THE WAIT

What I'm about to tell you happened in this land.
Right here.
In this neck of the woods.
On this ground.
Not there. Here.
In among the wheatfields, the olive trees and the holm oaks.
We only find what we're looking for.

It was here and now in among the wheatfields, the olive trees and the holm oaks. And I'm going to look back and look forward. At the things in my life that are behind and up ahead, and then list them in the present.
I'm going to give time a kick up the ass and get it moving.
Once you've seen it, you can't unsee it. Once you've heard it, you can't forget it.

My name is Adelaide; my mother was Antónia and my father was João. And what I'm going to tell you happened here in Sousel to Antónia and João.
Up ahead and behind. It doesn't matter. And it's based on facts.
Though the distinction between fact and fiction is a late acquisition of rational thought. Poor old reality: I feel sorry for it. And reason. By consequence.

Forgive me if I speak quickly. If my mouth is on fire. If my blood boils inside me. There are too many words going on. It's the words that shape the world. And I'm the third person. The third part. Already in my senior years. And that's why I'm in a hurry. It's the emotions that help us survive.

Antónia met João at the age of fifteen and was never the same again. On that day, João was nineteen and remained unchanged. It all started that day. That day born with a fragile beauty. The sun shone generously. A breeze ran through the rolling meadows. A gust of desire. A feeling in the air and in the wheatfields.

Antónia was on her bike running an errand for her mother. The sun beat down on her forehead, on her cheeks, on the back of her head, on her arms laid bare by her summer dress. João was cycling in search of something to do. For anything that was about to happen. Even if it were not about to happen, João would pedal away just to cause a draft. Antónia had already heard about João. João this. João that. João the underwear thief. João the heartbreaker. João the steel dick. João the swindler, crook,

scoundrel, cheat. João the fill in the blank. His first name and scurrilous events passed from mouth to mouth, via all the joyfully salivating mouths in this village.

On that day, Antónia was coming from the top of the village, pedalling. João was coming from the bottom, whistling. The two bicycles crossed paths. João rang his bell and put his foot on the ground. Antónia stopped.

João, standing in the middle of the road, looked into Antónia's walnut-brown eyes. Antónia immediately felt the impact. She blinked, trying to escape. João noticed and was spurred on. He pressed on. He had a piercing gaze.

Don't look at me like that. As if my body was a paradise.
Antónia didn't say this out loud, for lack of courage, but she thought it.
It was João who stepped forward.

Do you want to go and see the chickens?
Which ones?
Mine. They're a good breed.
Who?
The chickens. They're egg layers.
I have an errand to run.
It's bad for you.
What is?
Cycling in the sun. There's shade in the chicken coop.
I like the sun; and I'm not your type.
No?
I don't speak your language.
No?
No, I don't. You're a ruffian. I'm pedigree.
Pedicure?
Don't be silly.
I'm not silly. I'm a mongrel, a tracker and a gunslinger. I've got a good nose. Great aim. And that's what brought me here. Don't you see? That's what brought me to you, Antónia. And now I just want to see you, hear you, lick you, smell you.

With her clammy face and rapid breathing, Antónia had a problem keeping her head up. Because it was noon. Because she had already fallen in love with João. Because

she had butterflies in her stomach. Because she never thought she would be one of those who fell head over heels.
Sweating profusely, Antónia thought:
Love is like a cow that lies down on top of us.

That's it.
Love is like a cow that lies down on top of us.
Some days later, after fetching eggs from the hen house, João lay down on top of Antónia under a holm oak, and her whole world changed. It took a sharp turn. A collision. A cosmic blow. Antónia no longer knew where the sun set, which way the wind blew, how to feed the pigs or to make *migas* with asparagus. She lost her balance, her sense of taste, of direction, the art of seasoning. Her love was like that: an annihilation. Antónia's future, which had its shutters open towards Lisbon, closed forever in Sousel, in a love called João.

Antónia slowed down, went into reverse. Time became circular. She shut herself away at home, closed the doors so the heat wouldn't get in, waiting for love to return at night and cool her down. On the nights that João came home (when he came), Antónia washed his feet with tender love and affection, in a metal basin with warm water, while João ranted and raved against the world, reeking of brandy.

Of course I saw none of this. I hadn't been born yet. But love confirms the existence of Antónia and João. And then me.
I was conceived on a moonless night, the day after my father returned home. For several weeks, João had been travelling around Estremoz, working in a circus where he performed tricks. Magic tricks. Illusions. Hypnotising animals and people. Antónia and João had just had a bread stew for dinner and a few hearty glasses of cheap red when they decided to get into bed to remove the distance that hours of longing had created.

