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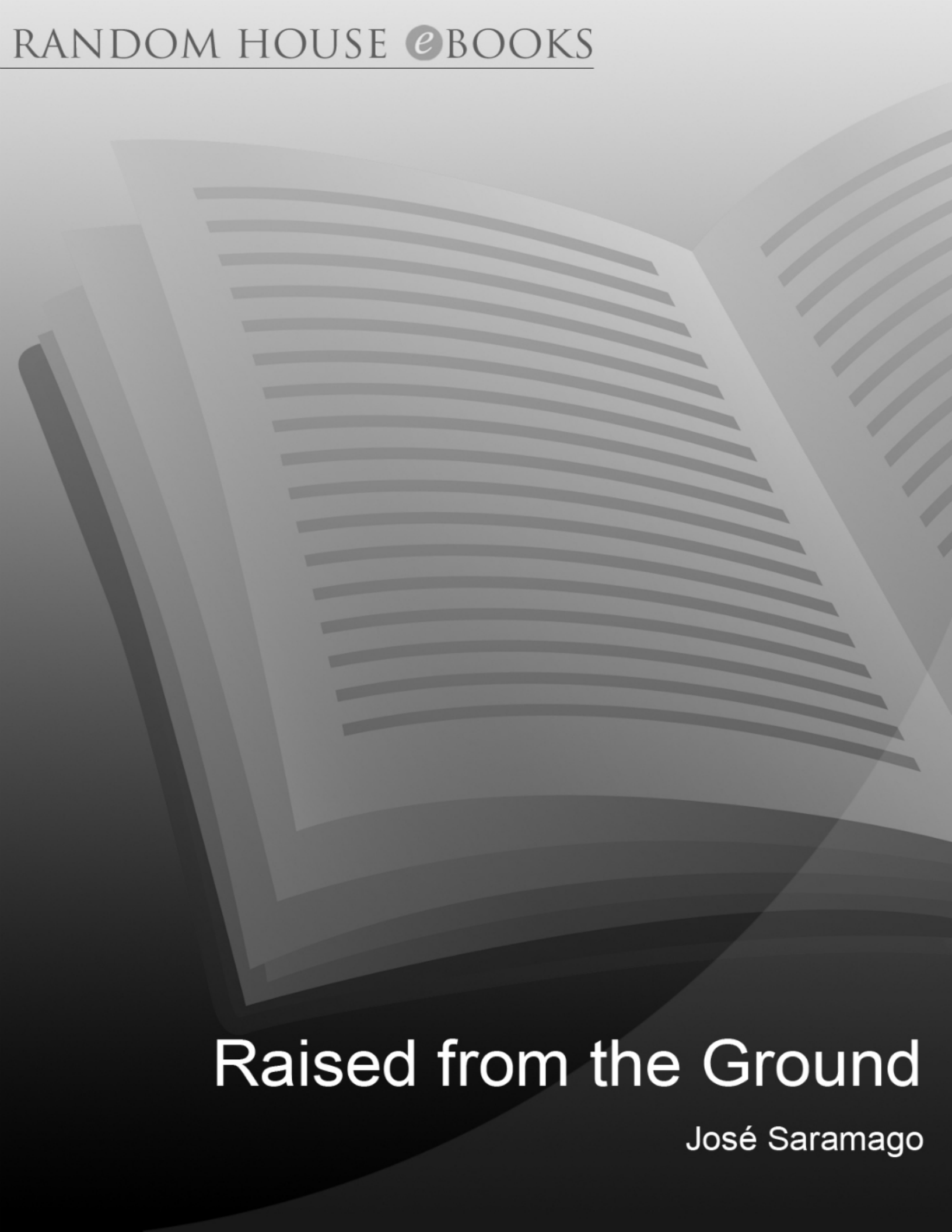

Raised from the Ground

José Saramago

Contents

About the Book

First published in 1980, Saramago's prizewinning novel *Raised from the Ground* follows the changing fortunes of the Mau-Tempo family – poor, landless peasants not unlike the author's own grandparents. Set in Alentejo, a southern province of Portugal known for its vast agricultural estates, Saramago charts the lives of the Mau-Tempos as national and international events rumble on in the background – the coming of the republic in Portugal, the First and Second World Wars, and an attempt on the dictator Salazar's life. Yet, nothing really impinges on the grim reality of the farm labourers' lives until the first communist stirrings.

