

RALPH JOACHIM

Nocturnal Revolution, 2009  
acrylic on canvas 36 x 48 in



courtesy: R.Blitzer gallery

JOÃO MELO  
The Secret

This story happened in Haifa. I have never been to Haifa, but I've always wanted to write a story that takes place in the city. Likewise, I will not die without writing a story located in Mexico City, in Venice, in Salvador, in Kathmandu, and another in New York. The (almost) Shakespearean question that plays havoc with me, when I am caught up in these delights, is whether the guardians of patriotic integrity in the national literature will cease considering me an Angolan author for daring to locate my tales in spurious, exogenous environments instead of restricting myself to local Bantu landscapes.

Thus, I remember—with a shock no doubt identical to that experienced by those condemned to be roasted in the medieval bonfires of the Inquisition—that the playwright José Mena Abrantes was accused of not being Angolan for writing a play called *The King's Orphan*. It was about the peripeteias of a Portuguese girl, who was part of a group of white teenagers sent to Angola in the seventeenth century by the king of Portugal. The girls were to marry the settlers before they took up with native women and contributed—as Viriato da Cruz has said, albeit in another context—to the darkening of the race. *Yaka*, one of the best novels by the celebrated author Pepetela, was also considered a colonial novel because the central characters were members of a settler family in Benguela.

More extraordinary, in both cases, is that the accusers were well-known opponents of the country's governing party, which they considered to be antidemocratic and dictatorial. Thus they proved that, if not subjected to a permanent process of questioning and evaluation, even the most well-intentioned and generous ideologies—those formulated to function as forces of consciousness, mobilization and, most of all, human transformation—run the risk of becoming instruments for the exclusion of others and even of bloody repression and attempted annihilation. This is the reason why oppressed people tend to mimic their oppressors, and why revolutionaries become conservatives or even counterrevolutionaries. The contemporary world is not, therefore, a very pleasant place, but it is the place in which we are fated to live.

As you have surely gathered, I'm particularly pessimistic today. I have just connected to the internet, and I am reading a story in a Colombian newspaper about a woman in Haifa who managed to hide her deafness from her hus-

band for exactly twenty-five years. In all honesty, I do not know which is the more scandalous: the self-proclaimed democrats, who hide within themselves their barely disguised autocratic and exclusionary tendencies which come out of their mouths at the first opportunity, or this woman, who, for exactly a quarter of a century, was able to conceal such a ridiculous and distressing secret from her own spouse, the man with whom she supposedly shared all the good and bad things in her life. Will this be, after all, the dilemma for postmodern literature—whether one should take a stand on the big questions facing mankind, or whether one should worry about the stories of the day-to-day existence of the men and women who live on our planet?

The truth is that, far away from this duplicitous mess, there was a woman who lived in the city of Haifa, and who concealed from her husband her very poor hearing for twenty-five years. As we know, Haifa is located in the so-called Middle East—one of the most explosive regions in the world, to use the journalese. To contrast with current advice, or the tendency of all the best-selling authors, prior to writing this story I did not have time to conduct any research. As such, I imagine Haifa to be a white city as well as a secular one (with all the implications that the word carries)—a city that is totally covered in the dust that was originally sand that came from the nearby desert. Not having forgotten, meanwhile, the input of a certain useless culture that follows us through life, I can also imagine men and women walking through the streets in long white outfits and, in the cases of the women, with veils covering their faces. Cars, mostly old ones but a few modern ones, too, are moving sluggishly through the city. If you are lucky, you can still see a few donkeys, evoking memories of those old times that are vanishing so relentlessly each day. Confirming the unceasing intensity of the disappearance of those times, Haifa has a new part, too—an area that is developing far from the port with which the city has traditionally been identified.

Whether a city like this exists or not, the first question we can ask, having—at last!—reached the end of the beginning of the story, is the reason for the woman’s deafness. Was she born with this defect? Apparently not, since she could speak normally with other people, as we shall learn before this story’s end. Another hypothesis, maybe a more plausible one, is that she was among the many vic-

tims of the war that has, for centuries, afflicted the region. Most likely, she became deaf, at least partially, due to the detonation of some deadly device exploding close to the place where she was hiding, in one of those daily battles, insane and inexplicable (at least for me, living so far away from the region), that continue to this day to shake the Middle East. The words that I have just used to describe the fighting in the region may seem unjust—at least when told by someone who has experienced four decades of war during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—but the truth is that the human tendency to gaze only at another’s buttocks is as unsolvable a mystery as the origin of the Haifa woman’s deafness.

