

SELECTED POEMS BY ANA PAULA TAVARES  
TRANSLATED BY RICHARD ZENITH

*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.

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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.

*Ana Paula Tavares*

*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

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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

*Selected Translated Poems*

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

*Ana Paula Tavares*

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

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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

*Selected Translated Poems*

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.