Finally published for the first time in English, *Raised from the Ground* is highly political yet full of Saramago's characteristic humour and humanity, and his most autobiographical and deeply personal novel. As full of love as it is of pain, it is a vivid, moving tribute to the men and women among whom Saramago lived as a child, and a fascinating insight into the early work of this literary giant.

About the Author

José Saramago is one of the most important international writers of the last hundred years. Born in Portugal in 1922 in the small rural village of Azinhaga, he was in his fifties when he came to prominence as a writer with the publication of Baltasar & Blimunda. A huge body of work followed, which included plays, poetry, short stories, non-fiction and over a dozen novels, translated into more than forty languages, and in 1998 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. He died in June 2010.

ALSO BY JOSÉ SARAMAGO IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION

Fiction

The Manual of Painting and Calligraphy
Baltasar & Blimunda
The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis
The Gospel According to Jesus Christ
The History of the Siege of Lisbon
Blindness
All the Names
The Tale of the Unknown Island
The Stone Raft
The Cave
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Seeing
Death at Intervals
The Elephant's Journey
Cain

Non-fiction

Journey to Portugal
Small Memories

To the memory of Germano Vidigal and José Adelino dos Santos, both of whom were murdered.

Raised from the Ground

Translated from the Portuguese
By Margaret Jull Costa

José Saramago

Harvill *Secker*
LONDON

I ask the political economists and the moralists if they have ever calculated the number of individuals who must be condemned to misery, overwork, demoralisation, degradation, rank ignorance, overwhelming misfortune and utter penury in order to produce one rich man.

Almeida Garrett

THERE'S NEVER BEEN any shortage of landscape in the world. Whatever else may be lacking, that's one thing that has never been in short supply, indeed its sheer abundance can only be explained by some tireless miracle, because the landscape clearly pre-dates man, and despite its long, long existence, it has still not yet expired. That's probably because it's constantly changing: at certain times of the year, the land is green, at others, yellow or brown or black. And in certain places it is red, the colour of clay or spilled blood. This, however, depends on what has been planted or what has not yet been planted, or what has sprung up unaided and died simply because it reached its natural end. This is not the case with wheat, which still has some life left in it when it is cut. Nor with the cork oak, which, despite its solemn air, is full of life and cries out when its skin is ripped from it.

There is no shortage of colour in this landscape, but it isn't simply a matter of colour. There are days as harsh as they are cold, and others when you can scarcely breathe for the heat: the world is never content, the day it is will be the day it dies. The world does not lack for smells either, not even here, which is, of course, part of the world and well provided with landscape. Were some insignificant creature to die in the undergrowth, it would smell of death and putrefaction. Not that anyone would notice if there were no wind, even if they were to pass close by. The bones would either be washed clean by the rain or baked dry by the sun, or not even that if the creature were very small, because the worms and the gravedigger beetles would have come and buried it.

This, relatively speaking, is a fair-sized piece of land, and while it begins as undulating hills and a little stream-water, because the water that falls from the skies is just as likely to be feast as famine, further on, it flattens out as smooth as the palm of your hand, although many a hand, by life's

decree, tends, with time, to close around the handle of a hoe, sickle or scythe. The land. And like the palm of a hand, it is criss-crossed by lines and paths, its royal or, later, national roads, or those owned by the gentlemen at the town hall, three such roads lie before us now, because three is a poetical, magical, spiritual number, but all the other paths arise from repeated comings and goings, from trails formed by bare or ill-shod feet walking over clods of earth or through undergrowth, stubble or wild flowers, between wall and wasteland. So much landscape. A man could spend his whole life wandering about here and never find himself, especially if he was born lost. And he won't mind dying when his time comes. He is no rabbit or genet to lie and rot in the sun, but if hunger, cold or heat were to lay him low in some secluded spot, or one of those illnesses that don't even give you time to think, still less cry out for help, sooner or later he would be found.

