a friendly young man called Miguel Gonçalves, an intern at the museum who wants to be a tourist guide. Timid, he gave me explanations in an uneasy tone about each of the animals, gesticulating wildly with his hands, until I made the mistake of adding a detail to a phrase of his about the rhinoceros and he smiled and fell silent and didn't talk any more and began to follow me in silence. He only opened his mouth again in front of the "biggest collection of elephant foetuses in the world", a glass display case with fourteen pachyderm still-births lined up in rows, from a little yellow monster the size of a bean, in formaldehyde, to a rotund doll that looked as if it was made of plaster, the size of a calf, with a desiccated umbilical cord emerging from the depths of its belly, painted the same grey colour as the sawfishes on the upper floor.

Miguel began to reel off the spiel about the elephant foetuses that he had learned by heart for these occasions, and said: “This is the most valuable piece in our museum, the gestation period of the elephant is twenty-two months, more than double that of the human being, those foetuses were collected during an elephant slaughter south of Maputo during the First World War, to clear the land for farming, the chief of the brigade of hunters was Mr. Carreira, who luckily happened to think of having all the females’ bellies opened up and keeping the foetuses, today a thing like that wouldn’t be possible, killing two thousand elephants in one sitting, and to make the crime even more serious, in the end the area in question was never used for farming, it was a sad event but the collection remained, the only one in the world.”

This country doesn’t explain anything to me. It’s a place where an added veil of distance isolates me from the others. A place where a latent violence seems to make positions more extreme. A place where old conflicts that time has left raw are played out again and again. A place where there is no peace. Here, at first sight, everything is done the hard way, there are victims and executioners. In fact, it is more subtle than that. We have to decide at every moment whether we want to be victims or executioners. We can be victims now and executioners five minutes later, or the other way round. Isabela Figueiredo says there are innocent-innocents and guilty-innocents. She says there are victim-victims and guilty-victims. And she says that among the victims there are executioners. My father came to the war under duress, but he came. The war ruined his life, but he did it. He hated the army, but he slept with black women. He felt sorry for these

people, but he left and never came back. He adopted Artur in the bush, but, when it was time to leave, he left him behind and never, ever spoke to me about him. He believed he was a victim of war, of the army. The war stories he told, more than a narration, were just one long justification. It's not worth telling these people I am the son of a victim-executioner. Here, in the eyes of these people, my father was just an executioner. Artur is a victim, that's beyond doubt. That's why I've come in search of him. Perhaps I don't really want to find him. Perhaps I'm afraid that in the meantime he's turned into an executioner. And me? I'm a victim, of course. And an executioner as well. This country, apparently so divided, is after all the place where things are the most blurred, the place where what stands out is the overlapping of roles and bodies, victim and executioner, innocent and guilty. I thought I was coming to Mozambique in search of the time when my father, victim-executioner, could still say with conviction that he was just a victim. Perhaps I have come, after all, to cure myself of my compartmentalisation anxiety. And to leave my dead here, if I can.

I asked Miguel if there might not be some publication in the museum about the foetuses, for me to find out more about that Mr. Carreira, about the clearing operation that killed two thousand elephants. He told me:

"Maybe in the library, I'll take you there."

We went past a smallish aquarium with dirty grey water, with one solitary and very ordinary fish that looked like a codfish fritter made of mud raising murky clouds as it nosed about. A sign read "Don't touch the aquarium." We went past broken down carousels with zebras and gnus, past a panel saying "Visitors are forbidden to present themselves in a state of

intoxication, use bad language or behave inappropriately, touch the objects on exhibition or cause any damage", past a varnished coelacanth with mangy fins, past an anthill cut lengthwise with ten levels below the ground and trails of embalmed ants marching through its galleries. We went through the ethnology section, full of highschool students, boys and girls in uniform, white shirts, blue skirts or trousers, neckerchiefs on, standing in front of wooden figurines left to their fate inside dusty display cases, without a legend to rescue them from anonymity, like figures in a crowd, mixed with busts from the colonial era that were meant to represent the races of Mozambique, also unlabelled. Another, older guide winked at Miguel, turned to the pupils, pointed to a bust on its pedestal, and said very loudly:

"Pay attention, boys and girls. This is the Maconde."

