

“After August” from *Ovelhas
negras* (1995) by
Caio Fernando Abreu

Translated by Julia Garcia

Translator's Preface

Caio Fernando Abreu's last published short story, "Depois de Agosto," is about a man's life after being diagnosed with AIDS. Written 12 months before the author's death at 47 due to complications of the same disease in February 1995, "Depois de Agosto" ("After August"), could easily be read as autofiction. That is the case of many of Caio's stories: a raw, passionate dive into the life of someone who experiences the world differently from everyone else around them. In fact, the sense of absolute intimacy in Caio's oeuvre is evident in how he is still often referred to in scholarship and in the media: by his signature, Caio F. This might sound weird to readers in English, but Brazilian scholars tend to be on a first-name basis with this author, as he no doubt would have preferred.

Still, when presenting "Depois de Agosto" in *Ovelhas negras* (Black sheep, 1995), Caio calls it "um tanto cifrada," a bit enigmatic. Having just finished it, he doesn't feel like he has much to say about it. This is the last short story in the collection, and it stands out: All other stories were "black sheep" (hence the title), pieces that had been written for a collection but not made the final cut, or that were only ran in newspapers, or that had been censored by the Military Regime in Brazil (1964–1985), against which Caio was vocal. The stories span the author's entire career, from the mid-1960s to his untimely death, and "Depois de Agosto" is by far the most recent one. Unlike the others, this one seems not to have been edited. Caio introduces each short story with some quick context and lets the reader know whether it has been edited or what follows is the original, but this one is "too close." Could this be the reason for the sense of mystery he perceives in the text?

Caio wasn't exactly known for having an "easy" style. His passionate but obscure language has often been compared to that of Clarice Lispector and Virginia Woolf—not surprisingly, some of his biggest influences. Even his third-person narrators feel close, more all-*feeling* than all-*knowing*. "After August" could just as easily have been written in first person and little would change about it. The same is true for several of his works, most notably in short story collections such as *O ovo apunhalado* (The stabbed egg, 1975) and

Morangos mofados (1982, English translation *Moldy Strawberries* published in 2022 by Bruna Dantas Lobato). Caio's stories are often concerned with finding one's place in the world, fighting loneliness, forging bonds in an inhospitable city. More than describing this state of mind, his text embodies it. There is a refusal to explain that echoes throughout his work. His writing is often proudly hard to reach.

Much of that comes from some of Caio's trademark quirks: the unnamed characters, referred to mostly by pronouns; his *use-of-hyphens*, turning multiple words into a single one; the run-on sentences that mix narration of events, thoughts, and direct quotes. Caio's plays with language, not only in Brazilian Portuguese but regularly including Spanish, French, and English, require attentive reading. Although in his introduction he worries that "After August" might be enigmatic, he also is confident that "a good reader" will not let that hinder their understanding.

This absolute trust in the reader is a key aspect of Caio's work, and in this translation I have attempted to follow his lead. Whenever I had to choose between two versions and was tempted to favor one for clarity, I went back to the text and analyzed it again to see whether this could be one of the "ciphers" he alludes to. Caio's text expects reciprocity: It offers you a glimpse into someone's most intimate workings, and all it wants is for you to experience everything in its entirety.

As I worked on "After August," I treaded a fine line between producing a readable (and hopefully pleasurable) translation and *explicating* the text. Would that still be *translating* Caio's work? Is it the translator's job to make the enigma a little bit easier to understand for those without a shared language to start from? Like Caio, his characters were raised in a time of repression and fear. What they don't say matters as much as what they say, if not more. They either live in hiding or live proudly but are always aware of the risks of doing so. Most of his characters are gay; they are often dealing with the freedom of adulthood after a lifetime of shame. This is all in "After August," with a further sense of urgency that can be hard to follow at times. The man in the story is trying to find life after a death sentence, and as he travels through different cities—never explicitly named, only hinted at—there is much he does not yet dare

articulate. The text reflects his process of coming to terms with the life ahead of him. It isn't easy, but it is beautiful. I tried to favor that quality, even if it meant relying, here and there, on a few more words than Caio needed.