Many have died of war and other plagues, both here and elsewhere, and yet the people we see are still alive: some perceive this as an unfathomable mystery, but the real reasons lie in the land, in this vast estate, this latifundio, that rolls from high hills down to the plain below, as far as the eye can see. And if not this land, then some other piece of land, it really doesn't matter, as long as we've sorted out what's mine and thine: everything was recorded in the census at the proper time, with boundaries to the north and south and to the east and west, as if this were how it had been ordained since the world began, when everything was simply landscape, with only a few large beasts and the occasional human being, all of them frightened. It was around that time, and later too, that the future shape of this present land was decided, and by very crooked means indeed, a shape carved out by those who owned the largest and sharpest knives and according to size of knife and quality of blade. For example, those of a king or a duke, or of a duke who then became his royal highness, a bishop or

the master of an order, a legitimate son or the delicious fruit of bastardy or concubinage, a stain washed clean and made honourable, or the godfather of a mistress’s daughter, and then there’s that other high officer of the court with half a kingdom in his grasp, and sometimes it was more a case of, this, dear friends, is my land, take it and populate it to serve me and your offspring, and keep it safe from infidels and other such embarrassments. A magnificent book of hours-cum-sacred accounts ledger presented at both palace and monastery, prayed to in earthly mansions or in watchtowers, each coin an Our Father, ten coins a Hail Mary, one hundred a Hail Holy Queen, Mary is King. Deep coffers, bottomless silos, granaries the size of ships, vats and casks, coffers, my lady, and all measured in cubits, rods and bushels, in quarts, pottles and tuns, each piece of land according to its use.

Thus flowed the rivers and the four seasons of the year, on those one can rely, even when they vary. The vast patience of time and the equally vast patience of money, which, with the exception of man, is the most constant of all measurements, although, like the seasons, it varies. We know, however, that men were bought and sold. Each century had its money, each kingdom its man to buy and sell for maravedis, or for gold and silver marks, reals, doubloons, cruzados, sovereigns, or florins from abroad. Fickle, various metal, as airy as the bouquet of a flower or of wine: money rises, that’s why it has wings, not in order to fall. Money’s rightful place is in a kind of heaven, a lofty place where the saints change their names when they have to, but not the latifundio.

A mother with full breasts, fit for large, greedy mouths, a womb, the land shared out between the largest and the large, or, more likely, joining large with larger, through purchase or perhaps through some alliance, or through sly theft, pure crime, the legacy of my grandparents and my

good father, God rest their souls. It took centuries to get this far, who can doubt that it will always remain the same?

But who are these other people, small and disparate, who came with the land, although their names do not appear in the deeds, dead souls perhaps, or are they still alive? God’s wisdom, beloved children, is infinite: there is the latifundio and those who will work it, go forth and multiply. Go forth and multiply me, says the latifundio. But there is another way to speak of all this.

THE RAIN CAUGHT up with them towards the end of the afternoon, when the sun was barely a half-span above the low hills, to the right, however, the witches were already combing their hair, for this is their favourite weather. The man reined in the donkey and, to relieve the animal's load on the slight incline, used his foot to shove a stone under one wheel of the cart. This rain is most unseasonable, whatever can have got into the ruler of the celestial waters. That's why there's so much dust on the roads as well as the occasional dried cowpat or lump of horse dung, which no one has bothered to pick up, this being too far removed from any inhabited place. No young lad, basket over his arm, has ventured this far out in search of some natural manure, tentatively picking up the crumbling sphere, which is sometimes cracked like a ripe fruit. In the rain, the hot, pale earth became spattered with sudden dark stars, falling dully onto the soft dust, and then a torrent flooded everything. The woman, however, still had time to lift the child down from the cart, out of the concave nest formed by the striped mattress squeezed in between two large chests. She held him to her breast, covered his face with the loose end of her shawl, and said, Good, he's still asleep. This was her first concern, the second was, Everything's going to get drenched. The man was looking up at the high clouds, wrinkling his nose, and then, in his male wisdom, he declared, It'll pass, it's only a shower, but just in case, he unrolled one of the blankets and draped it over the furniture, Why did it have to rain today of all days, damn it.

A flurry of wind sent the now sparse drops flying. When the man gave the donkey a slap on the back, it shook its ears vigorously and tugged at the shafts, and the man helped by pushing against the wheel. They set off again up the slope. The woman followed behind, her child in her arms, and, pleased to see him sleeping so soundly, she peered down at him, murmuring, There's a good boy. The

ground to either side of the cart-track was thick with undergrowth, in which a few lost, choked holm oaks stood, trunk deep, abandoned or perhaps born there. The wheels of the cart gouged and squelched a path through the sodden earth, and now and then gave a sudden violent jolt whenever a stone raised a shoulder above the surface. The furniture creaked beneath the blanket. The man, walking beside the donkey, his right hand resting on the reins, was silent. And so they reached the top of the hill.