The second question to ask is the following: why did this woman conceal her deafness from her husband? Whatever the culture of the author may be (and however useless), among the different religions fighting with one another in the Middle East, there is not known to be any taboo (the traditionalists among you may read *kijila*) against the physical impossibility of hearing the daily hubbub of the world. Moreover, the Colombian newspaper where I first read this story did not state whether her husband had any kind of anger towards or phobia of deafness, which proves that, contrary to what its practitioners claim, journalism is not the most comprehensive, precise, or exact (let’s not even mention objective!) form of communication. Once again, therefore, it is literature that is called upon to save mankind, or at least to save its readers.

The author is of the firm belief that the husband nurtured a secret joy for the fact that his wife could not hear a single noise. However, do not rush into thinking of him as a monster, because the truth is that he loved his wife just as she was. The biggest hypocrites might say this meant nothing, since, in addition to love being a highly plastic emotion not only favorable to all sorts of uses but also to all sorts of justifications and excuses, the concept of truth is equally highly debatable, at least since the Greeks (so we are told) invented philosophy with at least five strands. So, it is said, one of these strands is close to the truth of the rabid shamelessness of the cynics.

Thus, the husband could have been completely at ease with his wife’s deafness for, let us say, opportunistic reasons, since a spouse who is unable to hear offers certain advantages for the other after all. These advantages can

be unfolded almost infinitely. For example, just imagine him being able to snore at all times without ever facing the recrimination of his wife. Or, in bed, swapping her name for that of his mistress without running any risk whatsoever of being thrown out of the room, or having to divorce or even die. And what about the delicious pleasure of producing certain scatological noises without being pushed out of bed, or having to listen to insults from his wife? Not to mention the supreme joy of never again having to repeat relentless vows and worn-out promises of love simply because she can’t be bothered to listen to them...

Last but not least, we can even imagine something which is a bit like the icing on the cake: In addition to all the above-mentioned advantages, this woman’s deafness would have made it impossible for her to hear any of the precious information reported by her friends about her husband’s extramarital affairs. Indeed, I have heard that after the marital brainstorming that she carried out with her friends (to call them “gossip sessions” would be too prosaic), she remained oddly calm and serene. She did not shout and curse, she did not pull out her hair, strip off her veil, nor cry and throw herself to the floor. Considering that human beings usually tend to analyze others according to stereotypes, many might attribute her behavior to some cultural disposition (I’ve already said that this story happened in Haifa, but these cultural explanations can, in truth, be found where one least expects them); yet in this case, the cause was not that complex, at least sociologically: she did not hear any of the accusations—by which I mean absolutely none—that her friends made so vehemently and with such conviction.

It is not, therefore, out of stubbornness that I feel suspicious of this woman’s husband—who, indeed, I have never met. For him, his wife’s deafness should have been like heaven on earth. He was living, have no doubt, in some kind of nirvana. It would have been totally different if, instead of his wife concealing her deafness from him, she was concealing the fact that she did not feel any pleasure, or that she had a lover, or that she was a lesbian. Men, so we say, usually lose control when they learn about these kinds of secrets. And to be fair, this is not only the case in Haifa; on the contrary, it happens in the best families and in the best civilizations. What we can say, in these cases, is that the degree of male rage varies according to the three men-

tioned situations—although, strangely, the feeling might be the same: everyone who experiences it feels unquestionably betrayed. “Cuckolded” is, in truth, the right word. Cuckolded by themselves, in the first case; cuckolded by any son of a bitch, in the second; and perhaps most despicable of all, cuckolded by a cow, in the third and final case.

Be that as it may, as far as I can work out, this man has no reason to complain. Apparently, he was able to give his wife not fictitious but real orgasms; she did not have a lover (either that, or she had concealed him as well as she had concealed her deafness for the past twenty-five years); and lastly, she had not “gone over to the opposition,” as the saying has come to be known since the political system opened up in Angola—and not without a slight and tolerant irony—referring to someone who has, openly or not, opted for homosexuality. What I could not find out was whether an analogous expression is used in Haifa, though I am sure it must exist. One question remains, however: if they really were without any marital problems, why did the woman conceal her deafness for so long? I am sorry to confess that, despite my best efforts, I have not been able to clear this up.