Today, nearly 30 years after his death, Caio is unfortunately more widely known for things he did not write. His passionate style has become a source of inspiration for many writers, and across social media hundreds of products of this influence have been mis-attributed to Caio. He has thus become associated with self-help quotes that do not bear even a passing resemblance to his work, such as "Life is short, live it. Love is rare, enjoy it. Fear is terrible, face it. Memories are sweet, cherish them." It is as if there had been two Caio Fernando Abreus: one telling you to live, laugh, and love, and another concerned with exploring what those things effectively meant in a world that seems to be against you all the time. Sharing stories such as "After August," so representative of his favorite themes and the way he sculpted them into the text, is a way of highlighting Caio F.'s real legacy. May he be remembered and celebrated for who he was, and may other "black sheep" find solace in his work.

After August

by Caio Fernando Abreu

(A positive story, to be read accompanied by “Contigo en la Distancia”)

Author’s note: Written in February 1995, in Rio de Janeiro, Fortaleza, and Porto Alegre. There isn’t much to say about it, it is still too close for me to be sufficiently cold and removed. It might be a bit enigmatic, but a good reader won’t let a little bit of mystery keep them from understanding.

“For the Lord your God has blessed you in all the work of your hand. He knows your trudging through this great wilderness. These 40 years the Lord your God has been with you; you have lacked nothing.” Deuteronomy 2:7

LAZARUS

It was already too late on that August morning. That was the first thought in his mind as he crossed the hospital doors sunk on his two friends’ shoulders. Guardian angels, one on each side. He made a list: too late for joy, too late for love, for health, for life itself, he kept repeating those words to himself without uttering a word, trying not to look at the sun reflected on the grey headstones across Dr. Arnaldo Avenue. Trying to see not the graves but rather the crazy life inside the tunnels and highways that flowed into Paulista Avenue, he experimented with a new laugh. Step by step, in part because he didn’t want to scare his friends, in part because it really was a little funny to be back to that metal vertigo of São Paulo, a city he had left behind but a month before.

Let’s have some sushi at a restaurant you like, said the woman on his left. And he laughed. After that we can go to the movies and see that Tom Hanks guy you like, said the man on his right. And he laughed one more time. The three of them did, a little uneasily, because from that August morning, even though they and everyone else who knew or would come to know (since he was proud of not having anything to hide), even though they all would try to

tenderly pretend not to, they all knew it was too late for him now. For joy, he repeated, health, life itself. Overall, it's too late for love now, he sighed. Discreet, prudish, conformed. Never-again. Love was what hurt the most, and of all his pains, this was the only one he would not dare to confess to.

SPRING

But it almost didn't hurt, in the following months. Spring came and brought so many purples and yellows to the jacaranda trees, so many blue and silver reflections to the waters in the river, so much movement in the faces of People on the Other Side with their delicious stories of living unimportances, and cloud shapes—an angel, one day—and shades in the garden in the late afternoons—on another day, two butterflies making love against his thigh. Thigh Love Station, he laughed to himself.

He wouldn't always laugh. For there were also hard times, hard drugs, nauseas, vertigos, words escaping him, suspiciously hanging from the roof of his mouth, a sweaty terror strangling his nights and eyes low on the mirror each morning, so that he wouldn't see Cain's mark on his own face. But there were still other sweet abstractions like a sense of pining for things before they were gone, since everyone knew it was too late, and a pounding faith irrationally hoping for some science fiction miracle; there were sometimes magical signs in the colored plumes lost around the house. And most importantly, there were mornings. They were no longer August mornings, rather it was September, then October, and so on and so forth until a January in the new year which just last August he had not dared to hope for.

I'm still strong, he found out one day, full-blown summer in the southern city he had moved to, deserted and crowned by the sun, white and hot like a Mediterranean village in a Theos Angelopoulos movie. So he decided: I'm going to travel. Because I haven't died, because it's summer, because it's too late and I want to see, glimpse, spot, behold everything I haven't seen yet and even more of what I have seen, like someone who's been condemned, I want to see like Pessoa, who also died without finding it. Damned and lonely, he dared to decide: I'm going to travel.