From the very beginning, Antónia knew who John was. She had the measure of him. An alcoholic womaniser, a hustler, a two-faced charlatan. A rascal born on the wrong side of the tracks. A poor guy with the demon in his dick. Who fornicated with anything that wore lace panties. Who drank every liquor known to man straight from the bottle. Who lied every other sentence. Who printed fake money in his workshop. Nevertheless, despite everything, the warnings from family and friends, all the joyful salivating rumours, Antónia accepted João exactly as he was. He didn't have to change. Alter his character or appearance depending on the situation. She loved him

passionately and unconditionally. For João was the word that filled her days. My João, she would say. Although aware of the lie - João would never be hers completely, now and forever - she knew that a love like this only comes along once in a lifetime. And it's better to sacrifice your life for love, than sacrifice love for a life. I don't give a damn about happiness. If no one teaches you how to live because you know how it ends, no one will teach you how to love, because love is a wild tractor. Life is a fatal disease. Love is a turbo diesel tractor. It sweeps everything before it. Antónia said.

Having swindled a good number of elders from this and neighbouring counties, laid waste to thirty marriages and tried his hand at every possible and imaginary business, João realised that there was little or nothing left for him here. He needed a change of air, a change of scenery, fresh pastures and some new panties.

My life has a destination: Africa. Said João.

And so it was.

What had been a cow, then a tractor, turned out to be distance: love. And that's it. The world is made up of words.

João left for Africa on a package steamer named after a woman when I was at primary school. To work on his uncle's farm in Malanje. On some rich-uncle's-plot-growing-no-one-quite-knows-what in Canambua, he claimed. Promising he would write every week. And that he was going on ahead to clear the way as soon as possible for us to join him. With the assurance that even paradise would be envious of that land.

And so it was.

Love is a tractor in the wilderness.

João left. And Antónia stayed. João ran away. And Antónia stayed. And I stayed with her. My mother looked like all women who see their men leave. They're left with holes in their eyes. Looking at her was like looking into an immense void. And you had to look to see what couldn't be seen. You can be destroyed inside and the world will never know.

Antónia stayed as all women do when they see their men leave. She stayed alone in Sousel, caring for the house. She stayed with her daughter to feed and raise her. She stayed just to make the toast, the milky coffee, the tomato soup, straightening my blankets so the cold wouldn't get in, helping me to say my times tables backwards. She stayed just to work on the threshing floor. She stayed to till the soil, to eat her heart out and ruin her feet by trying to stamp out the devil. She stayed in full view of the neighbours. She stayed at the mercy of the gossip and rumours.

After João left, Antónia fell into a state of dejection. And when she looked up, she

didn't recognise herself. She became a one woman abyss. One response from you was enough to send me over the edge.

- Darkness does not ward off darkness, Adelaide.

- There I am not another, but I am me.

- You need to let your hair down now and again.

- His apple ate me.

These are a few examples.

Every once in a while, we got a letter from João. And these were sunny days for Antónia. These were the lightning bolts that illuminate the distance in the middle of the storm. As soon she approached the envelope, the dark in Antónia's eyes would see a light at the end of the tunnel. Even though the letters we received just now and again were more like telegrams.
I've arrived. Signed João.
I've found diamonds. Signed João.
Tomorrow, I'll buy you a bed and another for the girl and a mosquito net. Signed João.
Palm trees and dense vegetation. I've got malaria. Signed João.
It's almost done. Not long now. Signed João.
There have been some unforeseen events. Some misunderstandings. I'm coming home for Christmas. Wait for me at the station. Signed João.
And it was this last missive that triggered what followed.
Every day, at the same hour, my mother would put on her best dress, tie a ribbon in my hair and take me by the hand down to Sousel station.
We only find what we're looking for.
We would stand facing a wall with green tiles, with our necks cricked towards the line that would bring the train that would be bringing João. And what had been a cow, then a tractor that turned out to be distance, was now a train that never switches tracks. Because love always goes straight on.
And that's it.
Because of the love called João, Antónia was never again able to think about everything, to reflect on everything, to give an opinion about everything. Because. You know why. Because. It's not possible. It's not. Possible. Understanding love is harder than making up stories. For 30 years, without fail, Antónia took herself down

to Sousel station to wait for the train that would be bringing João.
The trains stopped. And João never got off.
It is not worth pretending that this did not happen. If I'm here. Ripping out the roots of the words. Scratching at the sky. Scratching my mouth. Talking to discover my identity. I'm a hoarse spider telling this story. I really want to tell this story. I want to soak up life. And what is hidden behind the veins and the cobwebs. There is something real before your eyes. Believe me. This story tore lives to pieces. It's the tragic story of people like us. Whitewashed houses, rolling meadows, olive trees, cork oaks, holm oaks. The bones left over from the stories of tragic people like us. I'm not going to sugarcoat the issue. This is what I have to say. And this is what I'm going to say. The danger is not in the sentences. But in the way they're presented. Don't look at me like that. Even though I'm a senior, I'm easily influenced.

We've forgotten so many things. Mostly we forget what we wanted to remember, to make flesh, present, breath, day. And unfortunately we remember so many things we wanted to forget. And I was the one who survived.

I'm still walking the path my mother walked. Every day I walk to the abandoned station. My shoes worn. My heart all chewed up. And I sit on the bench and wait. I'm Adelaide playing Antónia. Always hoping to hear a raspy voice from the loudspeaker announcing:

The train from Estremoz is about to arrive at Sousel station, 50 years behind schedule.

Sandro William Junqueira