

PESSOA IN LISBOA

Sharon Dolin

*Countless lives inhabit us
I don't know, when I think or feel,
Who it is that thinks or feels.
I am merely the place
Where things are thought or felt.*
Ricard Reis (Fernando Pessoa)
13 Nov. 1935

Pessoa means *person* in Portuguese. The most generic of names for this most elusive and shape-shifting of poets.

✧

Lisboa is the best place to land on my birthday. For what are birthdays, but a way of emphatically saying *I am here*. But who is that *I*. And where is *here*?

✧

To celebrate one's birth? I'd rather celebrate the death of all the unhappiness that preceded this day.

✧

When Pessoa writes of the "ennui of the brave" in his *Book of Disquietude*, he has eluded it by casting those thoughts onto Bernardo Soares (whom he deems a semi-heteronym) who is, and is not, Pessoa.

✧

I don't *write* as in *compose*. I pull invisible threads from the air and conjure them into legibility with this pen.

✧

Impossible to be in Lisbon without a brooding sense of being inside and outside oneself.

✧

To know the self by becoming an other. As Rimbaud said, *Je est un autre*.

✧

Perhaps poets are the true ventriloquists of language — throwing our voice to revive/enliven the dummy of words.

✧

Café Brasileira in Chiado: in the center of everything. Why would Pessoa ever need to travel again?

✧

Lisboa: from the Phoenician *Allis Ubbo*, “safe harbor,” from the Latin *Ulyssippo*, after “Ulysses.” Ulysses Tower overlooking the Tejo (Tagus River).

✧

What does it mean to say Ulysses founded Lisbon? Ulysses: husband, lover, trickster, thief, conqueror, conquered, mercurial — even down to the leg scar that unmasks him. Lisboa: city of masks, city of the poet who would be nothing but masks.

✧

The imaginary is always sweeter than the real: as the beloved’s untasted body tastes sweeter than this almond tart.

✧

Is it possible to taste still unsavored kisses? His almond lips on my neck. His tendriled arm on my waist.

✧

What is the taste of future kisses? Quince and autumn winds.

✧

What is the taste of withheld kisses? Olives and the smoke of burning cork trees.

✧

Here I am in the Port of the Gauls, scaling a hill in a 90-year-old tram to gaze from a castle’s ramparts. Here I am on the threshold of

love. All anticipation. No mournful fado. All songs as yet unsung.

✘

“I am the space between what I am and what I am not, between what I dream and what life makes of me clouds . . .” — Pessoa, *Book of Disquietude*

✘

At the Oceanarium (40° C outside), I was the space between the octopus and the glass, between the sea dragon and the aquatic plants it resembles. I sweated into nonbeing.

✘

“Clouds: indescribable rags of the tedium I impose upon them.”
— Pessoa

✘

On Praça do Comércio, no clouds. Only the Tejo and an unrelenting sun to rival my temper.

✘

Not tedium. Ennui or lazy-headedness that comes from air thick as argument.

✘

When so many embraces have been delayed, the languorous minutes fill with the unbidden.

✘

Fear: Within the mourning of virtuosic joy. As Shlomo Carlebach, the ecstatic Hassid, once said to me, “Be happy even in your grief.” What all poetry strives for: to create something shapely out of our tears and rage.

✘

At Sintra the yellow domed palace recalls the absent Moors who recall the absent Jews.

✘

Climbing into the heat. My stuporous brain, my restive heart.

✘

The ache of desire is the aching desire to be desired.

✧

As we roll down the path in the road of cork trees and cedars, always the play of his lips down my neck.

✧

Why have I spent much of my life thirsty for kisses, having to soothe myself sipping words through a straw?

✧

If means you are allowed to dream.

✧

Is it possible to miss what I've yet to discover?

✧

Field of sunflowers. And here I am offering up my corona to you.

✧

In Silves, russet hilltop castle to remind us of the way the past hovers over the present.