JADE

Towards the coast, near the sea, where the green waters looked like jade glistening in the horizon, as if he were part of a kitschy postcard, he drank coconut water wearing a straw hat under the shade of a palm tree in the seven o'clock sun, collecting colored shells hemmed in the sea foam. At sunset he would sometimes treat himself to a beer, watching forever unattainable young men playing beach soccer.

Too late, he never forgot. Then he would draw his breath in slowly, restrained, saving his karmic prana by filling his stomach-back-lungs, in this order, softly raising his shoulder blades and then letting the air out in a smile, a tiny Samādhi. Devotional, Buddhistic. For if it were indeed too late to do all the things the Oblivious Living Ones (as he started referring to the People from the Other Side—only to himself, as he didn't want to sound snobbish) still did, for if it really were too tragically late, he would light a guilty cigarette and, fuck them all, he would in all his arrogance conclude: If it were too late, it could also be too early, don't you think? he was breathlessly asking no one.

Ships slid through the green horizon line. He philosophized: If too late came after the right time, too early would be before that very moment. This time was then set, the exact time, between before-after, night-day, death-life and that was everything, and in being everything it was neither good nor bad time, but rather the right and just one, all the time he had. Between this and the other side, this and that, a coconut in his left hand and a cigarette in his right, he smiled. Supported by fleeting and fierce things, guardian angels and guard dogs.

Not bad for someone who was brought back to life, he pondered. And right after that, irrationally: I'm happy. It was true. Or it almost was, because:

ANNUNCIATION

Then came the other one.

First by phone, as he was friends-with-a-friend-who-was-traveling-and-told-him-to-check-on-him. Whether he needed anything, whether he was alright even if that meant being "alright."

So annoyed he was at being reminded of his own fragility as he found himself in that crowning tropical January, nearly expelled from the Paradise he had worked so hard to reach after his private season in Hell, that he had a violent impulse to treat the other one like barbed wire. Hearing a voice belonging to the *other*. Being invaded by the *other*. The kind cruelty of the *other*, who certainly belonged to the Other Side. A member of the Compliant Collaborators, at times even more hateful than the Dirty Discriminators, get it?

But there was something—a nuance?—in this other one’s voice that made him feel nostalgic for laughing until his throat got sore while chatting away with people of either side—it made him feel like there were no sides but rather slides, he guessed vaguely—like he had unlearned to do since before that August. Oh, to sit at a bar table to drink whatever water Brahma Light alcohol-free Cerpa (and he had been so fond of cognacs), praising or disparaging whatever movie, book, creature, as ships stitched the green horizon hem and tan muscular young men would forever play soccer on the beach sand with their colorful Speedos protecting sweaty curly pubic hairs, their salty, hairy balls. He took a deep breath, slowly, forgiving the other one sevenfold. And he asked him out on a date.

ORIENT

He knew it the second he saw him. Maybe his tan skin, maybe his Chinese eyes? Interesting, a certain gypsy vibe, perhaps a Persian nose?

Maybe so much who knows *quizas peut-être magari* as they rode around in a car listening to crazy tapes *but you’ve got this one I can’t believe any other creature besides me in the entire galaxy: You’re crazy, boy, I never would’ve thought.*

The windows, open to the almost-February breeze, made the hairs on the top of only one of their heads float around, since he had started balding since August. Quivering hairs in their arms—the salty scent of the sea, marine magnetic movements—and muscles in the naked thighs underneath white shorts shook in breathless cramps each time one casually touched the other. A bit by chance, fumbling hands at first expecting a possible rejection, then more confident,

entangled snakes, pupils crashing for the length of fireworks in a whisper—and all of a sudden my *santo antônio* a wet tongue kiss in the mouth all the way to the heavens and almost their throats, flooded to their knees in the tropical rain of Botafogo.

