"Fátima" from *Outros cantos* (2016) by Maria Valéria Rezende

Translated by Cristina Ferreira Pinto-Bailey

Translator's Preface

"Fátima" is excerpted from my translation of Maria Valéria Rezende's 2016 *Outros cantos* (Other songs), a first-person novel set in Brazil's impoverished Northeastern sertão, the arid hinterlands covered by scrubby vegetation and subject to extreme, periodic droughts.

Rezende (b. 1942) is a nun and educator. From a young age, she became interested in Brazil's political reality and engaged in the struggle for social justice. In 1965, she joined the Congregation of Our Lady–Canonesses of Saint Augustine and, after leaving the cloister, began working on behalf of the poor. She taught literacy in various regions of Brazil and traveled to China, Cuba, Algeria, Mexico, and other countries. Rezende has received many important literary awards in Brazil and abroad, among them the prestigious Jabuti Award for her novel *Quarenta dias* (Forty days, 2014) and the São Paulo Prize for Literature and Cuba's Casa de las Américas Prize, both for *Outros cantos*.

The author's life experiences and sociopolitical commitment are reflected in her writings, and *Outros cantos* is arguably her book that best illustrates this. Although not an autobiographical novel, it was inspired by the years she lived as a missionary in the sertão, between 1972 and 1976, a period of hardened military rule in the country.

Outros cantos is one of the most compelling contemporary Brazilian novels to depict the reality of Brazil's Northeast and the plight of those who are subjected both to the droughts that regularly devastate the region and to injustices and exploitation by the landowners. At the beginning of the novel, the protagonist, Maria, is on a bus traveling to the sertão, where she had lived 40 years before. The narrative alternates between past and present, as Maria recalls her arrival in the small village of Olho d'Água, as well as the many similarities among the people, culture, and landscape of Brazil's sertão and those of the M'Zab Valley in Algeria and of the Mexican Zacatecas desert, all places where she'd lived before.

Maria moves to Olho d'Água under the guise of being a literacy teacher in the Movimento Brasileiro de Alfabetização (MOBRAL; Brazilian Literacy Movement), created during the military dictatorship. However, her job in fact entails raising the villagers' awareness

of labor and political rights. Nevertheless, she soon realizes that she, the "teacher," has much to learn from the locals, as she witnesses their daily hardships but also their wisdom, resignation, and simple joys. "Fátima" describes the many life lessons Maria learns, especially from Fátima, a remarkable, strong woman who struggles to support her family alone in a harsh, male-dominated environment.

Outros cantos abounds with vivid, colorful regionalisms typical of the Northeast, such as "macaxeira" (yucca) or "jerimum" (squash), and is striking for its rich visual imagery sustained by a seemingly simple, poetic style. Additionally, Rezende pointedly employs a wide range of Portuguese words of Arabic origin—some easily understood by Brazilian readers (e.g., "algazarra," or racket, uproar), and others less so (e.g., "almucantar," also "almucantar" in English or "celestial sphere")—which strengthens the connections and coincidences the protagonist finds between the cultures and lifestyles of the sertão and of the Saharan desert. I have opted to maintain some of the Arabic-derived words and many regionalisms whenever their use doesn't hinder the English-language reader's enjoyment of the story in an effort to highlight the richness and musicality of Brazil's Northeastern dialect. However, I have not italicized these regionalisms, rather inserting a modifier or phrase to clarify their meaning for the English-language reader, as for example, "uruçu bee." Likewise, I have chosen not to italicize Portuguese words already used in English, such as "sertão," or the Spanish term "redondillas," which is found in English-language dictionaries.

