

“At the End of the World”
from *A face serena* (2019) by
Maria Valéria Rezende

Translated by Thomas Mira y Lopez

Translator's Preface

“At the End of the World” is a story by the Brazilian writer Maria Valéria Rezende (1942–) appearing in her 2019 short story collection, *A face serena* (The serene face). Rezende is one of the country’s most respected and celebrated living authors. Having spent most of her life in the Northeast, specifically in João Pessoa, Paraíba, Rezende represents a literary force operating outside of Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, and Porto Alegre. Rezende’s writing often focuses on the customs and cultures of the Northeast. In works such as *Outros cantos* (2016), the first novel of hers to appear in English (bearing the title *Other Songs* in a forthcoming translation by Cristina Ferreira Pinto-Bailey for Tagus Press), Rezende’s narrator reflects on her time living with a group of textile workers in the remote sertão.

“At the End of the World” is Rezende at her most playful: Nested within an older narrator’s memory of passing afternoons with her grandfather as a child there lies, *Princess Bride*-like, a medieval tale. This tale presents both a light parody of pastoral romance and a chilling explanation of the reasons for that romance. What drew me to this story in particular were several moments when characters perform unusual kinds of reading. When recalling her grandfather’s stories, for example, the narrator describes the way her grandfather read aloud to her: by holding the book forward towards the narrator so that, while the grandfather reads the text upside down, the narrator follows along right side up. Here the grandfather provides an almost literal frame as “At the End of the World” enters another realm. Another instance is a kind of intersemiotic translation, in which Eurico and Aldegundes, the young shepherd and maiden who function as de facto heroes of the grandfather’s story, must journey to the ends of the earth in order to escape an evil duke’s grasp. Like the young granddaughter, Eurico and Aldegundes are also unable to read. When a kindly and ill-fated priest gives them directions, telling them to follow the word “FINISTERRE” until they reach, as the Latin indicates, the world’s end, the couple translates the word into its associated shapes. The “F” becomes a broken trident, the “I” a staff, the “N” a gate, and so on. In this way, they make the abstract literal, just as their destination does: Finisterre is both a

metaphorical end of the world and a real location off the westernmost tip of Galicia.

These moments of translation and interpretation also call attention to how the story shifts audiences. Rezende's narration begins with the granddaughter's perspective then moves to the grandfather's. Simple enough. Yet because the grandfather's tale is told to a child but recalled by an adult, Rezende's story allows us to adopt either perspective: that of the child, who finds the tale one of courtly valor and bravery, or the adult, who recognizes the implications it carries about the world's cruelty. The grandfather's tale itself moves from an innocent, naive perspective, that of Eurico the shepherd, to the more experienced, weary outlooks of Aldegundes and the priest. These shifts also cause changes in register. For example, Eurico and Aldegundes address each other using the colloquial "tu," while the priest addresses them using the formal "vos," a difference that becomes more pronounced when the priest gives them directions in Latin. These differences can be difficult to navigate as a translator since there is less subtlety in English's use of second person. As a solution, I tried to amend other moments of the priest's speech to call attention to its higher register. "At the End of the World" is a story about literacy and the paradoxical ways that texts can function as both an exposure to and a refuge from the world. Eurico and Aldegundes do reach the end of their world, as well as the end of the grandfather's tale, so that the narrator can begin her own story.

At the End of the World

by Maria Valéria Rezende

Where does the world end? I asked my grandfather. His only reason for existence, I was sure, was to answer my questions. He spent the whole day sitting on the porch, puffing on his cigarettes, not doing anything except waiting for me to ask him something.

Where does the world end? He went to his rickety bookcase, exactly as I hoped, and took down one of the old rough-edged books, opening it to a page marked with a faded ribbon. He had his ideas about what a girl should or shouldn't know, and he didn't listen to anyone else's opinions.

I settled into my little rocking chair at his feet and traveled to another world, a strange far-off one, just as I desired. He began reading that way only he knew how, first turning the book towards me, then peeking over its top edge and reading the words upside down, so that I could see the figures:

Eurico the shepherd sprawled on the grass, expecting the day to pass as uneventfully as all the others in his life. Not a bleat, just silence and slumber. He'd already begun a lazy dream when he noticed a shadow covering his face; he opened his eyes, half-dazed by the midday light, saw an ample red wool skirt above him, and guessed what was underneath. It wasn't uncommon for Aldegundes to hike up to those spots where he spent the day watching sheep. He bet she was once again there to tease him. She would refuse him any favors, leaving him flushed, sweaty, and agitated for the rest of the day, revisiting his desires and his fear of sin over and over again.

"Come here, Eurico," Aldegundes said. "Draw your sword and stick it in me before the duke does."

Eurico didn't understand, confused as he was by her long legs and arms, and slipped as he tried to lift himself from the wet grass that covered the steep slope where he lay.

"What sword? If I only had a sword. . ."

"I'm talking about what you were born with between your legs, stupid."

“That? But you never let me touch you, not even a little bit. . . how are you plotting to drive me wild this time?”

Aldegundes lay down on Eurico’s black cape—the one with the tattered edges he inherited from his father—lifted her skirt, and opened her legs. Then she explained:

“My godmother works in the castle, and she heard the duke announce, after too much wine the other day, that a new flower was in bloom and that he planned to pluck it today! It has to be me because there’s no other maiden left that he likes. I’d sooner die than be deflowered by that brute. So you do it. You might be stupid, but at least you’re gentle. Sooner or later you’ll have to, since there’s no other free man alive in the rest of this land to impregnate me.”

And so like that they did it.

Haunted by the crime they committed—not of the flesh, but of sovereign offense against their lord—they abandoned the sheep and ran down the hill to the sacristy of the small church. There they knew they’d find an old priest sitting next to the fire. They confessed what they’d done and asked him to marry them then and there.

“You are married, if you so wish,” the priest said, while drawing some signs resembling the cross over their heads and hands. “But the sacrament can do nothing against the duke’s hatred, which will certainly come to shorten what remains of my painful life, for which I thank him. But you, you must run! Run until you reach the end of the world and you still won’t have traveled far enough to escape the fury of your lord.”

“How will we find the end of the world, dear Father, when we don’t know the first thing about it and haven’t even gone past the stone bridge?”

The priest plucked a fragment of dark and twisted parchment that lay on the table, grabbed a quill, and wrote: FINISTERRE.

“Take this word with you and burn it into your eyes so that you may recognize the signs that lead you along the path to the end of the world. Don’t wait any longer—be off with you!”

The two left for the path, carrying only a few crusts of bread the priest gave them and the small parchment, whose strange symbols they tried to recognize and engrave in their minds: FINISTERRE.

A broken trident, a staff, a gate, another staff, a snake, a gallows, an unbroken trident, two big-bellied monks, another trident. . .

They learned well. Although they were nearly lost many times, they found the path again by recognizing, in the marks of stone along the road, the word that guided them: FINISTERRE.

They ran, full of hope that they'd find shelter and protection at the end of the world. When they were spent and exhausted, they came at last to a great pillar that announced FINISTERRE on the very edge of a cliff jutting out over the sea.

Whoever today has the courage to venture to this inhospitable place will see, gliding over the ocean in the middle of a fog, an enormous bird with one ruby wing and one black.

I shuddered with fear and delight, satisfied by all the story's mysterious words and events. My grandfather, who was already beginning to nod asleep, muttered: Don't tell your mother I told you this story. Like every other day, I grabbed the book from his hands and returned it to the bookcase before my mom appeared and yelled at the old man for telling me dirty tales. The end of the world, happily, is very far away, and I don't think any dukes remain.