✧

The taxi driver complained of too many "Negros" on the beach of Cascais and Estoril coming from Capo de Verde in Africa. And I: *Well, isn't it because of Portugal's history in colonizing those places?* And he, laughing: *Yes. You're right.*

✧

The bitter Dutchman on line for a coffee in the bus station. Of Amsterdam: "Criminals. All criminals in that city." As though fleeing to the wilderness of Portugal he could escape his bitter misanthropy.

✧

My fear: that the man who guards his heart too perfectly has forgotten how to leave a small passageway for love. As the owner of even a mansion must create a door flap for the cat to pass through with

the gentlest of paws.

✕

Think of your heart as a hand. If you clench it too tightly, how can you hope to receive the gift you seek from another or to offer a caress in return?

✕

Or the heart as an eye. Close it to prevent sun glare but then you are unable to see the smile that could warm you.

✕

On the other hand, the risk of a too-open hand is that you won't be careful enough about what drops into it: spiny sea urchin, desiccated bone, pitcher plant heart that opens to consume you.

✕

What is more satisfying than to see the smirk on my son's eleven-year-old face when I've managed, against his will, to introduce him to a Portuguese boy on the beach with whom he is now playing paddle ball.

✕

When I read the word *suicide* in Pessoa: *a tiredness of life so terrible . . .* . [A]s a remedy to this situation, *suicide seems uncertain*, I feel a wave of pangs in my solar plexus remembering my young friend R., who, for eight months could do nothing except, in the end, plan and execute her own death. If only she had had a more extreme *tiredness of life* that would have made her incapable of taking those pills, of lighting those briquettes.

✕

Every time I think of R.'s disappearance I'm confounded once more by the uncanniness of death. Of her laugh gone from the world. Of her poems, none *still* to be penned. Each lyric now a tomb — pages pressing together a dead flower.

✕

The rocks rising out of the sea at Lagos are impervious to the boys climbing them, to the beautiful winds we hurl at them, unfurling as

the tides slowly chip away at them for centuries.

✘

When he said he liked my warmth, I am waiting, like the sea star underwater, for him to lift me up to find my soft mouth.

✘

Swimming above schools of fish: bliss.

✘

Why are we drawn most to what is hidden? To see an octopus. To lure a heart out of its cove.

✘

What middle-aged man who's not sure how much gas he's got left in the tank wouldn't like your passion: How did I know he was excluding himself?

✘

Once my heart begins to open like a sunflower lifting its petals to the light until, heavy with seeds of love, it bends its neck in fullness.

✘

Writing is a way to discover what I have to say. Kissing is a way to discover what I have to feel.

✘

Yet one more man who wants to postpone opening to me until he is certain, not realizing the impossibility of knowing in advance what the water will feel like by standing on the shore or sticking a toe in.

✘

Only by diving in can one know what it feels like to be wet. So it is not possible to taste my love's kisses by looking at his lips. Nor for him to know what it will feel like to swim in my sea.

✘

Even with the sea's tendrils all over me, his absent hands are the wavelets caress.

✘

Such endless joy contemplating these volcanic cliffs with their schists of sandstone. The unruly sea mountains jutting up that boys climb and dive from. Women have no need for diving. We carry the sea within us.

✕

The only course open: to become the hermit crab and let the elusive one find you.

✕

In Lagos, even the sound of the broom sweeping the early morning street sounds sensual.

✕

Fado cry of the glass bottle being tossed into a pail.

✕

So rare for a moment of quiet when I hear my cloud-driven mind and not my son calling me down from the sky with his plaintive *Mom*.

✕

The more he rebels, the more my son needs me to be the one against whom to flail.

✕

The power to wound contains the power to heal.

✕

Words can be blows to the heart. So can the absence of words.

✕

Why is it the ones who say they want so much to love cover their heart with impenetrable thorns around the rarest of roses? Why do I still believe I can avoid the thorns?

