

“Ants and Cockroaches”  
from *Essa coisa viva* (2024)  
by Maria Esther Maciel

*Translated by Xavier Blackwell-Lipkind*



## Translator's Preface

Maria Esther Maciel is fascinated by the taxonomic, the nameable, the catalogic, the listable. In many of her most recognizable works (*Pequena enciclopédia de seres comuns*, *O livro dos nomes*), Maciel mines apparently utilitarian forms—the encyclopedia, the alphabetized roster of names—for their surprising narrative potential. Her writing interrogates the power of lexical accumulation, the capacity for parts to coalesce into wholes.

*Essa coisa viva* (This living thing), published in 2024 by Editora Todavia, is no exception. In this striking book about violence, plants, and memory, the narrator, Ana Luiza, addresses her dead mother, reflecting on the experiences that bind them and enumerating—along with the photographs and flowers that surround her—the abuses she suffered as a child. In the first chapter, “Formigas e baratas,” translated here as “Ants and Cockroaches,” Maciel offers the reader lists upon lists: “tubes of lipstick, rings, bracelets. . .” Out of these inventories emerges a tale of fear and infestation. The titular ants and cockroaches appear, in the present and in the past, crawling and still. Dreaming, Ana Luiza sees mounds of dead bugs replaced by heaps of shining fruit. She cannot excise insects from her memory, but, in these pages, she stops being afraid of them and, perhaps, of her mother.

Maciel, who has taught literature at the Federal University of Minas Gerais and the State University of Campinas, puts her academic training on display in *Essa coisa viva*. The book closes with a list of “Ana Luiza’s Bibliographical References.” This bibliography doubles as a window into Maciel’s influences, the authors with whom her narrative of loss and life is in conversation: E. M. Cioran, Stefano Mancuso, Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida, Fiama Hasse Paes Brandão, and Harri Lorenzi, among others. To this list I might add Machado de Assis, in whose *Quincas borba*, Rubião (cf. Rubinho, the diminutive assigned to Ana Luiza’s brother) kills several ants, then, overcome by regret, thinks, “Pobres formigas mortas!” (Poor dead ants!). Poor ants, indeed. In Maciel’s literary world, too, the formigas are dead: big, motionless, waiting to be described.

Translating Maciel's prose presents several interesting challenges. I paid particular attention to the vivid descriptions that dot these pages. Maciel deploys recurring modifiers in her depictions of insects and fruit: In one instance, cockroaches are "graúdas, lustrosas"; later, jaboticabas are "graúdas e brilhantes"; later still, cockroaches are "graúdas e reluzentes." I translate these adjective pairs as "fat, lustrous," "fat and shiny," and "fat, glistening," respectively. Maciel is a writer who uses subtle motifs to great effect, and I have done my best to leave her intentional repetitions ("graúdas") intact while simultaneously respecting the slight tonal adjustments ("lustrosas," "brilhantes," "reluzentes") with which the text experiments. (See also the reappearance of screams and screaming in various parts of the translation. By my count, the source text includes six invocations of "gritos," in one grammatical form or another, in the first chapter alone.)

One instance in which I have permitted myself some stylistic latitude is the dream scene described above, in which an unsettling accretion of insects gives way to a vision of a fruit-filled orchard: "When I fell back asleep, I dreamed. I dreamed that a foggy-faced man, wearing boots up to his knees and carrying a broom in his right hand, began to sweep a cockroach-covered floor." The two alliterative hyphenations—"foggy-faced," "cockroach-covered"—reproduce Maciel's "de rosto inexato" and "repleto de baratas mortas," respectively. My hope is that this slight rearrangement accurately renders, in English, the oneiric quality that animates the original prose.

## **Ants and Cockroaches**

**by Maria Esther Maciel**

Yesterday was a year since you died. I tried to cry, but I couldn't. I just wrapped myself in a vague and indistinct sadness, as if overcome by an old pain, the kind of pain we carry in our bodies for many years, without knowing exactly where it comes from.

The night that followed seemed unending. I returned, without progress, to a book I had started the night before, then combed through headlines about the pandemic on my phone, dreading the impossibility of returning to the life that I had been planning, carefully, since the moment you left. What story will exist for my life after the world stops ending?