Fátima

by Maria Valéria Rezende

Fátima taught me everything I needed to survive. She didn't teach me everything she knew, just everything that could be taught. My lessons began before daybreak. The first step was to get some light by reviving the embers that lay overnight under the ashes with a fan of woven straw, exactly like the one I had seen Lupita, my Mexican "teacher," use. Once the flames were burning, I had to fill a pan with a precise amount of water and set it on the fire. Next, Fátima taught me how to make a head ring with rags left from a torn hammock, place it on top of my head, and try to balance a water jug on it while keeping my spine erect to walk with the ease and elegance that was expected. Then I had to fetch clean drinking water from the spring: two large jugs for Fátima and her brood and a smaller one for myself. Later, I had to turn the well's windlass, pour two bucketfuls in a can, and bring home the brackish water for all our other needs: washing the pots and pans, the rags, and ourselves. Fátima's gestures were precise; she wasted not a single drop of water or effort. As for me, I was all about wasting—water, sweat, moans, exaggerated gestures, and threats of quitting. Every day, Fátima was patient and persistent in her teaching, while I was proud and stubborn, making only imperceptible progress. By the time the first rays of sunlight touched the top of the hill, we were crossing the threshold of the house, back from the first of the day's endless tasks. We finished at the same time, Fátima going back and forth lively and light on her feet, me, dragging myself around to fetch a single jug of water from the spring or a bucket from the well.

At dawn the day after I met her, when it was still dark outside, Fátima sent one of her kids to get me, as would become her routine for the rest of my mornings in Olho d'Água, since I, with my oblivious city-dweller's ears, didn't wake up to the roosters crowing in the distance.

"Now, time to prepare the couscous. . . What are you going to eat if you don't learn how to make it?" "Couscous," Fátima said

several times. There was no doubt; it was the same word I'd heard on the eve of festivities at my family's home in São Paulo, the very same word that surprised me in that Algerian oasis, in another woman's voice. It'd been Fatouma who taught me to moisten and smooth the semolina until the bottom of a wide bowl was covered with a thick but light grainy white layer that, when steamed, would become our daily couscous. Like today, a word, an image, or a gesture was enough to recall others, random memories like reels of a movie shown out of order but that helped me find familiarity in the unfamiliar.

In Fátima's bowl there was only hard, dry, inedible yellow corn grains. Surprised, I asked why she hadn't left the corn soaking since the day before, as I'd seen Lupita do, adding to it a small handful of pickling lime so it'd be soft and ready to be rolled into a tortilla the next morning. "How long is this going to have to boil till we can chew it?" I asked. Fátima laughed, "You'll see right now who's going to chew this corn. . . Bring the bowl."

I followed her to the shed behind the kitchen; she sat down on a stool next to two heavy discs made of rough stone that lay, one on top of the other, on a stump. The lower disc was slightly concave, with a groove that ran from its center to the rim. Over it, another disc, a bit smaller, fit perfectly. It had one hole in the middle and another close to the rim, into which a short stick of smooth wood, polished over the years by countless hands, was inserted. It was a small manual grinder like I'd never seen before, a fine sculpture, an object as perfect and ancient as the stone metate Lupita used to grind her white corn into masa. The dough, in turn, had to be patted until it became the light tortilla de maíz, which she taught me to watch and flip over in the comal to cook it to perfection.

Fátima grabbed the handle with one hand and began to turn the disc in a steady and continuous rhythm while, with her other hand, she took handfuls of corn from the bowl and let it fall quickly, grain by grain, into the center hole. A grainy bright yellow flour ran through the groove between the stone discs, slowly filling a clay pot on the ground. "Beautiful!" I exclaimed. She laughed, "Do you want to do it?" "Of course I do!" I tried to pour the corn through the middle hole and immediately spilled a bunch of grains because I couldn't get

my aim and rhythm right, making her, the children, and even myself burst into laughter until I managed to get the hang of it. "Now turn the grinding stone, too, because I have other things to do." At first, I didn't understand Fátima's mischievous smile; then I held the handle and tried to keep the stone turning: I couldn't do it even using both hands. "Will I ever be able to eat my own couscous?!"

