

Selected poems from
O som vertebrado (2022) by
Edimilson de
Almeida Pereira

Translated by Jane Kassavin

Translator's Preface

Contemporary Brazilian poet Edimilson de Almeida Pereira writes of his poetry collection *O som vertebrado* (A backbone sound): “The printing of the first edition of this book occurred in 2022, more than 400 years after the first excavations in the land we now call Minas Gerais. The sound of this work of *explor-action*¹ can still be heard among the ground, animals, buildings, and people. This work is one of those reverberations. Another consequence of these sounds is the work of the poet, composer, musician, and multi-instrumentalist Milton Nascimento, to whom this book is dedicated, on the year of his 80th birthday.”² In establishing a resonance between the physical attributes of the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais (general mines) and his poetics, Almeida Pereira emphasizes writing as a *material* act of both unearthing and investigating a complex and multilayered territory. His note, as well as the references to the materiality of writing and reading (to ink, paper, and printing), foregrounds a poetics of weaving together the seemingly opposing categories of the natural and cultural, the animal and human, the visible and invisible, and the audible and inaudible, as well as the colonial and racial past and present that have cemented these divisions over centuries. *O som vertebrado* remains attuned to languages both human and nonhuman, inspired by a land whose cultural traditions Almeida Pereira has studied for many years as a prolific anthropologist, poet, and novelist. In the poems that follow, syntax and language are broken and made strange in order to write another kind of history and geography of Minas Gerais.

¹ My choice to translate the word as such points to the poet's double meaning of the word “exploração” as both an exploration or an investigation and a word associated with mineral extraction.

² Edimilson de Almeida Pereira, *O som vertebrado* (José Olympio, 2022), 168; “A impressão da primeira edição deste livro foi realizada em setembro de dois mil e vinte dois, mais de quatrocentos anos após as primeiras escavações na terra que hoje chamamos de Minas Gerais. O som desse trabalho de exploração pode ainda ser ouvida entre solo, animais, construções e pessoas. Esta obra é uma dessas reverberações. Também consequência desses sons são as criações do poeta, compositor, músico e multi-instrumentalista Milton Nascimento, a quem este livro é dedicado, no ano de seu octogésimo aniversário.”

In addition to his work as a poet, Almeida Pereira is a well-known anthropologist and literary scholar of *Afro-mineiro* traditions and Black Brazilian writing and cultural production. Many of these poems are “extracted” from the landscapes and histories of Minas Gerais and the Indigenous and Afro-diasporic traditions fundamental to this land. I use the word “extraction” quite literally, as this term is necessary for reading Almeida Pereira’s poetic and scholarly work. Minas Gerais was the site of the Brazilian Gold Rush in the 1690s, which brought over 500,000 enslaved Africans to the region. Portuguese colonizers employed slave labor to build infrastructure and mines, which continued as Minas became the epicenter of gem and crystal mining through the 18th and 19th centuries. By the time slavery was abolished in 1888, many of these mines had also been exhausted. As a result, once-populated cities with their ornate architecture and colonial monuments quickly fell into ruin, becoming ghost towns. Meanwhile, mining and environmental disasters continue to afflict the region into the present: One recent example of this is the Rio Doce disaster, of which the Indigenous philosopher Ailton Krenak has written extensively.³ As Almeida Pereira tells us, this is the same afflicted land that defines the melancholy music of the famous *mineiro* singer Milton Nascimento.

My philosophy as a translator has been to maintain certain moments of ambiguity and estrangement to the best of my ability and to prioritize the formal and poetic aspects of Edimilson’s words as much as his “literal” meaning, which is often impossible to definitively “extract.” It is my belief that to make the English version more legible would be to flatten the sense of strangeness and disarticulation of language that this work stages, or to replace a multidimensional and palimpsest-like Portuguese with an all too fluent English that harbors its own histories of colonial and imperial domination. This notion of ambiguity is relevant to Almeida Pereira’s work across multiple registers: As a literary critic and anthropologist, he has written Black Brazilian and *Afro-mineiro* identity as multiple, defined

³ Ailton Krenak’s *Futuro Ancestral* references this disaster directly and was recently translated into English as *Ancestral Future* by Alex Brostoff and Jamille Pinheiro Dias (Polity Press, 2024).

by its internal conflicts and contradictions, impossible to pin down.⁴ These works, as well as their formal and theoretical implications, are essential for ongoing discussions surrounding Blackness in Brazil, and the relationship to Black Diasporic cultural production more broadly.

