

THE POET'S CONUNDRUM

ISABEL D'AVILA WINTER

On a spring day in Lisbon in 1931, the poet Fernando Pessoa took two steps back from the window of his rented room. Across the road, on a balcony, Pessoa had seen a young woman poking lettuce leaves into a canary cage.

Years later Pessoa would not remember the canary, and he only dimly remembered the young woman (she remembered him clearly). But he recalled that on a certain afternoon at dusk, when the sun's last rays shone through the window panes and leaned into his room, he had turned from the light and been compelled to search for a pen amongst the assorted objects on his chest of drawers. The poet is a faker, he wrote. The poem's first stanza he wrote almost without lifting his pen. When he read it over it was as though a train had stopped with a jolt at a station without him realising he had boarded it.

The poet is a faker

He fakes so completely

He even fakes the pain

Of the pain he really feels.

At the bottom of the page, Pessoa signed his name and wrote the date as the first day of April, which was a deliberate lie (he had spent April Fool's in bed, indisposed, as his diary attests) and yet further evidence that the poet is a faker.

In 1977, long after Pessoa's death, a bundle of letters came to light. Apparently there had been a certain young woman eleven years before the poem supposedly written on April Fool's Day. It turned out she too might

have kept a canary on her balcony, a fact that some have since considered significant. All the more when it was discovered that Pessoa had bestowed on this young woman an impassioned kiss in an office after-hours (this when it is widely believed Pessoa died without making his acquaintance with Venus).

There will always be those who assert the kiss would never have taken place had it not been for the young woman's name. Had it not been for the fact that at the moment of the young woman's birth, some twenty years earlier, her eldest sister had been reading *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*.

Ophélie.

The day when Pessoa noticed Ophélie for the first time, it is now known he repeated her name out loud. And of all the people in the office, Ophélie herself had heard it and turned to Pessoa at his corner desk. He worked here whenever his employer called him in to translate correspondence from Portuguese to French and English, and vice-versa. It seems Pessoa had barely ever found a need to raise his head from the task at hand until that day. Ophélie, new in the office, still reeling from the thrill of having been employed at all, did not know his name. When Pessoa said hers out loud, she turned to him and saw a well-born, well-bred gentleman (though not especially well-looking, she thought at the time, and with eyes dark enough to make you want to raise a lantern to them). Ophélie gave him a glad smile, nevertheless, which Pessoa did not reciprocate.

Pessoa, say several, was not in the habit of smiling until after a certain time in the evening. Perhaps after a dinner of sole and Colares wine, after strong coffee and *aguardente*, deep in smoke and in the company of men who reacted indifferently to his tobacco-cured teeth, his smirk like a glimpse of mossy castle ramparts on a dreary day. Those who knew Pessoa claim his dispositions had less to do with the gravity of being a poet than with his British reserve, this being expected from a man who had spent his formative years in Durban, in then British South Africa. Pessoa had lived half his life in a place where English language and British mores had been everywhere, not to be escaped, not unless a person boarded a boat and rounded the Cape of Good Hope in the inverse direction taken by Vasco da Gama all those centuries ago. 'Who's sent you, who's sent you

this far?' said the sea monster to the navigator. 'The king sent me, who else?' said the navigator to the sea monster. Or so Pessoa would write in a poem one day.

But not on the day he stared stunned and unsmiling at Ophélia. If she was Ophélia, Pessoa must have thought, then there was no question of whom he was meant to be. (This conjecture, however, and those borne from it, remains polemic.)

The very next day, in character, Pessoa declaimed a passage from *Hamlet* as Ophélia walked past his desk. Without batting an eyelid Ophélia answered in kind, as Ophélia, in English and with flawless pronunciation. Her parents were as practical as they were philanthropic and had found for her a tutor who spoke English and only English—a young man who would have been otherwise unemployable, a distressing enough circumstance, even if his father's Port wine export venture had not fallen on hard times.

Back at her desk, Ophélia had sat with her straight back to Pessoa. This, or similar, can be easily assumed: from his desk Pessoa watched Ophélia's hair rolled up into a neat rim around her head and could not help imagining it wildly undone.

That same afternoon Pessoa wrote a note to Ophélia, which he placed on her desk on the pile of correspondence to be copied and dispatched. The note said he was pleased she had recovered from that unpleasant business with Hamlet, and so splendidly. He offered to walk Ophélia to the tram at the end of her shift, since it was threatening rain and he was possessed of an umbrella.

Ophélia had received notes from young men before, but not like this one. She walked to Pessoa's desk and announced she was afraid she did not take trams. Pessoa adjusted his glasses on the bridge of his nose. She said she was saving her fare for a new hat, the very hat she would buy when she was allowed to cut her hair in the *garçon* style, and anyway, trams did not serve her street.

He would walk her home, in that case, Pessoa said. Ophélia warned him she lived atop an almost vertical hill. Pessoa assured her few things could be more fortifying for the spirit. He stared after Ophélia as she

walked back to her seat, stared at her hair and imagined it loose and spread out and at the mercy of strong currents.

That afternoon, at the appointed hour, Ophélia and the poet rose from their chairs. They put on their coats at the same time and walked together down the stairs to the street. It was not raining, but the winter sun had long retreated. From downtown blustered a fierce wind, as was usual for that time of year. Pessoa and Ophélia turned uptown holding their hats in place. They veered into a cross-street and Ophélia paused to adjust the coat collar that the wind had raised over her nape. She remarked on the weather and that it was not yet the season for carnations. Pessoa agreed. They walked side by side at the pace of two people who have a common destination, and made pleasant conversation.

Later, at the top of Ophélia's hill, at her doorstep, Pessoa stood struggling for breath. Ophélia gave him time to speak. 'On this very crest stood once a city wall,' Pessoa said at last. He then told Ophélia about the Moors looking down from her hill and seeing the Christian horsemen advancing and then retreating, advancing once more and once more retreating, like seaweed at low tide. In the end a Moor had yelled down to the Christian bishop: 'He who cannot control the flight of body cannot control the mind. Decide to take Lisbon or else be gone.'

Ophélia turned to the city below, trying to picture the bishop and his horsemen. 'Is that true?' she asked the poet. 'It was what the Moor said?'

(end of excerpt)

ISABEL D'AVILA WINTER was born in Portugal and immigrated to Australia in her late teens. Her first novel, *Dona Stella and Her Rivals*, is about to be released in Portugal, in translation (QuidNovi). She lives in Brisbane and was a recent winner in the One Book Many Brisbanes story competition.