The librarian was very kind, he had in his eyes the theatrical shine of a secondary character in a comedy of errors, the look of a compere ready to lose his composure and burst out laughing. He heard my request, then said no, they didn't have anything about the elephant foetuses, nor about the slaughter, nor about Mr. Carreira. I asked if the library had a catalogue, he said it didn't, "We don't have a catalogue", and narrowed his eyes as if he had just made a joke and was waiting for me to laugh or to give him the cue to laugh as well. "Perhaps there's something here," he eventually told me, not at all convinced, with the awkward air of a comedian playing a serious part, and he pulled off from a metal shelf a pile of very old French scientific journals, from colonial times, all mottled with wine-coloured stains from the rusty staples. I sat down at the table to leaf through the magazines so as not

to seem arrogant, knowing I wouldn't find anything in them to interest me. A woman in a white lab coat came in, the librarian said to her:

"This gentleman is from Portugal. He's come to do a study, and he's going to take us back to Lisbon with him."

They both burst out laughing, I took a photograph of them in front of one of the metal bookshelves, along with Miguel, I asked them for "just one more," then "just one more." Behind them, in the bookcase, in the middle of the bound German and English magazines from long, long ago, there was a shelf full of science fiction paperbacks, produced by Portuguese and American pulp fiction imprints, with improbable covers and titles to go with them, all falling apart, with broken spines, dog-eared pages. *The Number of the Monster*. *The Year of the Comet*. *The Cosmic Temptation*. *Corruption in the Galaxies*. The librarian told me that the museum director was afraid of snakes and they all laughed again and I laughed too and took another photograph of them, "just one more."

Cristina came to collect me at the museum to go to dinner, turned onto the coast road, saw two policemen in the distance, slowed down, said to me in a confiding tone:

"There are policemen over there. I avoid them as much as possible, because some are corrupt. I always travel with a lab coat to put on when the police appear. I say I am a university lecturer, they have a lot of respect for teachers and doctors."

Forget what I said a while back, Amália. I am not a victim. Never a victim. I have the yearning of the dispossessed, the wretched of the earth. I'm hungry and I'm thirsty, I want everything for myself. I want your love

just for me, I want your sadness, your hope, everything just for me. And I am afraid, very much afraid. Afraid of old age. Afraid of becoming impotent. That day will come, I know it, I feel it. I will put it off by shouting, by my absolute certainty, my temerity, my blows of audacity. I am «strong in the way that victims are strong», as Michael Herr wrote. Nothing can deter me, nothing can defeat me.

This morning, when I woke up at five o'clock, I thought Maputo a beautiful city. The alarm went off, I washed myself in the bath, shaved, packed my case, distributed the junk in my pockets, on my shoulders and in my hands, wallet, travel bag, mobile phone, camera, spare camera battery, travel notebook, ballpoint pens, passport, moist wipes, I went out on to the pavement opposite the hotel and waited for José Muerere's taxi in the darkness of the deserted street. There was no one to be seen, in the darkness there was a peacefulness reminiscent of Lisbon, two steps away was a petrol station with a soft light shining near the cash till, and beside the petrol station a condemned building, the skeleton of a building, windows with no glass or frames, a strange geometric form riddled with rectangular holes, and the pavements were the same ones as yesterday, dug up and filthy, but in that darkness there was a rarefied reality that didn't address me, didn't ask me for any explanations. Two white men in shorts and trainers went running past, covered in sweat, and one asked me in English if that was a good hotel and I made a gesture saying "so-so" and he raised his thumb and went off running slowly with his friend, and at that moment José Muerere's green and yellow taxi appeared and I found it funny, you know, it made me want to laugh, with nearly no lights on, just the

sidelights, the panels all bashed in and dented as if the bodywork was made of crumpled paper, I greeted José and he smiled, which was rare, José Muerere's first smile, though without showing his teeth, still restrained, maybe testing the ground. Gradually, things began to shine in the light of dawn, the door on my side wouldn't close again, only on the third attempt, with a kick, I sat in front again, in the dead man's seat, so as not to create a barrier between me and the black taxi driver, but I lack conviction, I lack the naturalness of those who feel genuine brotherhood with all men. The car pulled away and you could feel things moving underneath it, the exhaust panel bumping along, the taxi seemed like a buffalo with its guts hanging out fleeing from lions, but in today's dawn in Maputo, I felt invulnerable, Amália, I felt the sharp braking, people suddenly crossing in front of the car, the sky was the dark blue of the Indian ink I like to write with, and there was a possibility of solitude and anonymity in those semi-deserted avenues. I asked José if he knew anyone in Nampula, because I needed someone to drive me to Cuamba. I had first planned to go by train, back in Portugal I did detailed research on the internet, there's a train from Nampula to Cuamba on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, it leaves Nampula at five o'clock in the morning, the journey takes twelve hours, the train stops at all the stations, big and small, a quarter of an hour or twenty minutes each time, people come from all around to sell their wares to the passengers, fruit, vegetables, God knows what, all it took was one day in Maputo to put paid to my fantasies, what I have to do is get a car to take me and pay whatever it costs. I didn't go into all of this with José, I just asked him if he knew anyone in Nampula, he asked me for my phone number, I told him I

