

Meeting at the lake

*The taste the salt the humidity the smell all
of this on entering the bay of dreams ...
Everything is the sea beyond. Landscapes
whose immensity is the brief time that people
spend in them.*

Natália Correia, *The Nightly Sun and the Daily Moon*

No one noticed KaLua. From one moment to the next, he proceeded to defecate by the side of the church, alongside the small shrubs. ‘I love shitting to the sound of a good whistle...’ he thought, before standing up. He had two and a half rolls of toilet paper in his hands when he began running in the direction of Dissoxi’s house.

The door, although stiff, was not locked. He breathed in the fresh air, almost humid, so different from the village’s usual air. KaLua inhaled deeply, exhaled, and then did it innumerable times, until he awoke again.

In reality the room was in a salt warehouse. Dissoxi provided salt to the village and had enormous sacks leaning against the white walls, which gave off that thick smell of the sea. KaLua put his hand into one that was open, then thrust his forearm into the sack, feeling the salt refreshing his skin. He knew it well. He put his other arm into the sack and paid attention to smelling the interior of the hut. He almost believed he was hearing the sound of waves breaking over his soul, he almost felt wet. That was, it could be said, a house of the sea.

The walls, in their apparent simplicity, displayed very rare colourful and fine and curved and half-open shells. Lying in one corner was an enormous fishing net that, despite being rolled up, was still vast and laden with smells. The chairs were made with fishing net, the lamps were of coral, her bed was a blue net of the sea. KaLua touched the things with a childish fear: it seemed as if on being touched they dripped salt water! True: every little thing, shell, embalmed fish, net, strewn fishhooks, lines of thread making a mosquito net, everything of that world seemed damp. On being touched, they exhaled salt.

All of a sudden KaLua noticed the tiny little window that looked on to the street, on to the square, on to the church. Open-mouthed, he confirmed at that moment that that window, in reality, did not exist. 'But this house has no windows...', he thought, while making his way to the outside of the hut. It was surprising: from the outside the wall was smooth, white, endless, obstinate. KaLua smiled, made to go inside again, and look at that window once more. It was beautiful. Then he remembered Dissoxi. He began shouting, calling out to her as if in that miniscule house there was some place she could be hiding. Not finding her, as she had gone to the lake. He looked around, peered at the afternoon through the window and, not seeing anyone, picked up one of the beautiful shells and put it in his pocket.

He went back to wander on the square, from which most of the crowd had already dispersed. There were birds in the distance, and clouds, and a few stars already visible. He passed through a dense drove of donkeys, calm, grey, young. He stroked one, then another, scratched an ear, a leg, and set off on the walk to the lake.

The path was a sinuous world of beautiful and narrow curves, dishevelled by the slow passing of the donkeys, decorated with sparse silvery flowers and small shrubs along the edges, smooth from having been trod on due to the gentle earth they had there. It was a beautiful labyrinth with only one exit: to the lake.

KaLua saw her from a distance, more curled than a shell, more tilting on the breeze than a flower. Silently, withdrawn, sitting by herself, Dissoxi seemed like a human cactus, white and fragile, from which only her long hair, undulating, escaped. The lake seemed to him, at that moment in the late afternoon, like an enormous aquatic mouth readying itself to nibble away at her. Clutch-

ing on to his three rolls of toilet paper as well as he could, KaLua began running in her direction, with the more than heroic notion of saving her from the coincidental watery gnashing.

Dissoxi did not get a fright because she heard him from afar, because she felt in the air his hurried movement and because she immediately detected the smell of salt on the hands and arms and heart of KaLua. He grabbed her shoulder, pushing her gently backwards. She fell as much as floated over the stones, falling over them – without wanting to injure them. KaLua then looked slowly and intensely at the lake, its dimensions, its water, its quiet movement, its impressive parsimony, its intentions. He turned to Dissoxi. He spoke:

“Don’t worry,” he smiled, “today you won’t be swallowed by the lake.”

As Dissoxi did not say anything and simply took to staring at him, at his rolls of paper hanging from his hands and at his strange clothes, KaLua sat at her feet, setting – like her – to looking at the lake. Seated, the two of them, most arboreal. Dissoxi understood that he had come to tell her something.

“What’s wrong, KaLua?” she said, in her rarefied voice.

“The whistler...the whis...” KaLua began in a nervous tone, breathing impatience. “Today after lunch...Padre was there with KeMunuMunu, and then lots of birds came...” he demonstrated with his hands, with a look, the movement of the swarm.

“Calm down, KaLua,” Dissoxi almost ordered (gentle tone).

“And then that happened...” he closed his eyes KaLua, clutched his little rolls of toilet paper. “That sound...The man began to whistle, okay, I didn’t know where he was...I began to hear the sound, look, I swear on the health of whoever you want, I didn’t move a muscle...I don’t know how to explain, my stomach hurt, my head, everything, only my hearing didn’t hurt me...”

“And Padre?” Dissoxi enquired, eyes sad.

“Padre was sitting quietly, like the rest! It’s like I said, no one moved...the sound is what was moving! And afterwards everything was stopped, waiting for the end of the music that would never end... it was almost the whole afternoon!” KaLua exaggerated. “When I realised where I was, I was there by the side of the church having a piss...” he indicated his rolls of paper. “And afterwards, I don’t know why, Padre locked up the church!” KaLua stared at Dissoxi, awaiting a reaction.

Ondjaki

“Hmm...” murmured Dissoxi.

“And I went to find out...” KaLua looked at Dissoxi.

Then he stared at Dissoxi’s eyes, at her gaze. Behind the iris, where shine usually resides, there was another notion of light – an almost unshine, with a tendency to wane.

The window of her sadness was so vast that it almost opened a path to her soul.