I live alone in a big house with a garden since I sent away the man I thought I loved and did not love. You didn't get to meet him. We lived together for a bit more than a year. It was the first time, since my separation from Pedro, that I had dared to live with another person. If I didn't tell you about him before, it was to protect me, and to protect him, for obvious reasons. I don't think you know, either, that I ended up selling that apartment where I hosted you various times when you came to Belo Horizonte to consult your favorite doctors. I couldn't put up any longer with my neighbors, the noise of the cars, the distance of the places I care about, the smell of mold in the closets. And I needed, more than ever, to be able to abandon all of that for a less corrosive life.

I remember that, in those recurring visits you paid me when you had your appointments—visits that tended to last at least a week—my days turned upside down. You seemed to realize this, but you couldn't care less about the mess you always left, clothes scattered across the bedroom, used sheets of toilet paper overflowing from the bathroom trash can, sauce spilled on the tablecloth, handprints on mirrors, faucets left running, shoes dropped in the living room. And you even opened my drawers when I wasn't around and took my things like they were yours: tubes of lipstick, rings, bracelets, tweezers, hairpins, nail clippers, creams, perfume bottles. Complacent, I let you do it. Today I know that, if you could, you would take from

me everything I had, everything you considered remotely relevant to my life.

More than ever, I wanted to erase those memories and the crystallized feelings they unearth, since all that weighs on us and stretches beyond the time to which it belongs prevents us from being free of that weight. But those things still attack and consume me a year after your death. Besides, the force of experience is so staggering that we end up getting used to its consequences as the years go by, and only when those consequences grow larger than us do we search to rid ourselves of them. That's what I'm doing now, as I write what could be called a letter, even if you can't read any of my words. Or can you?

The truth is, I slept very badly last night, ruminating about what I could never understand. When I got up, I was sure that my Saturday would be rainy, judging by the heavy clouds I saw when I drew the bedroom curtains. Hair mussed, rather dizzy, I turned toward the bathroom. Then, suddenly, I came across the ants, motionless on the floor. But how had they appeared like that, so abruptly and in such great numbers? Since moving here, I had never seen a single ant in this house, and certainly not big, rust-colored ants like these.

I crouched to see if they were alive. They weren't. No movement of the legs, not even a tremor. All of them dead and spread across the beige floor. Frightened and uncertain, I walked to the service area and looked for the vacuum. And just as I started vacuuming the bugs, a convulsive sob forced me to sit on the edge of the bed and unplug the device, letting it fall on the bedside table. I don't know how many minutes passed. But once I regained my composure, I managed to complete the task of cleaning the room, relieved to have dealt, albeit reluctantly, with the inexplicable death of those insects.

It was then that I realized that certain scenes attach themselves in strange ways to our stories. The dead ants could only be here this morning to bring me the memory of the cockroaches, the monstrous cockroaches that you poisoned while I—maybe three or four years old—still slept beside you, in that massive room that was also Dad's. Fat, lustrous cockroaches that, when night fell, emerged from the cracks of the old floor, built with long, wide planks. That night, you had spread insecticide in every corner of the room, and, in the morning, you turned on the lamp—I don't know why. I woke to your

terrible screams, and I saw you kneeling on the bed, pointing at the floor, which was spattered with dead cockroaches, while Dad tried to calm you down. You were screaming so much that I started to cry out of fear. Not a fear of the cockroaches themselves, but a fear of the screams, and of your panicked expression. Things only calmed down after Dad found a broom and got rid of the insects, using a dustpan to put them in a plastic bag. I never forgot that. Perhaps because of that scene, I, too, have come to fear cockroaches, as if the fear you felt had saturated me forever.