But if the other one, *cuernos*, if the other one, like everyone else, was perfectly aware of his situation: How dare he? *Why do you try, if we can't simply be friends*, he hummed absent-mindedly. Pity, suicide, seduction, hot voodoo, melodrama. As if since August he had become so impure that not even the lepers of Cartago would deign to touch him, he, the itchiest of all dogs of the nastiest alley in New Delhi. *Ay!* he moaned in thirst, riding him like an Andalusian in the *rosso* desert of the city of the center.

SONNET

He woke up in a state of delight. In another city, even farther up north, where he'd fled to after that kiss. But he could barely look outside anymore. Like he used to, when he was part of the gang, like when he was really alive—but fuck if I haven't fucking died yet, he almost yelled. And maybe it wasn't too late, after all, since he desperately started to have once again that craving feeling: hope. As if that weren't enough, along came desire. A blood-thirsty desire of a live animal for the flesh of another live animal. Calm down, he said without sleep, taking too many *lexotans*, lukewarm showers, *shiat-sus*. Forget it, renounce it, honey: Those tarts aren't for you to taste, my dear summer child. . .

Acting as if that wasn't what he was really doing, he took a concealed look at his reflection in the mirror of the hotel hall, for the first time since August. The marks had gone away. A bit skinny, *bien sûre*, he thought, but *pas grave, mon chér*. Twiggy, after all, Iggy Pop, Veruschka (wonder what she's been up to?), Tony Perkins—no, forget about Tony Perkins—he listed, he was kind of a sixties guy. Anyway, if you didn't already know you would never guess, don't you think, dear? But the other one did know. And inside the delight, the hope and the desire, mixed with all that he started pitying the other one, but that wasn't fair, so he tried hate. Experimental hate, of course, since although a good man, he had Ogum with his spear straight up right in his face.

Screaming in the shower: If you know about it you fag then what do you want with all this wooing? Let go of me, leave me alone, you've ruined my life. He started to sing an old song by Nara Leão that always made him cry, this time more than usual, *why did you come down to my dark basement, why did you uncover me in abandonment, why didn't you leave me in my sleep?* But the water would often get shut off in that city, and dry and covered in soap he stopped singing.

ESCAPE

Because he could no longer take those things inside and on top of that the almost-love and the confusion and the pure fear, he came back to the city of the center. He booked his flight back to his hometown in the south a week from then. It was still summer, there were almost no spots left, and everyone kept moving from the sea to the hills, from north to south, and the other way around all the time. Thus, the fateful return. In seven days. Only on the third, the one with the fruit trees, he gave him a call.

The other one, yet again. The other one's voice, the sound of the other one's breathing, the pain of missing him, his silence. For three more days, each of them on opposite sides of the city, they schemed unlikely escapes. The traffic, the rain, the heat, the need for sleep, the need for rest. Not fear. They wouldn't say fear. They left choppy messages on each other's answering machines, at the sound of one's voice the other would pick up the phone right away or let it ring without picking it up, their voices getting lost in the first degrees of Aquarius.

Yes, it was a misery to want and not to have. Or to have without wanting to. Or not having nor wanting it. Or wanting and having it. Or all and any other combinations of wanting and having each of them found himself in, it was all a misery.

MIRROR

He had a dream then. The first one he could remember since August.

He arrived at a bar serving tables on the sidewalk. He lived in an apartment on top of that bar, in the same building. He was distressed, waiting for a message, letter, note, or anything showing the other's urgent presence. Smiling at the door of the bar, a young man greeted

him. He didn't know him, but he greeted him back, not so much in confusion as in a rush. He ran up the steps, he opened the door breathlessly. No note on the floor.

No message on the answering machine. He checked his watch, too late, not coming. But he suddenly remembered the young man who greeted him at the door downstairs, that tan man he didn't recognize—that was the other one.

I don't see love, he found out when he woke up: I dodge it and fall right into rejection.

CAPITULATION

Since they could no longer postpone it, at the risk of sounding rude at the bare minimum—and they both had good manners—the day before he was set to leave, he lit a candle to Jung, another one to Oxum. And so he went.

Like a damsel, he shivered as he got out of the cab, but some virile adrenaline coursed through his muscles and some crazy endorphins in his brain told him: It was back, the desire that had ached so hard before and with such intensity that because of that he had gotten this way. Nosferatu, since August, that raised sword, neck in the guillotine, a grenade whose pin no one would dare to pull.