✕

And what of my flower? Why don't I know how to grow thorns? Why do I prefer to be the bee rubbing my body in the pollen of possibility.

✕

Small shells and stones I choose from the beach are translucent: onion shells, moonstones, because they know it is best to let the light pass through them, transmuted.

✕

Did he keep the black onion shell — a rarity — I gave him: the best, first (last) way I could give him a piece of darkened light?

✕

As the hermit crab must take the risk of no shell to find a bigger home, so must the heart expose itself to find the proper heart within which to dwell.

✕

I'm not interested in opacity — in objects or men who bounce back all the light.

✕

Nor in transparency where, unaffected by the light, they let it pass through them unobstructed and untransformed.

✕

To be changed by the light. Even damaged by it. The only way to truly live.

✕

Why do I seem to encounter/desire those men who want to know if they will like the book of me before they have turned a single page?

✕

The past is everything I never managed to be (Pessoa). My past is all the selves I've worn through like sand — ground-up shells and stones crushed by relentless tides.

✕

Shadows on the cliffs to make a denser light. Too soon, too soon I am leaving the sea burnished bright.

✕

Inscribed on the fountain wall outside the Roman wall of Lagos:
*Valeu a pena? Tudo vale a pena
se a alma não é pequena.*

Pessoa, *Mensagem*

(Is it worth the trouble? Everything is worth it
if the soul isn't too small.)

✘

Another mountaintop with three monumental fixed birds with three rotating wings in the wind.

✘

Nausea of existence can coexist with ecstatic bends in the road.

✘

In Lagos, we never went to see the former slave market (now a gallery). Out of guilt or empathy or indifference? Instead, we observe the African street vendors.

✘

On flirting: It is bad form to flirt with a man who's with a woman and senseless to flirt with one who's with a man. Which left one crazy blonde Dutchman in the bus station café line. And maybe the hotel owner in Lagos whose tan was as dark as *café com leite*, which in English sounds like "coffee combed light."

✘

At the tomb of Pessoa in the Jeronimos Monastery in Lisbon, there is a statue with inscriptions:

*Para ser grande, se inteiro: nada
Teu exagera ou exclui.
Sê todo em cada coisa. Põe quanto és
No mínimo que fazes.
Assim em cada lago a lua toda
Brilha, porque alta vive.*

(To be great, be complete: don't
exaggerate or exclude anything.

Be each thing. Put yourself in
the littlest thing you do.

So, in each lake the full moon
shines because it rises so high.)

14.2.1933 Ricardo Reis
Fernando Pessoa
1888-1935

✕

*Nã: Não quero nada.
Já disse que não quero nada.*

(No. I don't want anything.
I've already said that I don't want
anything.)

*Não me venham com conclusões!
A única conclusão é morrer.*

I don't come to conclusions!
The only conclusion is to die.)

1923 Álvaro de Campos

✕

*Não basta abrir a janela
Para ver os campos e o rio.
Não e o bastante não ser cego
Para ver as árvores e as flores.*

(It's not enough to open the
window
to see the fields and river.
Not enough not to be blind
to the trees and flowers.)

20.14.1919 Alberto Caeiro

✕

Near the Belém Tower, in the gift shop, Fernando Pessoa as a cartoon keychain. A refrigerator magnet. A coffee mug with his black silhouetted heteronyms. An empty notebook.

✕

It's not true that I can't put aside my other urges for my son. It's that almost nothing pleases him: not the view from the tower, not the carved stone artichokes, nor the mosaics of Joseph's tale, nor the custard pastry of Belém.

✕

I know not what tomorrow will bring. — Pessoa's last words, which were written in English.

✕

The greatest gift a lover gives aside from himself: hope.

✕

The greatest theft by a false lover: hope.

✕

What does it matter if the entire time I'm in Portugal I write dreams to a man who will spurn me upon my return. The pleasure is all in the dreaming.