Sooner than I expected, I learned to use Fátima's grinder to grind the corn she bought in small portions with the little money she was able to save on water. I also learned to moisten the dough just right, place it inside an immaculately clean cotton rag, mold it into the shape of couscous, place it just so in the wide conical opening above the round bottom of the couscouszeira—a clay pot made especially for that purpose and a beautifully designed piece of pottery—and fan the fire, so the couscous would cook over the steam coming from the water boiling inside.

Every day I was excited to try to reproduce the precision and economy of Fátima's gestures, until my movements became a perfect ritual of praise to daily existence and also to God's miraculous powers, which were clearly what kept the village of Olho d'Água alive. In the same way, I got to master balancing the water jug on my head, dyeing the yarn, weaving the threads, and even the science of setting up my friend's loom when its last part finally arrived, a few weeks ahead of her man's return.

Every day I learned knowledge that was more essential to survive the rough life in that hostile corner of the world than the ABCs I had come to teach them, useful only in the small pockets of privilege scattered across the globe.

From all that, I've kept with me the beauty of the forms and of the essential gestures and ignored what it had cost me to learn: my sore muscles, my aching feet, the exhausting heat. In that world of scarcity, the beauty and strength of human labor stood out. I was beginning to learn how to live there, to have my hope restored, and slowly began to let my dead rest in peace, at the same time asking myself when I'd learn how to change injustices and sorrows into new life. I was preparing myself to stay there for a long time.

[...]

In that ancient corner of the world—without cables, lamps, and electricity—nighttime darkened everything down below but lit up a multitude of stars above, as could only be seen from the deserts or open ocean. It took a long time for the day's heat to dissipate; it was impossible for me to just go home and fall asleep. Each nightfall, with the lamps already turned off to save oil, most of the adults sat under the largest mesquite tree, comforted by boiled macaxeira root and some coarse coffee, a mixture of who knows what grains. Stories were told and retold in prose and verse, the day's events sung in redondillas improvised on the spot in perfect meter and rhyme. Around us, we could hear, but not see, the children running and playing. Their chirping, sometimes a cat meowing, barks, mooing, a shout here and there, or a song, enveloped us in a mantle of peace and safety. Everything was fine.

They asked me to tell my stories too. I began without a plan, spontaneously, talking about the Sahara and its people, the semolina couscous eaten with méchoui; Fatouma; their rug-weaving art; the dunes; the shepherds with their sheep and goats; the canteens full of fresh water hung in the middle of the narrow streets in the walled cities, waiting to quench the passersby's thirst. "Just like the jug Dona Zefinha leaves under her cashew tree at the end of the street, for people who arrive so parched they can't wait to get home, right?" they remarked and laughed, never questioning any of my stories about Algeria. They even guessed the festivities held at the time when the valley floods, when the turbulent, overflowing waters run along a millenarian riverbed after it rains in the desert's rocky mountains; the waters cross the dunes and disappear down the centuries-old wells carved in the riverbed rock, feeding the oases. "Like the dry river here that fills only when it rains at its head. If we only had those wells. . . But the ground here is pure gravel and sand. If there's any hard rock, it'll be down deep, all the way down, almost to hell, and the man is never going to build something good out of cement just like that and put an end to selling us the water that brings him profit."

We continued every night. We went to Zacatecas, with its nopales, cactuses, and brambles; I talked to them about Lupita, her white corn, her metate and comal, her light backstrap loom improvised out of simple sticks tied together; I talked to them about other

nations, countrysides, and cities. They wanted more and more, and I wove them stories.

They had heard the official—but not at all convincing—reason I was there from the councilman who distributed gifts and favors around that district, eternally reelected with support from the Owner, the supposed donor of everything.

I had applied after seeing a brief ad in a government bulletin listing all the municipalities that needed teachers for the government's MOBRAL literacy program and was accepted right away because Brasília was pressuring the region's political caciques. Nobody else capable of placing one letter after another was willing to exile themselves to Olho d'Água to teach young and old adults reading and writing. ". . . to read what here? Only if it's the iron brand on a cow's backside." What about a novena or the Office of the Immaculate Conception? "No need to read that, every old woman knows that by heart, and every girl learns it like they learn how to cook and to give birth. . . Even that young woman who'd been here earning a trifle from the government because the councilman fell for her and even ended up taking her to the city, well, she could write, couldn't she, copying everything from the book onto the blackboard in a handwriting that was even pretty, but reading? She didn't know how to read anything, no siree."

