

Transparent City

Ondjaki

| Angola |

translated by Stephen Henighan

excerpt of Transparent City
(Biblioasis, 2018)

*

Blind Man cut himself o! with a peep of laughter so tiny that it genuinely seemed like

a professional actor's rehearsal, a pretty, soundless smile, like the form or shadow of an absence of sun

"i never even seen them naughty films that they're going to show here with foreign women howling and all... i've heard them when i was far away in another neighbourhood... but to say i saw, no, i never saw them!"

Blind Man returned to his seat, wagging his head from side to side in a contented way, still disbelieving the words he had just uttered, the others' attitudes were of the greatest respect, and, as he returned, Seashell Seller helped him to seat himself

"Little Daddy," João Slowly spoke in a loud voice, "take your place on stage!"

“me, Uncle João...?”

“take your seat, we don’t discriminate against youngsters here”

he put down his cleaning rag and didn’t know where to put his hands, he avoided standing up, tried to sit down, felt a burning in his eyes that made him seek out the sky, he looked up, prolonged the pause of his leaden silence and, when he finally homed in on the audience, he was another person:

“if i’m supposed to just get up there and talk”—his voice was alien—“then it would just be about the business of the war and my mother... that the war, when it broke over us and terrified me, i was already running,”—sounds danced in the air—“and i didn’t even think to return home to see whether my brothers and sisters had the means...”—the voice, which was alien, faltered—“to run, even with hunger and thirst and bleeding feet, that later we walked with a comandante, not even today can i remember how many kilometres, just the days, which were many...”

the tone, which was unfamiliar, grew too close

“and, to tell the truth, at night i still dream about those days, things keep repeating in my sleep, i dream about it at night”—in the air, the sounds ceased their dancing, “and that it’s... speaking like this in words... the thing is that i wasn’t able to shout... i wasn’t able to shout my mother’s name... and still today i’m looking for her...”

he picked up the cloth he used for cleaning things again, sat down in the back, catching his breath, returning from the place he hadn’t yet succeeded in coming back from

“they just call me Seashell Seller, to speak simply, to speak here, purely to speak, it’s not rudeness nor talking out of turn... it’s that i’m learning a lot with Elder Blind Man, a person, i mean... you never help yourself all alone, you’ve gotta have somebody else nearby, sometimes a person doesn’t show up just to be helped, it’s that it also does the heart good to help another, i’m not talkin’ out of my own mouth, i’m sayin’ things that Elder Blind Man

told me, you see sometimes he don't know that he talks in his sleep... so that's how it is in the city of Luanda, a person can unburden himself by selling seashells, assailing the rich ladies in their big houses who

have more money, if people don't have money there's always bartering... and with pretty girls it's just a question of making an offer... but the person... what's really important is to be comfortable, happy... i keep that in mind right before i do anything, i remember i like diving and sell seashells... Kianda protects me..."

Odonato felt he should speak up

he got up slowly, looking at his hands and moving with the deliberate pace of a reticent convict, he'd understood and internalized the rules of the game, and during the short walk he tried to expel from his mind the deep apprehension he felt concerning his son

he settled into the chair and continued to look at his hands, causing the audience to do the same

he lifted both hands, turning them towards the public like someone exhibiting part of his inner being, a light breeze made the oldest antennae dance and awoke the one-eyed rooster in the other building

"shh... go to sleep, ha, it's not the crack of dawn any more, my neighbour, please forgive the intra-eruptions of the Rooster Camões, our cinematographic mascot," and João Slowly fell silent

"first it was my hands, my fingertips... it wasn't that my body was transparent the way it is and looks now... the

beginning my fingers felt lighter... and my stomachaches disappeared..."

Odonato turned his hands towards himself and spoke without lifting his gaze from them

“a man, when he talks about himself, talks about things from the beginning... like childhood and games, schools and little girls, the *tugas*’ presence and independences... and later, something from the more recent past, the lack of decent jobs, about looking so hard and never finding work... a man stops looking and stays at home to think about life and his family, about feeding his family, to avoid spending, he eats less... a man eats less, as if he were a little bird, to give food to his children... and that’s when i got my stomachaches... aches inside me, from seeing that in our cruel times a person who doesn’t have money, doesn’t have a way to eat or take his child to the hospital... and my fingers started to turn transparent... and my veins, and my hands, my feet, my knees... but the hunger started to go away: that’s how i began to accept my transparencies... i stopped feeling hungry and felt lighter and lighter... that’s my life...”

and again he looked each of them in the eyes, including Blind Man

“this is the body i have now,” he got up to return to his place

a silence could be felt on the terrace

“my friends,” João Slowly was unable to hide his emotions, “i don’t know how to thank... not for your help in arranging our cinema of the eighth art... it’s really for the contribution of human beings, the world needs to know that here, on the terrace of our beloved building, in Luanda, today, at this time, a group of men witnessed by a rooster who maybe doesn’t see very well... today this group of men made theatre! theatre in the old style, in the style of the stalwarts!, because... only great men cry alone in the solitary company of other men,”—he

crossed his arms on his chest—“end of quote, my friends, good night and be happy!”

without altering the geography of the chairs and the antennae, Odonato lingered for long hours at the edge of the

building watching the bustle of cars flowing down the broad or narrow arteries of the city of Luanda

a glow of yearning within him lit up his heart and the man yielded to the temptation to open his shirt and peer down awkwardly at his own chest, but the see-through glow no longer allowed Odonato to observe with his eyes that which was invading his veins

“Nato? what’s up?” Xilisbaba found his gesture strange

“what’s up where?” Odonato buttoned up his shirt

“chest pains?”

“heart pains”

“seriously?”

“heart pains of feeling, leave it, woman, the doctors have already assured me i suffer from accumulated yearning”

Xilisbaba smiled and, as she had been doing for years, moved her husband away from the edge of the building

“i suffer from a yearning disorder”

“don’t make me laugh, Nato”

“it’s true, i only understood it completely today, i have yearnings in all directions, not only yearnings for the past, i even have yearnings for things that haven’t happened yet”

“you sound like my mother”

“just like her... but do tell, what’s been going on?”

“Gadinho phoned”

“and?”

“he’s located Ciente in a police station, he left directions, but...”

“tell me”

“he said it’s a very tricky police station and that he’s already had squabbles with the commanding officer there, he can’t help you”

“well, at least we know where Ciente is, did he say anything else?”

“he said he got to speak with one of the guards who sleep there”

“so, they want money?”

“no, apparently not”

“what do they want?”

“tomorrow i’ll speak with Strong Maria so she can prepare a basket”

“but what do the guards want?”

“steak and French fries! they said that if you bring them more than they can eat they’ll give the rest to your son”

“sons of bitches!”

“that’s life...! so much the better for us, because steak and French fries is something i think i can lay my hands on, if they’d asked for money it would be a lot worse”

“you’re right”

Odonato leaned against Xilisbaba

“are you lighter, too?”

“i am”

“Nato...you’ve gotta eat, baby,” Xilisbaba begged

“i don’t have to eat, Baba... i already told you, not eating has done me good, it’s got rid of my stomachaches, i feel better, i think better, maybe the rest of you could try it”

“we already talked about that, Nato, all of us except the children”

“i know, i know”

Odonato returned to the edge of the building, looked at the sky, saw the rooster hide, then remained motionless with his body rigid and sweaty, like a statue that had been spit upon

“the truth is even sadder, Baba: we’re not transparent

because we don’t eat... we’re transparent because we’re poor.”

