

Pedro da Silveira. *Poems in Absentia and
The Island of the World*. Trans. George Monteiro.
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Islands occupy an almost mythical quality in literature. As locations, as metaphors, as literary devices, and even as characters. Naturally bounded by the sea and often adversely affected by weather and isolation, islands create their own narratives from their very elemental boundaries. Fictional islands can be paradises or hells, sometimes simultaneously, places engendering poetic contemplation or personal and moral corruption. As inspiration, islands can have a tremendous impact on their writers.

The literature of islands, too, is often bounded by similar natural boundaries, but the very nature of insularity can also breed an outward-facing literary imagination, for in any direction one has the unlimited horizon afforded by the sea, which seemingly knows no bounds. Island literature is created by the interplay between landscape, sea, and imagination.

For the writers of the Azores, the remote, mid-Atlantic archipelago located about midway between Portugal and North America, their literature is rooted in “the habitat consisting of the lava mountains that spew forth, from their very depths, the substance that penetrates us,” as the great Azorean poet, Vitorino Nemésio, wrote. “Geography for us is

as powerful as history, and it is not accidental that a large portion of our writings are memories of volcanoes and the other catastrophes. Like the mermaids, we are of a double nature: we are of flesh and we are of rock. Our bones sink into the sea.”

The Tagus Press, the publishing arm of the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth Center for Portuguese Studies and Culture, has recently launched a book series under the name of “Bellis Azorica,” dedicated to the literature, culture, and history of the Azores. One of the first books in the series is George Monteiro’s translation of a selection of poems by Azorean-born Pedro da Silveira (1922-2003), gleaned from two of his books *Poemas Ausentes / Poems in Absentia* (1999) and *A Ilha e o Mundo / The Island of the World* (1952). An insightful introduction by the Azorean writer and critic Vamberto Freitas, who knew both the poet and his translator, along with an afterword by Monteiro, provide context and background for this important poet.

Monteiro, who died late last year, is an expert translator of Portuguese poetry into English, and his gifts in this discipline first came to light with the 1983 Gávea-Brown title, *The Sea Within*, which gathered the work of twenty-six Azorean poets and presented them in an accessible, dual-language publication unfortunately now long out of print. Two of Silveira’s poems from his first book, *A Ilha e o Mundo*, were included in that anthology; among them, Silveira’s signature poem, “Ilha”:

Só isto:

O céu fechado, uma ganhoa
pairando. Mar. E um barco na distância:
olhos de fome a adivinhar-lhe, à proa,
Califórnicas perdidas de abundância.

which Monteiro translates as:

Only this:

Closed sky, hovering heron.
Open sea. A distant boat’s hungry
prow eyeing forever those bountiful
Californias.

It's a poem about longing, as so much of Silveira's poetry is about longing—so distinctly Portuguese and, in particular, an Azorean literary trait wrapped up as it is in the most difficult to translate Portuguese word and concept of *saudade*. For Azoreans, this sense of longing is tied to their insular existence and, at least since the great historian of the Azorean settlement, Gaspar Frutuoso, more specifically named it *saudades da terra* (a longing for the land), which is understandable for a people whose homeland is surrounded by sea. Simultaneously, however, is the sense of longing for another, better life, which led people like my great-grandparents to leave the islands for América shortly after the turn of the last century. Some emigrants left for Azorean enclaves in southern New England, some for parts further West, such as Hawai'i and California. Hence the "Califórnia" of Silveira's poem.

Silveira was born on the archipelago's westernmost island, Flores, which is part of the most isolated group of the nine, and therefore the island closest to America. Looking west from there, one comes naturally to America and, in fact, Silveira's father, an immigrant farmer, was born in California and returned to the island some time before the poet's birth. Being born on Flores, as was another great Azorean poet, Roberto de Mesquita, Silveira could also be considered Europe's westernmost 20th Century poet, as he was anything but provincial. He traveled to and from the mainland often, and all over the islands, settling for a time in Ponta Delgada on São Miguel, the most populated of the islands, and, for much of the latter half of his life, in Lisbon, where he was long employed at the National Library of Portugal.

Filled with elegies, remembrances, poems of return and family history, the selection from *Poems in Absentia*, which occupies three-quarters of this book, also includes a sequence of short, almost aphoristic "Memórias" (Memories) sprinkled throughout, which act as a reminder of the heartbeat of the incessant sea to which Silveira refers in one of the them,

Basta-me este mínimo verde
e a casa diante do mar.
—Bates, coração?

and in Monteiro's translation,

It is enough for me this least bit of green
and my house facing the sea.
—My heart, does it beat?

If I have one criticism of this book, which was recently longlisted for the 2020 PEN Translation Award, it is that the selection from Silveira's first book is so slight—merely three poems—and leaves me wanting more. It was, at the time of its publication, an influential volume, especially upon the generation of writers that began to publish poetry and prose in the 1960s and in opposition to the dictatorship of Oliveira Salazar, which lasted from 1926 until the Carnation Revolution of 25 April 1974.

But mine is simply a disappointment that we couldn't have more of Silveira's poetry—and Monteiro's translations—in a volume such as this one. And, unless Monteiro left behind a treasure-trove of additional translations in need of polishing for publication, we will have to wait for another translator to tackle the balance of Silveira's work—and hope for a future volume of Selected Poems from among these two and his other volumes of poetry, which include *Sinais de Oeste* (1962) and *Corographies* (1985).

Perhaps I am biased—having ancestors from the Azores, which I can trace back to among the archipelago's original waves of settlers, lends me a certain fondness for the literature of these islands—for I feel the literature of this special place, a place of many poets from Antero de Quental and Roberto de Mesquita to Vitorino Nemésio and Natália Correia, and into the present generation's Carolina Matos and Urbano Bettencourt, is deserving of more attention than it has received to date. (To say nothing of the archipelago's many novelists and short story writers.) For this reason, Tagus Press is doing a yeoman's service in creating a series dedicated to Azorean literature of which this important volume is among the first. May its list rise out of the ocean to create an island of literature for all of us to discover.