They began to ask me every night to put my word loom to work, unravel and spin again the skein of stories about the big wide world. It was the revelation—or designation—of what my real job was, the role I was to play in their lives, my right to stay there: to tell them about other worlds, casually, freely, just because I could. My stories interested them much more than my promises to teach them the ABCs, the apparent reason for my presence in that corner of the world. In exchange, they slowly started to tell me their own stories, and to recall verses from the cordel pamphlets bought at markets, passed from generation to generation and recited in the dark while our eyes rested on the stars. Slowly they even told me things nobody talked about during the long workdays because, over there, they were born already knowing all that.

In this way they offered me their stories, cruelly true or brightly imaginative, interwoven with mine, forming a new chess game made

up of different worlds, and I learned what it really meant to belong to a community. We talked very quietly under the distant clamor of the children playing, as if we were protecting our secrets from mysterious, invisible ears that might be hiding nearby. Listening to them, I remembered the verses of a sonnet by Bilac, certainly read in some schoolbook: "O ye, who in the silence and seclusion / Of the fields, alone talk, when night falls, / Careful!—what you say, like a murmured prayer, / Will be whispered in the skies, carried away by the wind. . ."

> *The bus braking suddenly jolts me again. The lights come on, the driver gets up and walks to the row behind mine, where a young couple is making out, long kisses and moaning. He glares at them for some seconds until they separate and, without a word, returns to his seat and resumes the journey. I wonder if another passenger had complained about their exhibition. The scene reminds me suddenly of those verses that seemed so appropriate to the evenings in Olho d'Água: they were just a scrap of a silly sonnet that talked about dead virgins turned into stars and exhorted all lovers to not disturb them by making them envious of a love they'd never known. As imaginative as the fabulous narratives of the storytellers from my sertão! I laugh to myself, thinking how a stanza takes on new meanings and stands alone in our memory when removed from the original poem. How many scraps gathered along the way like that feed our imagination? My existence had certainly acquired a new and obstinate purpose since that scrap of life I'd spent among those scrawny people and cactuses.*

Little by little, I understood. There at the edge of the world, the sole essential goods that only money could buy were water and a loom.

That end of the world, which I'd imagined as hidden and completely unknown, had an owner, the Owner of the hill where the miraculous, perennial water spring sat. He was the real owner, "with signed papers and all," they'd said, the man who owned life and death in that land I'd dared invade without knowing what I was

doing. Only he had the resources to bring the machinery, blocks, and cement to have a deep and narrow well drilled where now there was always plenty of the brackish water that was essential for his dyeing shop. Only he had the means to buy the windlass and the chains that lifted and lowered the buckets, the money and power to pay and cover up for his armed thugs and the guns that represented him. And he charged a lot. Each jug of potable water, each bucket of brackish water, cost money. He was the Man who also owned the truck and the yarn, without which the precious looms were worth nothing. He would send the raw cotton yarn and the aniline dye and take back the hammocks, leaving only a few cents to pay for the people's work, a meager amount that would mostly go back to his coffers in exchange for jugs and buckets of water. Just to pay for the minimal liquid ration during the long, dry summer months a family had to have their own loom and work hard their whole lives.