MIRROR

In the bright and clean room, he started to talk nonstop about another city farther up north, its jade-like sea, and the other one farther down south, the purple tunnel of jacaranda trees. About everything that was not there in the bright and clean room at the center where the other one stood still staring at him, about everything that had been before and that would be after that moment, he spoke. But not once about that moment, that exact second, when he and the other one looked each other in the eye.

“Tomorrow is Iemanjá day,” he finally said.

The other one invited him:

“Sit here by my side.”

He did. The other one asked:

“Did our friend tell you?”

“What?”

The other one held his hand. Soft, light, fresh.

“Me too.”

He didn’t get it.

“Me too,” the other one said again.

The sound of the cars turning in Ipanema, new moon on the lake. And like an electric shock, Iansã’s rays, he got it. He got it all.

“You too,” he said, looking white.

“Yeah,” the other one nodded.

WALTZ

They hung around half-naked in bed all night sharing stories since childhood, between folding fans, peanut shells, Gatorade cans, star maps, and tarot arcana, listening to Ney Matogrosso moan a sad and tired story about a traveler in a house, birds with renewed wings, dethroned kings with immense cowardice. I used to be fat, one of them said. I used to be ugly, said the other one. I’ve lived in Paris, one said. I’ve lived in New York, said the other. I love mangoes, I hate onions. Stuff like that, they talked until five.

Sometimes something crazy would happen, like the tip of one’s foot sliding so deep inside the other one’s shirt sleeves that a toe would suddenly brush against a hard nipple, or one’s sweaty head resting for a second on the other one’s shoulder, sniffing musk. That the other one had almost died, even before him, in a previous August perhaps in April, and since then all he could think was: It was too late for joy, for health, for life itself, and above all, oh, it was too late for love. He split himself into swimming, vitamins, work, sleep, and intense wanks so as not to go crazy with horror or horniness. The lungs, they said, the heart. Retrovirus, Pluto in Sagittarius, liquorice, zidovudine, and Ra!

When they went out for dinner outdoors, they didn’t mind that the others would stare from various vantage points, on many other sides—at their four hands often clasped together over the blue and white checkered picnic cloth. Beautiful, unreachable like two cursed princes, and for that very reason, even nobler.

ENDINGS

It was nearly morning when they exchanged a long hug inside the Simca-like car. So fifties, they laughed. In that morning of Iemanjá, he threw white roses to the seventh wave, then left, alone. They didn't make plans.

Maybe one of them would come back, maybe the other would go. Maybe one of them would travel, the other one would flee. They might exchange letters, late-night calls, Sunday sermons, crystals and beads through Sedex, since they both were a bit mystical, a bit gypsy, a bit *babalaô*. They might get healed, at the same time or not. One of them might go, the other might stay. One might lose weight, the other his eyesight. They might never see each other again, with earthly eyes at least, they might go crazy in love and move to the same city, or maybe travel together to Paris, for instance, Prague, Pittsburgh, or Crete. One might kill himself, the other one might go undetectable. Abducted by a UFO, killed by a stray bullet, who knows.

Maybe everything, maybe nothing. Because it was too early and never late. It was still early in their non-deaths.

BOLERO

But they made a pact: Four nights before, four after the full moon, each in their own city, at a specific time, they open the windows in their bachelor bedrooms, turn off the lights, and hugging themselves, alone in the dark, they dance bolero so tight that their sweats mix, their smells can't be told apart, their temperatures go over 90 degrees, throbbing hard between each other's thighs.

Slow boleros that sound like mantras. More India than the Caribbean. Persia, who knows, Hebrew Buddhism in Celtic and Yoruba. Or simply Acapulco, spinning around in an *embujo de maraca y bongó*.

Since then, even when it is rainy or overcast, they always know when it's full moon. And when it wanes and disappears, they know it will be reborn and grow and wax again and again for centuries and centuries, because thus it has always been and thus it shall always be, God willing, and may the Angels say "Amen."

And they do, they will, they are, they already have.