Before my readers feel tempted to doubt the investigative capacity of the author, let me attempt to answer the third and final question that must necessarily be asked: how was this woman able to conceal the secret from her husband for such a long time? Not since a certain British diplomat was duped by a Chinese spy had such a cinematic and (well-disguised) metamorphosis been heard of—otherwise, that episode would never have been immortalized on film in *Madame Butterfly*. In sum, how can someone who is deaf pretend for no less than twenty-five years, and without being found out, that she has the same ability as every other mortal to hear the polyphonic noises of the world? How could this extraordinary woman of Haifa, in the early morning, answer her husband’s more-or-less-loving farewells? How, in the evening, could she react to his high- or low-spirited greetings? How could she know, at the table, that he had asked her for the bread and not the knife, or, in bed, that he just wanted to lie at her side and sleep instead of trying again?

I don’t know. This unusual story received no more than ten short lines in the online edition of the Colombian newspaper where I read it. I must say that when I



first heard about it, I felt as if I had been attacked by an overwhelming concern that made me search the internet desperately for more details. But that first story was all I could find. For several days, I searched the principal oracles of our times, such as CNN, the BBC and Sky News, but it was all in vain. The only thing that is known is that after twenty-five years, this Haifa woman’s husband acknowledged that he had been living with someone who was unable to hear any noise, not even the smallest, because the mailman had absentmindedly given him a letter addressed to his wife that was from a hearing-aid manufacturer. The husband’s response remains unknown. Could it be that when he opened this curious letter to his wife that he fell to the ground, as if struck by lightning? Would he have fled their house, to be lost forever in the desert, fearing that his wife, at the end of the day, knew all about his hairy secrets that he thought he had concealed from her for the last twenty-five years? Or did he take his scimitar from the trunk where he had kept it for so many years, to polish it particularly carefully, while waiting for his wife with a peculiar quietness to his gestures and his eyes as blue as the Haifa sky, as if he had always imagined such a situation? Nobody knows. I have begun to believe that one of the most complex problems facing humankind today is the entropy of communication.

The author is forced to acknowledge his own frustration because, after all this, he knows nothing about this case of the woman who concealed her deafness from her own husband for twenty-five years. I do not even know why this story captured my attention in the first place. Possibly because it occurred in Haifa, a remote and foreign city, where I have never been, as I mentioned earlier, and for which reason I am running the risk of being forcefully withdrawn from the select (or, better said, selected) pantheon of national authors. To save my own skin, I only have one solution: to telephone the woman in Haifa.

—*And what do you, a simple Angolan writer, have to do with my life?* replies a voice from the other side of the world.

—*Translated from the Portuguese by  
Luísa Venturini and revised by Lara Pawson*

*In “O dia em que o Pato Donald comeu pela primeira vez a Margarida” (The day Donald Duck tasted Daisy for the first time). Lisbon: Caminho, 2006.*

**João Melo**, born in 1955 in Luanda, Angola, 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 masters 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 (thirteen of poetry, six story collections and one of essays) have been published in Angola, Portugal, Brazil, Italy and Cuba. In Angola and abroad, he has been included in various anthologies, and has been also published in magazines in Portuguese, English, German, French, 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. He lives currently between Luanda and Houston (USA).

**Luisa Venturini** is a Portuguese author, translator and poetry interpreter. She has translated into Portuguese works by many authors, such as Gabriel Garcia Márquez, Javier Tomeo, Joseph Stiglitz, Daniel Mendelsohn, Alberto Manguel, John Powells, Farhad Daftary, Heinz Halm, Reza Shah-Kazemi, and, into English, works by João Melo, Manuel Carmo, Maria Teresa Mimoso, etc., as well as regular translations of magazine articles, catalogues and brochures for institutions and museums, such as the Lisbon Water Museum or the Aga Khan Foundation.

**Lara Pawson** is a writer and journalist, based in London. She became interested in the Portuguese language, and Angola in particular, while working as the BBC correspondent in Angola 1998 to 2000. Her first book, a work of literary non-fiction about Angola *In the Name of the People: Angola’s forgotten massacre*, will be published by IB Tauris in May 2014.

# RALPH JOACHIM

*Intrusion of Night into Day*, 2012  
acrylic on canvas, 72 x 48 in



courtesy: R.Blitzer gallery