They explained that when they had a good winter, three short months of rain, everything turned green across the sertão, and they could harvest all they had sowed: pumpkin and watermelon, bur cucumber, okra, and especially, manioc, corn, and beans, to be consumed parsimoniously during the summer months. Cavies and doves multiplied across the caatinga; even an occasional fat yellow armadillo could be seen, and fish or shrimp swam up the nearby river that now ran high. Cow milk, cheese, and curds became abundant, as did honey from the uruçu bee, and the São João festivities were celebrated heartily, sweetening a bit their captive existences tied to a servitude begun in who knows what remote time. More than anything, what made them happy was the water running down the roof tiles to fill with fresh water, however many jugs, pans, bowls, buckets, and pots they had without costing a penny, water from heaven rebaptizing the people under the roofs' spouts.

If there was no real winter, nothing except for some scarce, insufficient manioc survived in the parched plots outside the private and callously fenced-in lands irrigated by the water trickling from the perennial spring. Then, only the Owner could save them. They were grateful to him, they'd always owe him, even if they'd never seen him in the flesh. As if he were God. Because he was invisible, he was even more fearful and powerful. Anyone who decided to cut

their ties to him, whoever didn't submit to him and sold their loom in exchange for a bus ticket to the big wide world, got lost out there and would never be able to find their way back or have a place to belong when nostalgia started to ache deeply.

What could I say against an invisible power? Even if his gunmen remained invisible, lurking in their hideouts, appearing suddenly on the rare occasions when people's entrenched fear wasn't enough to keep everything working as the Man wanted, what would happen to my plans, to the job I'd accepted as my mission and which, through devious paths, had brought me to that place and its people?

> *I wish the night would last forever as if I were still there, leaning against the slender trunk of a scrawny tree, looking at the sky through its lacy canopy, sensing rather than seeing the others around me, sitting close together, playing with words, naming stars and constellations—the names they used and names I'd learned in other places—interpreting the celestial bodies' messages, talking about each one's longings, and making wishes on the numerous falling stars.*
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> *Now I watch through the window the stars going by, brighter in the sertão than anywhere else in the world, I'm sure. To my eyes they haven't changed one bit, no matter what the astronomers tell us.*

One night, as she tried to teach me how to guess the calendar date by the position of the constellations, Fátima told me that five years before, her husband, Tião, had left to find work where there was money. There was no more hope in farming, the only option for those who didn't have loom or cattle. He'd tried. There was land to spare, but no crops thrived enough to sustain so many lives all year long. His two or three cows had died of thirst or from snake bites. He'd just thrown the last shovelful of dirt on their youngest son's shallow grave, rented out the lands down below the wall of the small dam for next to nothing, grabbed the burlap sack where he'd already stuffed his birth certificate, a change of clothes, his new pair of flat leather sandals, an old, patched-up hammock, and took off. He didn't say anything else; it wasn't necessary. As a final goodbye,

the latest rains had knocked down the dam wall erected with enormous sacrifice on the hillside, where the waters flowed down in years of good winters. The other waters lay in lands that were the property of the Man, the Owner.

She, Fátima, stayed behind, shriveled, maybe already a widow. For a very long time. A woman without a loom and without a man, she had to take on manly jobs, dyeing the yarn for some guy or another unable to work because of illness, mourning, a trip, or religious obligation. She worked on other families' looms and wove hammock fringes after hours for a few cents—or for a bowl of corn, or six pieces of macaxeira, or a couple of doves, her kids looking for firewood among the brush, always covered in scabs, their feet bruised—for a few lousy cents. Fátima: poorer than the poorest. Her husband didn't send her a single penny from what he earned; everything went towards paying for the loom. Illiterate, he never sent any news either. His letters were the pieces of jacaranda wood already carved that the yarn truck brought once in a while; her loom arrived in parts.

Fátima showed me the pieces of the rustic, unfinished machine and named each one with precision, caressing them fondly, all piled up in a corner of the practically empty room destined for the loom. Once it was ready, assembled piece by piece, the structure would fill the whole space. Too much empty space was a sign of extreme poverty there—and of obscene wealth in other places. Only a little more than a handful of pegs were still missing. On Sundays, she said, when the week's hustle and bustle let up, she leaned at the window, looking out at the dried-up ground, her own skin parched like their old, useless land title, feeling her hollow womb dry, no scent, no taste in its withered membranes, and in her ears, only the cracking of desiccated branches and the memory of his voice. Tião's face was already fading in her memory, and she knew he'd come back a different man, totally changed. She'd recognize him by his voice, by the way he called the cattle, and for this reason she'd let him get her pregnant again.