didn't have a Mozambican number and he said "We'll buy a phone" and he swerved the steering wheel and reversed and I felt a wave of euphoria, it seemed we could pretend we were just a taxi driver and his client in any city, and on top of that, men speaking the same language, it struck me as possible, during that half hour, to pretend there hadn't been any Vasco da Gama, there hadn't been any colonies, there hadn't been any war, there wasn't and there isn't any oppression, to pretend that we're going to start again, unsullied and having fun, pretending that we're brothers. We stopped at a corner where the traffic was already chaotic at that early morning hour, and he leaned out of the window without switching off the engine, his hand on the steering wheel, looked over at the other side of the road and shouted, "Hey! Come here!", he whistled, beckoned someone with his open hand waving downwards, a kid in a fluorescent vest came over, skipped across the road, José didn't look him in the face, he looked sideways at him and then spoke to him with his gaze fixed on the windscreen, reluctantly, almost with disgust, "Do you have phone cards?", the kid said he didn't have any phone cards, only if he went and got them, "Go on then", the kid ran off skipping between the cars, disappeared round the corner, came back after three minutes, "Which network do you prefer? Vodacom? Mcel?", I chose Vodacom at random, "How much do you want to put on it?" the kid asked in a low voice and José repeated the words inside the car, turning towards me. I asked his advice, I asked him how much, he said "two hundred, then you can charge it with more", turned to the kid and said "Give me two hundred", he answered "I don't have it, I just have a hundred and another hundred", José pulled a face of dissatisfaction, then he said: "So give me two one

hundred cards", I passed over the notes, received two scratch cards the width of the stripes of a shirt and the length of the fleshy part of my thumb, we pulled away, in the meantime day had already dawned, on the fast route to the airport there was a crossroads and the traffic was like a whirlpool in the drain of a blocked up bathtub, "the PIN is zero, zero, zero, zero, four zeros in a row", cars stretching as far as the eye could see, buses without doors, and in the middle of the crossroads a fat traffic policeman, actually a fat traffic policewoman, wearing enormous very white gloves, whistle in mouth, making exuberant gestures, ordering a stream of cars to advance, then another, then the other, ours is next, just one more car, just ten more, just fifty more, "you have to put in a code which is asterisk, one hundred, asterisk, zero, one, asterisk, then scratch and put in the code at the bottom there to charge it with a hundred *meticais*. I'm going to make some contacts then give you feedback if I find someone in Nampula." In the airport, while I was waiting for the flight here, eating a cheese and ham toastie and drinking a Compal tutti frutti, I saw on the television, without sound, on the programme Good Morning Mozambique, the news of "Mass fainting in Lichinga – 34 young people affected at the Friendship Secondary School", handpicked, one might say, to close this exciting start to the day in Maputo, this brief parenthesis of postcolonial reality, comical images of girls in school uniform, heads thrown back, teeth clenched, their eyes rolled back, shaken by fits that at first sight looked epileptic, arching their bodies defiantly, as if possessed, carried off by gaggles of boys, also in school uniform, who didn't disguise their mocking smiles and their enthusiasm at being filmed carrying those defenceless females in their arms, tripping over each other while

carrying those human burdens to the canteen converted into an improvised infirmary where, on gym mats lined up on the ground, the victims rolled insistently from one side to another like the wise men maddened by the curse of the Inca mummy in *The Seven Crystal Balls*.

When my father died, I went in search of his comrades-in-arms and began to write a novel about all the wars I had known, from near and afar, the colonial war, my intimate war. I felt inebriated, like someone revealing secrets, like someone visiting virgin territory. I knew straight away that I had to come to Mozambique, but only after finishing the novel. First I had to build up my Mozambique from scratch, and a new father to populate it. And then, yes, I could venture forth to this country, hoping that it wouldn't let me down. I finished the novel, published it, here I am. Nothing happened as I expected.

One of the first emails addressed to you that I could read, thanks to my home-made espionage, allowed me to understand that you committed the only unpardonable sin between us. You planned your death far from me, you deprived me of your death. You jealously guarded your right to die when and where it suited you.