

Foreword

The power of poetry: these juxtaposed terms, apparently contradictory and oxymoronic, impacted my life in an enduring, endearing manner. In which manner can an engineering professor claim ascendance of poetry over destiny? This is a long story, and this modest book is its fruit; as a preface and testimony to the statement, this brief story will, hopefully, convince the reader of the power of poetry.

I came from a small town, carved deep among ancient mountains in South America. Birds and woods and snakes and lakes filled with magical fish, lambaris and carás, trairas and timburés, piaus and cachaços, are the memories of my childhood. A devoted and enthusiastic priest instilled in me the appreciation for the beauty and melody of poetry. I transcribed the products of my prepubescent inspiration, of my exalted thoughts into a little book, with a soft red puffy cover, convinced that Father Henriques' admonitions and encouragement had to bear fruit through my pen. At fourteen, I moved into the Big City and, governed by the strong and wise hands of the grown-ups, parents, and society, I gradually left my childhood dreams, like a bird that loses its feathers. I return, forty years gone by, and reread the severe and prophetic words of Saint Exupéry, in "The Little Prince": "Grown-ups never understand anything by themselves, and it is tiresome for children to be always and forever explaining things to them." The moments of inspiration, in which my body trembled with emotion and internal music, became scarcer and scarcer as my social network, responsibilities, aspirations, and engineering studies enveloped me like a web. Nevertheless, there were bright moments. I spent a memorable two months in the heart of the Amazon; I served in the Brazilian Army in a time of turmoil and restlessness; and I studied in Liege, and drenched my soul in the cold rain of Belgium; I also worked as a reporter translating articles from *Les Cahiers du Cinéma* and *L'Express*, that would

later appear , in the local paper, with slight changes, as original matter signed by the chief journalist.

But the little bard in me persisted, poor of technique but rich in enthusiasm. In my senior year in the Engineering School, as I readied myself to embark into a (hopefully) successful technico-entrepreneurial carrier, jumpstarted by the proper marriage and a US MBA, an eventful occurrence took place, triggered perhaps by my restlessness; it diverged me from the planned path.

My senior year was a tough one; I don't recall exactly which dictator ruled Brazil: Medici, Geisel, Costa e Silva? Ironically, I had enlisted as a volunteer for the revolution in April of 1964, at the tender age of seventeen. My only recollection is that I gave my pistol and a few bullets, that I kept well hidden from my parents, to a good friend that left our city with the revolutionary forces. He was a driver in the military convoy and the pistol was later confiscated. A few days later, we got a first taste of the new revolutionary forces, when we were forced to march along the parade, bayonets on our back, as punishment for a few poorly placed jokes. The sergeant looked at me and proffered the fatidic word: "communist." Upon seeing my identification card with my Luxembourgish name, he confidently confirmed: "Russian communist." The Brazilian Army had taken over the revolution! We fluctuated between absolute order and anarchy, and the clashes, bricks thrown from buildings, major police-student confrontations were routine events. In one of these exchanges, our Engineering School was totally surrounded by the police forces. I escaped through a passage between two buildings, that only "good" students knew. Many of the rioters were quite ignorant of the "corridors of knowledge" and were more occupied in fostering The Revolution; thus, they were trapped inside the building and received their share of club beatings, when they finally surrendered, after a siege of only twelve hours. My Luxembourg ancestors, that specialized in resisting for months behind the castles that punctuate the landscape, would have laughed at them.

In this climate of affairs, I decided to publish my poems once and forever, and to move on. If the world was going to lose a poet, it would be a published poet! The preface to this book describes the motivation and my state of mind at the time. I contracted the services of the Engineering School Print Plant.

One of the employees, for a modest fee, “volunteered” to moonlight and print sixty copies of the book, all I could afford; the manuscript had been typed on proper forms and was mimeographed. After proudly receiving the copies of the book, I organized and hosted a launching celebration at our favorite bar, “Machado’s”. Motivated by my military experience in explosions, by nuclear weapons (which use an implosion, a reverse explosion in which a fissile mass is compressed, thus initiating the nuclear reaction) under whose threat we existed in those days, and by the necessity to draw allegories and analogies between the inner self and the external universe (a requisite of poetry), I chose a somewhat provocative title. I named it IMPLOSAO (Implosion). It will be seen that it was a fateful choice. A couple of weeks after the launching of the book, the Director of the Engineering School, Dr. Cassio Pinto, who saved many students from the cruel hands of the DOPS (the ominous Department of Social Vigilance!), had me come to his office. I had been able to avoid this honor for all of my student days, and was puzzled by the nature of the meeting. With some concern, he told me that the feared organization SNI (National Information Service) had approached him with a copy of the book, demanding an explanation for publication of “inflammatory and subversive material”. At that time, and unknowingly to us, military censors would routinely check every printed word in university print plants that often produced material that was not classroom stuff. The title “Implosao” certainly was tailor made to catch their attention. I was very concerned about the outcome of this and was scared by the accounts (probably highly exaggerated) of fellow students that had been tortured by the police, not a pleasant reward for a graduating senior. One of my acquaintances had been arrested a year earlier and had apparently eaten his own glasses, in an attempt to commit suicide (I did not wear glasses at the time). Other stories abounded of Homeric beatings, of the infamous electric shocks to the private parts, and of other forms of persuasion. Another of my acquaintances, also a distinguished Monlevade native, was a plastic surgeon and a part time police Captain. He would be routinely called upon to “fix up” or reassemble the faces of communists and subversives after interrogation rounds. I figured, correctly, that I was sufficiently ugly not to need any additional help.