Greater than the harsh, inescapable reality, only the power of dreams and fantasies, the strength derived from wonderment and from the encantados, the spirit beings that encouraged the living forward, day after day. Those were things the people in Olho d'Água

liked to talk about, and I could stay there forever listening to Fátima's cheerful conversation, telling the same story again and again. I can still hear her voice now:

"And when the miracle of the cinematograph arrived? It was around the time of the feasts of São João; what a good winter we had that year! Nobody believed all that idle talk from people who'd been to fancy places saying it wasn't a big deal, no miracle, just huge pictures that moved while stuck to the wall. Isn't it the same every time, these well-traveled folks putting down those who stayed behind, boasting like know-it-alls, to try to make the poor country bumpkin feel like a fool? But we all found a way to get the ticket money: breaking the piggy bank, digging into grammy's old trunk, borrowing at the grocery store or at the hammock shop—whatever. But as night fell, right when Mr. Eliel pulled the cord to turn on the generator, which by some miracle was working that evening, the whole town was there in the little building that housed the market to see the novelty. Only babies, old men in hammocks, and women who'd recently given birth didn't attend. Even Arduíno, who's completely blind, came to take a look. Those who hadn't brought a stool sat on the floor and didn't complain one bit, for who cares about comfort when you're about to see a miracle? Since early morning, a fellow had been walking around with a sort of big funnel to his mouth shouting, 'Finally, the cinematograph has arrived in Olho d'Água! For the first time you'll be able to see the greatest miracle of the century! Only 500 réis per person!' They said not even the town of Paulo Afonso had seen it. The man named Cinematograph came in first, carrying under his armpits two wheels, each about three hand spans across. They looked like bobbin reels from a sewing machine but that wasn't it; there was no thread and no sewing machine, and the reels were *this* big. His assistant came in behind him carrying a black box, also some metal pieces and a very long cable, which he plugged into the electric panel next to the generator. The Mr. Cinematograph fellow placed the black box on top of a market stand, messed with it for a while, and stuck two pieces of metal in it, which stood up like the open arms of a pilgrim praying to heaven. Then he fitted the reels that weren't for sewing onto the metal pieces, pulled a little black strip through them, and shouted 'it's about to start!' His

assistant walked to the panel and turned off the light. The building turned pitch black, and we all sat quietly, waiting, waiting, until we heard a ring just like when Mr. Heleno, the notary, slaps the bell to call in the next person in line. But we couldn't see anything in there, and didn't know whose turn it was, or what for. We heard a second ring; nothing happened, everything was silent again, and we continued to wait a very long time in the darkness, everybody quiet. At this point people began to nudge each other and whisper, not understanding what was going on. My sister, Ducéu, was elbowing me on my ribs for me to be quiet as if we were in church, when suddenly Aparecida's Lau, with his booming cowboy voice, asked 'What the hell is this? Pay 500 réis to see such a silly miracle?' The hubbub grew; people stirred about, demanded their money back, and some were about to stand up, when all of a sudden a light flashed out from the black box, and there, on the back wall of the market, appeared the large, colorful image of a red earthen field and the slopes of some high hills that came down, one on each side, onto low lands that sat smack-dab in the middle of the market. Green thickets, palms, and xique-xique cactuses could be seen here and there, under blue skies and a sun so bright we couldn't believe it, because it rained like crazy in that place! I expected to feel the rain splash on me, but it was still all dry inside the market. If not for some letters that kept running across in front of us disrupting our view, we could see everything very well: each white drop of the heavy rain as it fell straight from the clear skies, and bright, luminous flashes here and there that had to be lightning. It was something out of this world, it had to be, because in Olho d'Água there would be lightning only in March or April. So, I thought I was beginning to understand what the miracle was: to open inside the market a door to another world where the winters were severe, with a lot of precipitation and lightning bolts under blue skies, hot sun, and not a single cloud. How wonderful if Olho d'Água were like that; we'd have more than two crops every year! I was already satisfied; that was enough of a miracle to justify my 500 réis. But no! That was only the beginning, because all of a sudden, I saw something appear on the hilltops of the other world, almost touching the market ceiling, near the corner where Tudinha has her stall to sell ash soap. It was a bunch of people on

