Birth Song

The fire is lit
the hands are ready

the day has halted its slow march
into the depths of night

The hands in the water
create a new skin

white cloths
a boiling pot
the knife

A sharp pain
marking the flow of time
the wind churning
twenty gourds of milk into butter

the moon resting on the grindstone

A woman offers up to night
the open silence
of a soundless
motionless shout
pure silence opened to the shout
that marks the flow of tears

The old women unravel a slow memory
lighting up the night with words
then warm their hands that kindle fires
Ana Paula Tavares

A woman burns
in the fire of a cold pain
equal to all pains
greater than all pains
this woman burns
in the midst of the lost night
gathering in the river

While the little ones sleep
their simple milky dreams.

from *O Lago da Lua* [Moon Lake], 2000

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My beloved arrives and as he removes his leather sandals
his fragrance traces the limits of my room. He lets
his hand go setting boats adrift in my body. He
plants trees
with sap and leaves. He sleeps on his weariness
lulled
by our brief time of hope.
He brings oranges. He shares with me the moments
of his life.
Then goes away.

He leaves like forgotten dreams his beautiful leather sandals.

from *O Lago da Lua* [Moon Lake], 2000
Selected Translated Poems

Bitter as Fruit

“You tell me things as bitter
as fruit…”
Kwanyama

Beloved, why have you returned
with death in your eyes
and without any sandals
as if someone else were dwelling in you
in a time
beyond
all time

Beloved, where did you lose your metal tongue*
with its signs and proverb
with my engraved name

where did you leave your voice
soft as grass and velvet
and studded with stars

Beloved, my beloved
what has returned of you
is your shadow
split in half
is a you before you
words as bitter
as fruit

from Dizes-me Coisas Amargas como os Frutos [You Tell Me Things as Bitter as Fruit], 2002

*It is a tradition, among men of the Kwanyama people, to carry in their mouths a leaf-shaped strip of metal ornately engraved with signs and sayings and used to produce whistling sounds.
Woven Tissue

My body
is an upright loom
where you left the criss-crossed
colors of your life: two bands a diamond
and marks of the plague.

My body
is a thick forest
where you forged your path

After you got lost
you hid the key and the proverb.

from Dizes-me Coisas Amargas como os Frutos, 2002

***

Our ancestors make use of the mirror
Every night

Hey! Look at the village of our ancestors
The genuine village shaded by palm trees
Which we were forced to abandon
Hey! Our ancestors
Hey! Our own ancestors
Along with the villages we were forced to abandon
The villages shaded by palm trees
Hey! That so lovely group of villages
Hey! That so lovely village of our ancestors
Which we were forced to abandon

Our ancestors make use of the mirror every night

from Ex-Votos, 2003
The men of Mpinda e Mbanza Kongo
Wore bracelets on their wrists
Drank palm wine
Danced in a circle
And had the women do the work
Of picking the ripe fruit of the palm

Chorus:
   Woman, if you can’t ever rest you’re a slave
   They make you fetch the wood
   They make you fetch the water
   They make you pick the fruit

The women deal with the grease in the kitchen
The women deal with the children in the bedroom
The old men have stopped eating meat
They sit in the sun unraveling words

Chorus:
   Woman, if you can’t ever rest you’re a slave
   They make you fetch the wood
   They make you fetch the water
   They make you pick the fruit

from *Ex-Votos*, 2003
Build my house  
With clay from deep down  
Twine together the thatch  

Guard of the roads  
Guardian of fire  

Plant one post here  
And another there  
Prepare the precious mixture of mud  
And find just the right vegetable fiber  
Build my house with clay from deep down  

Guard of the roads  
Guardian of fire.  

from *Ex-Votos*, 2003

***

I’m sealed within the island of my body  
I lie down on the ground  
The earth speaks for me  
The time of life’s passage.  

I’m sealed within the island of my body  
I buy day-old bread  
And caresses.  

from *Ex-Votos*, 2003
Keep your hand
In line with the dunes
The desert is no place
To walk a tightrope

Drape the four winds
Across my body
Using the sun
To point them southward

Keep your hand
Perpendicular to the dunes
And find your equilibrium
In the corridor of wind

Our conversation will pass
Through oases our lips our thirst

When you leave
Close behind you
The doors of the Kalahari.*

Lisbon, 2005

*A desert in Namibia, Botswana and South Africa, between the Orange and Zambezi rivers.