I thank the many readers who were essential to the completion of the translations below, who helped me attempt to maintain the strangeness and hermeticism of these poems without rendering them as excessively literal or unnecessarily opaque. Two of the poems below, “Dream River” and “Gautherot,” carry the specificity of Minas Gerais into English through their proper nouns and references. “Dream River,” for example, references a steamboat that once traversed the São Francisco River and was originally built in Mississippi and brought to Brazil, while Marcel Gautherot was a French photographer whose work documented many rural traditions of Minas Gerais. In both of these poems, and the two others I include, use of passive and reflexive verbs and ambiguous subjects give the work an especially dreamlike quality, so much that one image or moment fades into another and makes one scene, person, or element hard to distinguish from its surroundings.⁵ My translations intend to preserve this ambiguity—an ambiguity inherent to the “coming and going of signs,” as Almeida Pereira writes of in “Dream River.” In this sense, if *O som vertebrado* imagines ways to hear the speeches and sounds of the people, animals, ghosts, and land of Minas Gerais, then rendering his poetic reverberations in English is also an attempt to hear those sounds across multiple geographies and temporalities. This hearing is necessarily uncertain or difficult: It is a release from the prison of syntax and toward the other, yet unimaginable, grammars, geographies, and places that Almeida Pereira’s poetics attune us to.

⁴ See his work *Entre Orphe(x)u e Exunouveau: análise de uma estética de base afrodiaspórica na literatura brasileira* [Between Orphe(x)us and Exunouveau: An analysis of Afro-diasporic aesthetics in Brazilian literature] (Fósforo Editora, 2022). It has not been translated into English.

⁵ I thank Nayla Ramalho and Lara Bourdin for this insight.

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Dream River

In a dream I walk with Domingos
down the street, barefoot.
We are unbothered, no sounds
on the balcony.
We are free to accuse
the ignorant.

Despite them, we sail
someone weighs anchor
eager to go on: the Benjamin
Guimarães carried sisters
to the north, left cousins destitute.
She gropes along the San Francisco.
There are dead from the first touch
within these waters
and a fierce flow of new beginnings.

Sometimes grains reach the table,
the fraud is an opera
and no one takes the blame.
The myth and the rock were
reduced to the coming and going of signs.
Writing with toothaches
is no longer hard—metaphors
ordered by mail
with no prescription.

Carried by the thread that once wove
and now strangles, some skin themselves
in bad deals.
Not all surrender,

but still, I see them,
throwing oxygen tanks
at police stations.

In a dream, Domingos
abandons me if my burdens
burden him.
Not long ago he discovered
there is no river or boat,
only
the journey that journeys itself.

Gautherot

a river watches Marcel Gautherot
as he photographs

a wedding with newlyweds and oxcarts

if it had a son the river would say of the stranger
in a white
suit
like sand under the oxcart—shifting
almost
delaying the yes

if it were a stranger the river would say that he cuts
figures
from one passage to the next

that migration unites people and birds

if it were a guest the river would have Gautherot's
eyes
that sees through a lens
the chance of this moment never ending

but a river
is not worried by human worries

the newlyweds and ships
leave
cathedrals burn in france, an heir
is struck down
the river would say if it were a prisoner of syntax

Second Warning

This book won't contribute to any theory
only that
of the seed collectors.

The heavy breath on the word reveals the dust

where a message
should be.

Backbone

The harpoon tip breaks off
as do fingers
the promise
us too—writing
mends us.

Imperfectly another
form
is linked to what collapsed.
They are fused
to make a circus
from an error

an island
uninhabited because

another
in us
refuses to follow orders.

There is pressure
in the instant when
all is alive and intact:
the tongue of one cavity
in another
not so secret, but
closed—

The hole where the rain
won't weaken
the wick
sign of a body that was once
whole
in some place—

this is more
and less than the shell
without the insect
now within—the uterus
where those lost at birth
await

under pressure
now
all is broken—we barely feel
the syntax
new, archaic
that we will write.