✕

Anticipation is sometimes more powerful than many actual experiences. My anticipatory travel anxiety vanishes like a cloud wisp as soon as I board the plane. Alas, that the anticipation of a tryst often surpasses the pleasure of the tryst. Which does not mean it is best not to act but only imagine. Only to remember: how potent are our fears as well as our imagined joys. So potent they have their own reality.

✕

Thus my dream of real kisses exceeding imagined ones. At the least: surprising me. Imaginary kisses to the second degree.

✕

When one false love briefly eclipses the beloved, the corona of the true beloved flames blindingly bright in your heart.

✕

Floating above fish in the ocean cove in Lagos — the only time I come close to floating instead of thrashing within desire.

✕

My son's anxiety: fear of stepping down on a sea urchin on a submerged rock in the ocean makes it hard for him to swim, more likely he'd step down on one.

✕

My anxiety — that I will never be found. That most of my life I've been submerged, with no diver slipping within my cove or retrieving me like a brain coral or a shell gone to mother-of-pearl from waiting.

✕

Of how many fears is this true: that the fear itself contributes to the likelihood of the feared event coming to pass?

✕

Fear of failure — as in musical performance or on the theatrical stage — can increase the likelihood of failure. Call it a negative homeopathy. The homeopathy of fear.

✧

Does fear of loneliness increase loneliness? Does fear of never being truly loved push away its possibility?

✧

The pageantry of the bullfight in Lisbon. The dancing horses, the pink capes. The brass band. The bleeding bull being tricked into leaving the ring with its as-yet ungored fellow bulls. The cowbells around their necks. The bloody spikes of death around his. Beauty and terror. In the end, can ritual trump cruelty? For the cheering spectators, it did. For me and my son who left after two bulls and the prone protesters outside besmeared in fake blood: No.

✧

We climbed the 500-year-old Tower of Belém when the Portuguese were a conquering power. Ate in the *pastellaria*, the custard *pastel de Belém*. Portugal now a conqueror of every sweet tooth. Each sea-lover.

✧

Riding on Tram 28 up to the ruins of Castle San George, a tram known for its pickpockets and its ninety-year-old rattle up the hill — the only thing taken from me: my heart's breath.

✧

At Casa Pessoa: all the shaving equipment of Pessoa's personal barber. As though viewing this reliquary of implements of what grazed Pessoa's face, we would at last be able to know the chameleon-poet in his unsheddable skin.

✧

We ate lunch at Pessoa's Café Martinho de Arcada under the porticoes of Praça de Comércio. The Tejo close enough to taste... or at least to float his orthonym upon.

✧

At Casa Pessoa: Ricardo Reis's doctor's desk with his personalized stationary and calling card. The calling cards of all of Pessoa's heteronymns. When one has a name, a biography, and an address, one is conjured into being.

✧

Did Pessoa become more diffuse because he spread his personalities around? What drove his heteronym Álvaro de Campos to insult the one girlfriend, Ophelia, Pessoa ever had? As though when she left him she left his alter-ego and not him. Love me, love my heteronym, my Jungian shadow.

✧

The record: One passionate kiss. Riding streetcars together. Perhaps Tram 28. As though intimacy were a journey through the beloved city — not each other's bodies.

✧

As though Lisboa were the true Ophelia of his affections.

✧

Did Pessoa choose Ophelia because of her namesake — so he could be a Portuguese Hamlet, his antic disposition heteronymic?

✧

How many of us in love role-play? How many times have I been mother, whore, sister, equestrienne, prostrate filly, ravenous, parched, indifferent, coy, empress, slave. And sometimes a mere wife or girlfriend.

✧

Some imaginary connection between Pessoa and Joseph Cornell. One created people inhabiting the rooms of his poems; the other created dioramic worlds inhabited by midnight birds and ballerinas.

✧

What do I create? Do I merely satisfy the reader's prurient interest in the hatreds and desires of another in shaped lines?

