

ELAINE BADGLEY ARNOUX

Ribbons, 2004
Oil on Canvas, 66 x 72 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

JOÃO MELO

Portrait of a Character in Search of a Writer

You lot need to know my history. Yes, with an H.
Do you think it might be of interest to some author?

Well, here it is.

I never had a childhood. At least I don't remember one, which amounts to the same thing. When I say this, what I'm really saying is that I cannot remember anything. Zero. Absolutely nothing. I don't know when I was lifted out of my helpless vegetative state for the first time, or when I started crawling. I have no clue as to which direction I took with my first steps. I don't know which word was the first one to find its way out of my mouth.

To dramatize a little bit more, I also have no recollection of the first time I used a potty, brushed my teeth, or ate with a knife and fork. I don't even remember the first time my penis hardened, or what caused it to—something which bothers me to this very day.

Of course, I am aware that this elementary information is passed on secondhand for everyone—in other words, by a third party. But I haven't even had that.

Indeed, to cut a long story short, I never had anyone to tell me what that first period of my life was like, on this planet on which I happen to live. Likewise, I never had anybody in whose steps I could follow, whose light could be my candle in the midst of the awful gloom that, for me, is human existence; or whose outlook could act as

some sort of white flag, flying peacefully but decisively in the center of this constant war, all against all, every day, without exception. (Please note, regarding the preceding description, the abusive intrusion of poetry, which, allegedly and according to a few heartless critics, merely muddles the story.)

The earliest memory I have of myself is of someone suspended on two apparently solid legs, but with a completely hollow mind and with a worrying feeling of loneliness and fragility, without knowing what to do or which path to follow. Instead of being appeased or diluted, this sensation has only increased over time.

Since I have known myself as a person, a kind of paralysis has kept me restrained in the shadowy heart of time. I feel tremendously overloaded by all the individual and collective dramas and tragedies of the world. It is as if my shoulders have had to support the entire weight of the terrestrial globe.

I feel permanently harassed by a powerful and complex impulse to do a number of things simultaneously, but the truth is that I do absolutely nothing at all. I don't even have a clearly defined profession.

It is true that I have a diploma, but I don't know what to do with it.

I also don't know how I got it. I do not recall having attended any school, college, or university.

Everybody remembers, for example, their first primary school teacher. Normally, she's the object of all sorts of descriptions and impressionistic accounts, nearly always generous and kind ones, but even when there isn't much ground for that, the students are at least lenient.

In my case, however, my first teacher is a vast black hole. Years ago, I gave up trying to bring her to mind.

Likewise, I don't remember a single school friend.

I don't remember a single crush, either platonic or consummated, during childhood, adolescence, or even during my adult life.

Petty sociology—a very useful tool, so it seems, for contemporary writers—says that teenagers are usually sexually initiated by their cousins, their domestic workers, or by the old spinsters who frequently visit their homes.

The truth is that I cannot recall having peeped at any cousin bathing in the shower or getting dressed in her bedroom alone, in front of the mirror, oddly fascinated by

the reflection. As far as my memory goes (which means nowhere), no cousin of mine ever lifted her skirt or asked my opinion on the knickers that she was wearing on that extraordinary day.

Moreover, I can assure you that I cannot recall having ever tasted (I won't use another, more literal verb, because current times are less and less favorable for freedom, even useless freedoms such as the literary type) a single housemaid. Someone told me that I don't know what I'm missing, but please consider such a statement as merely an innocent *fait divers*.

Regarding those possible spinsters who supposedly visited my home regularly, I must be suffering from some kind of trauma in relation to them, because the truth is that I only remember them in a vague and distorted way in my nightmares. They appear as indistinct, ambiguous, and volatile shadows, never becoming clearly visible. I'm convinced, therefore, that in my past, no sexual adventures took place between myself and any of them.

The fact is, to my knowledge, I've never had a sex life.

I have never masturbated; therefore, I don't know, to this day, the sweet agony of feeling one's penis shivering out of control like a moribund bird before suddenly spilling in successive spasms a thick and slimy jet spraying freely across every surface and object within reach, like a wild and furious waterfall or an obscenely joyful laugh. May my critics forgive me once again for this second intrusion of poetry, but what do you expect from me—a raw pornographic description? Do me a favor: don't create complications with the moralizing squad.

If, in my material on sex, I don't refer to any foreplay, I refer even less to the concluding phase. Believe it or not, I have never known a woman in the sense in which the Bible itself recommends. To put it another way, I have never plunged into a woman's body. I don't know what it is like to be burned in the fire that, so they say, all women conceal in a secret location within them; nor have I ever gotten lost inside a single one of them. To be blunt: I have never fucked anyone.

It is true that words are symbolic and, once they have been launched into the air, they become not only the author's property but, principally, that of the recipient. So, before you start to speculate and throw suspicion at me, I must add that, in all my life, I have never had

any homosexual encounters either—not that I remember, anyway. Yes, I know that nowadays this means that I am going against the mainstream to some extent, but it is precisely because of this and other things that my history is so incredible.

All that remains to say is that, apparently having not had a past of my own, the future neither thrills nor worries me. I don't make plans or have any causes, nor do I belong to any organization. I don't even defend my own cause.

As a result, I don't quarrel with anyone—not at home, not in the street, not at work.

I don't blame my family for my miseries.

I don't speak ill of the government or the opposition.

If, for me, the past is a huge black hole, my future is a plain white canvas upon which it is not possible to fix a projection.

I am an anodyne being.

You really do need to know my history right to the end.

Do you think a writer will be able to write it down?

—Translated from the Portuguese
by Luísa Alvim and revised by Lara Pawson

João Melo, born in 1955 in Luanda, Angola, currently lives between that city and Houston, Texas. He adds to his activities as an author those of a journalist, publicist, and professor. After attending Coimbra and Luanda Law schools, he was graduated in journalism by the Fluminense Federal University, and received his master's degree in communication and culture from the Rio de Janeiro Federal University, both in Brazil, where he lived from 1984 to 1992 as a press correspondent. He is a founder of the Angolan Writers Association, where he served as Secretary-General, Chairman of the Board and Chairman of the Fiscal Council. His works include poetry, short stories, chronicles, and essays. His books have been published in Angola, Portugal, Brazil, Italy, and Cuba. He has been included in various anthologies, in Portuguese, English, German, French, Spanish, Arabic, and Chinese. He was awarded the 2009 Angola Arts and Culture National Prize in the literature category by the Ministry of Culture of Angola. In the USA, his work has appeared in www.wordswithoutborders.org (September 2007), in *Catamaran Literary Reader* (Fall 2013), *Chicago Quarterly Review* (Summer 2014), and *Imagine Africa - 2* (anthology), published by Island Position/Archipelago Books, Brooklyn, 2014..

ELAINE BADGLEY ARNOUX

*Once Upon a Time:
See Saw Margy Daw, 2004*
Oil on Canvas, 154 x 120 in



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