One of them sent me into a state of shock once. I don't think I ever told you this. I was already married to Pedro and I was tidying the house. Barefoot, as I liked to be during the private hours, I went into the bathroom and started to wash the sink. Suddenly, I felt something on my foot, something living, brushing my skin with a subtle and imprecise motion. I looked down, and there was a cockroach—medium sized, but still a cockroach. My first instinct was to strike my foot on the ground several times and grab the washcloth to banish the bug from my right shin. I managed to do it, though not without screams. So loud that Pedro heard and ran to see what was happening. I was screaming more than I had seen you scream, that lost morning of my childhood. Pedro held me tight and hugged me. Then he went to get a cup of water and a sedative. I got in bed and slept deeply. I woke in the early morning, slightly dazed, my mouth dry; I drank water and went to the bathroom. When I fell back asleep, I dreamed. I dreamed that a foggy-faced man, wearing boots up to his knees and carrying a broom in his right hand, began to sweep a cockroach-covered floor. Then he vanished. I went toward the door, running after him. When I opened it, I found all the cockroaches piled up, blocking my way. I don't know how, but I closed my eyes and crossed that dark and glistening mountain, with a leap that carried me very, very far. Looking around, I found myself in a sort of orchard, under a jabuticaba tree. On the ground was a mountain of jabuticabas, fat and shiny. Overflowing with joy, I began to eat them. And I woke up.

Today, I am no longer afraid of cockroaches. I prefer to see them “technically,” as the dictionaries describe them: “Orthopteroid insects of the family Blattidae; in homes, by virtue of their





wide-ranging diets, they contaminate food, take on an unpleasant odor, and become serious pests.” But they must also have their reasons for being, in human eyes, like this, so frightening, so noxious. Perhaps this is what we are in their eyes, too.

I never imagined that, one year after your death, the cockroaches would return, disguised now as ants. “What is not cannot be until it is,” Dad would say, always alert to surprises, to things that, however absurd, can arise when they are least expected. At the very least, thanks to those insects, I managed to cry.

Crying—silently or eloquently, covertly or explicitly—has always been a contradiction in my life. I know that I cried excessively as a toddler, when I was spanked or grounded, in moments of sadness or contentment, experiencing profound loss or feeling compassion. But I don’t remember having faked tears to justify unfelt pain, much less to please anybody.

Do you remember when you took me to a wake for the first time—that, I believe, of some cousin of yours whom I didn’t even know—and, in response to what you perceived as my coldness toward the situation and the people there, started to pinch me to make me cry? And how many times did you hit me so that I would smile when you called the photographer to take photos of Rubens and me? Before he was born, there wasn’t that ritual of taking photos every year. God, how I hated those moments! More than anything, I hated them because I was forced to wear such lacy, frilly clothes, to put ribbons in my hair, to wear ridiculous gold bracelets. I couldn’t stand that business of clothes and ornaments and still can’t. Now I understand that you wanted to make me almost as beautiful as my brother, whom you loved more than everything in life. It certainly didn’t work, because in all the pictures that remain (I keep them in an old photo album), I appear with a grumpy face and sad eyes, trying to fake a smile, less to look good in the portraits than to avoid the slaps that would leave my arms burning. Not Rubens. Always smiling, with his fat little legs stuffed into shorts with suspenders, he stole the show. And, once the photos were ready, you showed them to everyone, saying: *Ana Luiza needs to learn from Rubinho how to look good in pictures*. I should mention that I always found it strange how you pronounced my name: While everybody in the family called me

Lulu (except for Dad, who preferred Analu), you insisted on saying *A-na Lu-i-za*, emphasizing every syllable with a tone of authority.

Striking, too, how after Rubens' birth you started to treat me like I was the most detestable person on the face of the earth: ugly, scrawny, grimy, resembling the members of Dad's family, whom you referred to as "simple people." Rubinho, besides being the "young man" you hoped I would be when you got pregnant with me, was always my opposite: blond and green-eyed, corpulent, princely. Just like everyone in your family of *senhoras e senhores* who had lived for years and years in our house, before you inherited it and it grew infested with fat, glistening cockroaches.

As Aunt Zenóbia says, each man heals himself however he can. But scars remain as traces of what we try to forget, since it's impossible for past experiences to stay silent forever. The effort to erase memories tends to be foolish and useless, for the poison of things lingers like a curse. So I am trying to heal myself the best way I can.

But no, I didn't want to bring all of this to the surface on the day of the anniversary of your death. I didn't want to succumb to any shadow of resentment. What I did want was to cry from longing, to go to the cemetery alone to put flowers on your grave and pray for your soul, to post photos of the two of us on Instagram with loving words, to write an elegy, a lyric poem exalting your existence in my life. I wanted to remember your abundant beauty, your talent for ballroom dancing, the almost childlike malice with which you spoke of men and fleshy fruit.

Might I manage to do it someday?