✧

A very pregnant woman getting her coffee in the rain. Nostalgia for the days when I was the one teeming with new life. When whatever lines I wrote were extensions of the umbilical line.

✧

At Café Brasiliero in Chiado, the other café Pessoa frequented, a bronze seated figure of the poet outside with a bronze chair beside him for tourists to fill. When empty, how many understand Pessoa is never alone — is most companioned by his own selves?

✧

Why are there some places (sun places) where my soul expands and shines away the anxious shadows. Why does that rarely happen in New York? Why is it when I'm dog-paddling in another tongue — a Romance one — that I feel most at home?

✧

Or does the self who speaks a pidgin Portuguese become an orthonym of the one who speaks New Yorkese.

✧

Who is the "I" who writes? *Uma Pessoa*. A person(a). Is there a core of self — or do the clothes — the outer garb of self — make the wo/man. Pessoa enacted the answer in his poetry, which sometimes spilled over into his life. As in calling cards for his chief heteronyms. A diary by his semi-heteronym Bernardo Soares. A diary even more fraught with existence because it dated and recorded thoughts about the quotidian.

✧

Some say Pessoa's split self derived from his formative years in Durban, South Africa, developing an English-speaking self before returning to Lisboa. Cervantes our greatest — first? — master of the slippery self.

✧

Or was it God?

✧

A fleeting sense of my tough Israeli self in Haifa when I was twenty-

one and knew the right inflection to the Hebrew, *Mah zeh?! (¿Qué pasa? What gives?)* to thwart a gang of young men who were hassling me and another young woman.

✧

The shrew-turned-piteous self I became at the end of my marriage: buried beneath dozens of poems.

✧

Shaz in Turkey dare-deviling through the semidesert on a quad bike. Being called a *hoon* by our Aussie guide.

✧

Sha-Sha belting out lead vocals on Rock Band in my purple leggings and leopard top.

✧

The flirty girl I become with each new date.

✧

The woman walking around with an open wound after each romantic land-mine.

✧

If there ain't no ardor, why bother?

✧

I am a creator of doors where others see walls, waiting for someone to create the handle with his desire.

NOTE:

Translated fragments of Pessoa's poems are my own.
Translations from *The Book of Disquiet* are by Alfred Mac Adam (Boston: Exact Change, 1998).

USE ICE IN A SENTENCE

Katharine Coles

1. On warm mornings the bay is choked with / /.
2. *Saturated* *floating under heavy snowfall*
3. maybe the / / is already a poem.
4. A / / is like an
5. / / only smaller.
6. How many names for / / can you come up with?
7. Did / / exist before its name?
8. Men in fur, putting the / / into words.
9. Men with / /-bitten fingers,
10. with / / in their beards.
11. Beyond definition, *the wreckage of other forms*.
12. Beyond measurement, beyond *accumulation*.
13. I keep saying "gash" when I mean / /.
14. I am lying on the shelf *almost awash*.
15. I am lying down *with raised rims*, among
16. / / *formed from* / / or *the wreckage*
17. of / / . Sometimes I am and sometimes not *attached to a coast*.
18. In Italian, / / means *loose gravel or stone made*, perhaps

and perhaps not *formed on a quiet surface* or *under agitated conditions*.

19. You won't learn anything useful from me. Tongue-tied, I don't know how to see

20. except that / / *protrudes up to 6.5 feet above sea level*.

21. In English, here and now / / *can be categorized*.]

※

- a. Floe
- b. Old
- c. Growler
- d. Slush
- e. Pancake
- f. Rind
- g. Floe-bit
- h. Frazil
- i. Brash
- j. Cake
- k. Floeberg
- l. Breccia
- m. Berg
- n. Grease
- o. Shelf
- p. Young
- q. Bergy Bits
- r. Tabular
- s. Shuga
- t. First-year

NOTE:

This poem begins with an erasure from *21 Kinds of Ice*.
For Jennifer Bogo