horses, in a frenzied gallop, rifles and pistols in their raised hands, shooting into the air. All the folks from Olho d'Água were flabbergasted and began to shout, but we could still clearly hear the noise of hooves on the ground of that other world, the shots, and the shouts of the people, long-haired and with feathers on their heads. But there's more! On the other side, near Aristolino's dry fish stall, another group of riders ran down the hillside, wearing wide-brimmed hats and kerchiefs tied around their faces, shooting their guns in the same way as the others. We watched one side, then the other, then it seemed like we'd moved back and were standing farther away, so we could see both sides at the same time, shooting and running towards each other. And we kept moving back and forth, away, and then very close to the scene. At one moment we could see everything at once, and next, only one group up close. We moved afar and saw everything, then, we'd see some men all bunched together, very near us. We kept moving around this way and that as if we were flying, like a flock of scared birds, watching everything that happened. There came the two bands running down the hills so fast I was almost breathless, expecting a big clash to happen down below, right in the middle of the market wall. People were galloping downhill, not worrying about the shooting, the rain, or the lightning, nor concerned about the ones who fell—they were all dead on the ground, men and horses. And we could barely breathe, fearful, holding each other tight. Suddenly, *snap!* We heard something like a whiplash, everything disappeared, and only a wide white spot remained on the wall. Folks, astounded and quiet, started to get up, but the man at the contraption yelled it wasn't over. Mr. Eliel tried to turn on the building lamp again, but it went out with a pop. We watched Mr. Cinematograph and his assistant strike some matches and mess with the reels this and that way while shouting, 'Soon, it's going to start again soon!' It gave us a fright to see everything appear on the wall like before, exactly where it had disappeared, when practically everyone was dead under rain and sun. That's when the real miracle happened! Because the two bands of horse riders that'd been running downhill, like they were going to crash into each other right in the middle of the wall, suddenly began to gallop backwards. All of us screamed loudly at once, so surprised we were, because that was

something never seen before. Not even the best cowboy from around here, or the greatest rodeo champion, could do something like that. Make a horse gallop backwards? One or two steps, OK, but such fierce galloping? 'Golly, it's the Devil's work!' people said. Do you think this isn't a big deal? Well, so, an even bigger miracle happened, like only Jesus Christ could've done: While the living kept galloping backwards, the dead bodies that had stayed behind on the ground, certainly to avoid dying again trampled by the animals, began to resuscitate. Each bleeding fallen horse sucked its blood from the ground back inside its body, and before you realized it, was already galloping in reverse, carrying the rider that had flown from the ground onto the saddle without even having to step on the stirrup. In this way, they all returned from death to life, and from life, they disappeared off the wall; only the emptiness of that other world remained inside our little market for another minute, the rain falling hard under the blue skies and hot sun. This happened only that one time, because even the electric generator got so astonished with all that it never worked again, and to this day, the Owner hasn't installed another one. But it was an experience of a lifetime, worth remembering every time."

Whenever melancholy hits me, because of nostalgia, the lack of a compass to show my life's north, or the feeling that the world out there was gone, or because it felt as if time had stood still and the day of the great revolution would never arrive, or every time I was tempted to quit amid my daily tasks, I asked Fátima to tell me again about the miracle of the cinematograph. I asked so many times that still today I can hear her voice and her words. She had me in stitches so bad, I could've died from laughing. We laughed together, my friend exaggerating parts of the story, making up details, imitating people's voices and comments, just to make me laugh even harder. She knew that it was up to her and her unfailing sense of humor to lift my spirits, something so essential for me to survive in that aridness.

