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Translator's Preface

Élide Valarini Oliver

Paulo Mendes Campos (1922-1991) was a well-known writer and *cronista*. The reason I chose this one is simple: it practically defines the genre: it was written for and published by a periodical (like all true good *crônicas*), in this case, a newspaper; it is light yet serious; it has a definite, personal style (a "signature"); it balances the contingent with the necessary; and even if the 'fact' upon which it comments is now part of a past circumstance, it still stands on its own. He wrote this *crônica* for his daughter Maria da Graça, on her fifteenth birthday.

The challenge of this translation is to catch and transpose the right tone in which the *crônica* was written. In spite of Paulo Mendes Campos' style, this *crônica* has an identifiable Rio de Janeiro atmosphere: it is colloquial but philosophical; it is warm and informal. His critique on *Alice in Wonderland* betrays an intimacy that is characteristic: when Brazilians love something they make it their own. It is as if the book were written by a friend he knows.

Readers must know that this is not a translation but a version, since I have translated from my native Portuguese into English, for me a foreign language. One of the many problems with which I had to engage is theoretical. The text in Portuguese has quotes from *Alice in Wonderland*. What would be the best approach to deal with such quotes? To use the original text is a safe bet and actually the only option in many cases. However, there are many different translations of *Alice in Wonderland* in Portuguese and I couldn't identify the version that Mendes Campos used. It might be that he translated the text himself, in which case, my version, in order to be faithful, would have to translate his translation as well. I opted first for the latter approach, and some quotes came out weird, as it was gently pointed out by the editors of this magazine. I decided, then, to mix the quotes, leaving some as translations from Mendes Campos's text and others, following the original. At this point, I don't know which approach is the best and I'll leave it for the readers of this magazine to debate.

I would like to thank the editors of *Translation* for their suggestions that have much improved my originals.

"A 'Crônica'—For Maria da Graça" by Paulo Mendes Campos¹

Translated by Élide Valarini Oliver

Now that you have arrived at the advanced age of 15, Maria da Graça, I give you this book: *Alice in Wonderland*.

This book is crazy, Maria. That means its own sense is inside you. Listen: If you don't find a sense in madness, you'll end up mad. Learn, then, for all your life, to read this book as a simple manual of the evident sense of all things, including the mad ones. Learn this your way, because I can give you only a few clues among the thousands which open the doors of reality. Reality, Maria, is mad.

Not even the Pope or anybody in the world can answer without blinking, the question Alice asked her cat: "Tell me the truth, Dinah, have you ever eaten a bat?"

Don't be amazed when the world looks unrecognisable once you wake up. For better or for worse, this happens many times a year. "Who am I in the world?" This perplexed question is commonplace in all of our stories. The more you decipher this charade as embedded in yourself as your own bones, the stronger you'll get. Doesn't matter what the answer is. The most important is to give, or to invent, an answer. Even if it is a fib.

The lonelyhood (forget this word that I have just invented without even thinking) is inevitable. It is what Alice said at the bottom of the well: "I'm so tired of being here, alone." The important thing is that she managed to get out of there by opening a door. The door of the well! Only human creatures (not even the great apes or trained dogs) can open a well-closed door and vice-versa: close a well-opened door.

We are all such fools, Maria. We practise a trivial action and have the petulant presumption of expecting great consequences from it. When Alice ate the cake and didn't grow in size, she was totally befuddled. However, this is what generally happens to people when they eat cakes.

Maria, there is a social wisdom, otherwise called pocket wisdom; not every wisdom has to be grave.

We are always making mistakes in relation to our neighbours and the only way is to apologise seven times a day: "*Oh, I beg your pardon!*" Because to live is to throw stones at those who live in glass houses. For this reason,

for your pocket wisdom, I tell you: if you like cats, try the mouse's point-of-view. This is what the mouse told Alice: "Would you like cats if you were me?"

Men are always running a race, Maria. In offices, businesses, national and international politics, in clubs, bars, in the arts, in literature, even friends, siblings, husbands and wives, and boyfriends and girlfriends are always running a race. These competitions are so confusing, so full of tricks, so unnecessary, so pretending-they-are-not, so ridiculous in their hidden ways, that when the athletes arrive, exhausted, to a point, they usually say: "The race is over! But who won the race?" It's foolishness, Maria da Graça, to enter a race if we won't be able to know who will win. If you have to go some place, don't be affected by the tiresome vanity of being the first to arrive. If you always arrive where you want to, you've won.

The mouse said: "My story is long and sad." You'll hear this a thousand times. Likewise, you'll hear the other terrible variant as well: "My life could be a novel!" Well, as all lives lived to the end are long and sad and as all lives could be novels, because a novel is only a way of telling a life, flee, politely but energetically, from men and women who sigh and say: "My life could be a novel." Mostly men: real bores, Maria.

Miracles always happen in the life of everyone and the life of everybody. But, contrary to what is often thought, the best and deepest miracles don't occur all of a sudden, but rather slowly, very slowly. I want to say the following: the word "depression" will be out of fashion sooner or later. As I suspect it will be later, prepare yourself for the visit of the monster, and don't despair at Alice's sad thought: "I must be shrinking again". Somewhere there is a mushroom that makes us grow back again.

And listen to this perfect parable: Alice had shrunk so much that she mistook a mouse for a hippopotamus. This happens a lot, Mariazinha. But let us not be naïf, since the opposite also happens. And there is another British writer who says more or less the following: the mouse we expelled yesterday has turned, today, into a terrifying rhinoceros. Indeed. Our soul is a complicated machine which produces, as we live, a considerable amount of mice which look like hippos and rhinos which look like mice. The only thing to do is to laugh at the former confusion and remain firm in order to face the rhino entering our territory disguised as a mouse. And

because to take the small for the big and the big for the small is always a bit comical, we should never lose our sense of humour.

Everybody must have three boxes in which to store humour: one big box for the cheap humour we spend on the street with people; one medium size box for the humour we need when alone, in order to forgive ourselves and to laugh at ourselves; finally, a precious little box, very hidden, for the big occasions. I call big occasions those dangerous moments in which we are full of sorrow or vanity, in which we fall into the temptation of thinking we failed or triumphed, in which we feel that we are either losers or very cool people. Beware Maria, on such big occasions!

Finally, yet another pocket word: sometimes a person abandons herself so completely to suffering, and with such complacency, that she's afraid she won't be able to escape. Sorrow also has its enchantment, and it turns against the enchanted. That's why Alice, after having wept a pool, thought to herself: "Now, I'll be punished and will drown in my own tears."

Conclusion: even pain has its limits. It's ugly, it's immodest, it's vain, it's dangerous to cross the border of our own pain, Maria da Graça.

Note

1. "Crônicas", a term I prefer to keep in the original Portuguese, are essays published in newspapers, weekly magazines, monthly publications, and other forms of mass media. They convey a light literary-cum-commentary sense of affairs for the Brazilian public and are avidly read. At the same time that they help to form opinions, they also gauge public opinion, capturing it and transforming it in a number of ways. This Brazilian genre *par excellence* is practiced daily by countless writers and *cronistas* big and small. There are various kinds of *crônicas*: political, economic, sports, literary, manners, TV and entertaining, musical, social, anthropological, medical, etc. It is not uncommon to hear people commenting on a specific *crônica* of the day with their friends and colleagues: "Have you read the last one by Luis Fernando Veríssimo? The one in which he writes in English to mock the people of the IMF?" People often circulate their favorite *crônicas* by forwarding them to friends via email.