It should be understood that these procedures were applied in strict adherence to the anti-Communist fight that was waged globally these days, in varying amounts of intensity, atrocity, and ferocity. The world's most powerful democracy, paradigm of justice and equality, even established a college that provided rigorous training and doctrine to Latin American experts. The School of the Americas is closing its doors, for lack of enrollment. Hence, there was a serious ideological underpinning to these actions, legitimizing them, in a manner similar to Nazi and Soviet tactics. As our colonel would say, in his frequent harangues in my Army days: "We shall break the paws of the Soviet bear!"

I was at the time a finalist for the Fulbright fellowship, and had been accepted by a first rate US University after a rigorous selection process in Brazil. We were ready to achieve our dreams: to go to a real university, where there were no strikes, police sieges, confrontations, and the like. Anticipating myself to my potential torturers, I decided to leave Brazil immediately, forfeiting even my graduation. My parents were very saddened and I only told them this story after my father discovered it. I joined my brother in Denver. Since I left Brazil before the final decision, I also forfeited the Fulbright. I was fortunate to obtain an Assistantship at the University of Denver, where I came as a "walk in". My first job was to make drawings for a famous Metallurgist, Prof. Barrett. He had received his Ph.D. from Professor Compton, of the Compton effect. He liked my drawings, one of my few talents at the time. As it happened, the department I joined was much more focussed on research than the school I originally planned to attend (Colorado School of Mines) and I found inspiring mentors and fully developed my interest for Materials Science; thus, an industrially geared carrier was redirected towards research.

The curious reader might ask: "What happened to the book IMPLOSAO?"

In the year after I left Brazil, a great flood happened in Belo Horizonte. The sewer-creek Arrudas overflowed and destroyed all papers and documents in the first floor of the Engineering School. I had secretly stashed the copies of my book in the Physical Metallurgy laboratory. All but a handful of copies were destroyed, proving, again, that, in the end, water (even sewer water) cleanses everything.

And what happened to my friends, communists, sympathizers, or mere bystanders?

They smile about these days and all say that “communism was but a dream...” Three of them pursued their dreams and, as Che Guevara, rode Rocinante to the end. One found his death as a warrior (or terrorist, in the government jargon), in a shootout with “the forces of oppression” (or civilian defense organization, in government jargon). The other went on a long odyssey that started with the killing of a policeman and included the necessary visit to Cuba and exodus in Mexico. The third spent half of his life helping and teaching the poor and is, by a tortuous path, reaching Christian sainthood.

And what happened to the “law-and-order” representatives?

They feel that they have carried out a tough and fair fight and that, in the end, the Soviet bear and his Cuban and Brazilian cubs had not only had their paws broken, but their hides taken.

And to me?

Every now and then a strange thought comes to my mind and I transcribe it in whatever piece of paper I find. The muse whispers songs in the empty and lone hours, and I write them down, imperfectly and poorly, as best I can. My nature is to keep “things”; my first communion and all subsequent suits that I had are solemnly and peacefully lined up in my closet. Again, it is difficult to explain to grown ups that these objects acquire a soul, that they become part of their owner, that they develop a magical communication with us. As I enter into the afternoon of my academic life, having crossed the hurdles and jumped the hoops that comprise our profession, I decided to return to my youthful dreams and assemble these poems. Thirty years have gone by since the first edition was “published”. The early, middle, and late poems are assembled and presented here, as a second attempt at publishing, under much more auspicious circumstances. My early thoughts are from my childhood and have therefore that special flavor and fervor. The latest poems are recent and therefore my entire modest works are contained herein. The poems span forty-two years, and reflect the internal and external changes. It is somewhat embarrassing that I am the central figure in most writings. This is not purposely done in a self-serving manner. Rather, it is the result of this singularly personal record of events and occurrences. The reader should not be frustrated if everything is not clear. It has been said that the beauty of poetry resides in its mystery, even

after it is totally known. I have attempted to translate the poems from Portuguese to English.

My sincere appreciation is extended to the women in my life that have, through their warmth and love, made this long journey bearable. I am forever endeavored to them, starting with my loving mother, Marie-Anne, who visits me in dreams every so often, my nanny for 54 years, Alaide Maria Vilas Boas, Mme. Wittig, from whom I learned little German but received plenty of affection and cookies, Dona Josefina, my first and most loving teacher (you will always be the image of grace and beauty!), Dona Lourdes, bright and tough, the many girlfriends who have shared their warmth and love with me, my cousin Annik, whose sardonic comments hide a very sensitive soul, Suzanne, with whom I share two wonderful children, and Joan Hart, frail, stern, and loving. A very special gratitude and appreciation goes to Linda Homayoun, for her love over the past ten years and for sharing, hopefully, what is left of our ephemeral existence. I have to quote Saint Exupéry again, through his fox: "We become eternally responsible for the ones we tame."

A special gratitude goes to the Humboldt Foundation, for granting me the freedom and time to "listen to my internal voices" through a Senior Scientist Award in Karlsruhe, Germany. Unknowingly to them, they funded both "Naturwissenschaftliche" and "Geistwissenschaftliche" activities. Were it not for this time and freedom, this work would not reach its closure.

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