Laughing at Fátima's stories led me to more laughter, as I recalled my funny experiences at Monsieur Aoum's home in the Ghardaïa Oasis. There I was, a guest and a foreigner—European, they said of me, no matter how many times I explained that we Brazilians aren't

European—sitting lopsided on rugs and cushions and having a meal with men who, out of courtesy to me, spoke only in French even among themselves, shrewd merchants trying to extract from me who knows what kind of information they might find useful. Having been scolded so often during my childhood to watch my manners at the table and hold properly the fork and knife, I felt very tense there, trying to learn the Algerian dining etiquette and grab my portion of méchoui using only three fingers of my right hand, without letting a single drop of sauce run down my knuckles or fall outside the bowl. When I was about to give some excuse to get out of that embarrassing situation, I heard giggles, "Psst, psst," and saw, among the folds of the curtain that screened off the area of the house reserved to women, a narrow portion of Fatouma's face, which wasn't covered by the usual veil. She crooked a finger, "Come, hurry up," and Monsieur Aoum, with a grand, lordly gesture, indicated I should follow his wives. I stood up awkwardly, passed through the curtain, and was dragged away by the women, amid laughter and excited comments in Arabic that were incomprehensible to me. Pulling me along, they threw themselves on big, colorful cushions placed in front of a large TV screen, on which the characters I vaguely knew from some American show—completely incongruous in that environment—spoke pure Arabic. Too bad I couldn't share with my dear Fátima the other reason for my uncontrollable laughing, for she wouldn't understand what was so funny, just as I couldn't imagine what went through the minds of my Algerian women friends as they watched the TV melodrama unfold in yet another world.

Slowly, I adjusted and learned to dance to their tune—a melody made up of the noise of wood against wood, mooing, bleating, the daily singing and verses of the sertão. I relished each of the movements that composed those long days, captivated by the exquisite yet laconic beauty of their language, of each sound, each gesture, or object, be they utilitarian or devotional, the use or meaning of which dictated rigorously their forms, textures, and intonations. But nothing matched the awe that filled me at sunset, released as it were by the first sounds announcing the cowboys' return. After a few days, I could already recognize each of the men who gravely and quietly greeted me with a touch of their fingers to the narrow brims of their

leather hats, and learned their archaic names from hearing them ask each other about the workday's events: Cicero, Severino, José, Pedro, Tobias, Nicodemus, Josué, Archimedes. . .

When the sun began to descend quickly on the west, and long shadows stretched out on the ground, my heart pumped faster and led me to one end of the street, almost always to the steps of the chapel very close to my house. Other times, it led me to the other side, which took more effort because it required a longer walk on the soft sand. Then I'd find a place to sit among the old cashew tree's huge roots. Dona Zefinha always kept a jug full of cool water under the tree, so those arriving from the caatinga could quench their thirst right away; it was a promise she'd made to São José in a year when the rains came late. Just above the jug, she left hanging from a nail on the tree trunk a quenga, a ladle made of coconut shell with a long handle to pour water from the jug. The ladle's edge was carefully cut in a zig-zag pattern, "so those in a hurry don't drink straight from the jug and sully the water with their spittle. . ."

Waiting at either of those places, I'd close my eyes and perk up my ears. The first thing I heard was the enchanting sound of the cattle calls far away, growing louder as the herders approached slowly. The song helped me imagine, before I opened my eyes, the beautiful silhouette of the cowboys and their animals against the light, an image all the more spectacular when outlined against the incandescent skies that loomed over the fields in front of the small chapel. The side by Dona Zefinha's cashew tree offered a narrower view, but the sight of the men aroused my sense of smell when, thirsty, they approached the water jug, emanating odors of leather, manure, and jerky—human and animal sweat transmuted into perfume in that arid landscape.