A mass of dense, towering clouds was heading towards them from the south over the straw-coloured plain. The path plunged downwards, barely distinguishable between the crumbling ditches planed almost flat by the winds sweeping in across the empty expanse. At the bottom, the path would join a wide road, a rather ambitious word to use in a place so ill served by roads. To the left, almost hugging the low horizon, a small settlement turned its white walls to face the west. As we said before, the plain was vast and smooth, interrupted only by a few holm oaks, alone or in pairs, and little else. From that modest vantage point, it was not difficult to believe that the world had no known end. And seen from there, in the yellowish light and beneath the great leaden sheet of the clouds, the settlement, their destination, seemed unreachable. São Cristóvão, said the man. And the woman, who had never travelled so far south, said, Monte Lavre is bigger, which, while apparently a merely comparative statement, hinted perhaps at homesickness.

They were halfway down the hill when the rain returned, initially in the form of a few plump drops threatening a downpour, so much for it being a passing shower. Then the wind swept across the plain, pushing everything before it like a broom, scooping up straw and dust, and the rain advanced from the horizon, a greyish curtain that soon obscured the distant landscape. It was a steady rain, of the sort that looks set in for many hours, one that arrives and is

reluctant to leave, and when, finally, the earth can’t cope with all that water, it’s hard to know then if it’s the sky or the earth doing the drenching. The man again said, Damn it, the kind of thing people say if they have learned no grander expressions. Shelter is far away, and with no coats to put on, they have no alternative but to receive on their backs whatever rain may fall. From there to the village, given the speed at which this weary and somewhat reluctant donkey is travelling, it will be at least another hour’s journey, and by then it will be dark. The blanket, which barely protects the furniture, is soaked and dripping, the water falling in drops from the white threads, what hope for the clothes in the chests, the few migratory possessions of this family who, for reasons of their own, are making this cross-country trek. The woman looks up at the sky, an ancient, country way of reading the great blank page above our head, this time in order to see if the sky is clearing, which it isn’t, looking, rather, as if it were heavy with dark ink, the weather won’t change this evening. The cart travels onward, it’s a boat plunging into the deluge, it’ll go under at any moment, that seems to be why the man is driving the donkey forward, but it’s only so that they can reach that holm oak, which will shelter them from the worst of the storm. Man, cart and donkey have arrived, and the woman is nearly there, sliding about in the mud, she can’t run, she would wake her child, that’s how the world is, we never notice other people’s problems, not even when the people involved are as close as mother and son.

Underneath the oak tree, the man was gesticulating impatiently, he obviously doesn’t know what it’s like to carry a child in his arms, he’d be better employed checking that the ropes on the cart haven’t slackened, because travelling at that speed, the knots are sure to have slipped or the furniture shifted, and the last thing we need now is for the little furniture we have to fall and break. Under the tree, the rain is lighter, but large drops still fall from the leaves, this is

no dense orange tree, standing beneath these enormous, widespread arms is like standing beneath a porch full of holes, indeed, it’s hard to know where to stand, but just then the child began to cry, prompting the mother to perform a more urgent task, unbuttoning her blouse and giving him her breast, almost empty of milk now, barely enough to stave off hunger. His crying stopped at once, and mother and child were at peace, wrapped about by the steady murmur of the rain, while the father walked around the cart, untying and retying knots, bracing his knee on the side of the cart to pull the ropes tight, while the donkey, abstracted, shook his ears hard and gazed out at the puddles and the flooded path. Then the man said, We were so near, and then all this rain, these were words spoken in mild anger, uttered almost unthinkingly and hopelessly, as if to say, the rain won’t stop just because I’m angry, well, that’s the narrator speaking, which we can quite do without. We would be better off watching the father, who asks at last, How’s the child, and goes over and peers under the shawl, he is her husband after all, but so quickly and modestly does his wife cover herself up that he can’t be sure now whether it was his son he wanted to see or her bare breast. He just had time to make out, in the tepid darkness, in the scented warmth of crumpled clothes, his son’s intensely blue eyes watching him from that private interior, with that strange pale light that usually stared out at him from the cradle, transparent and stern, an exile among the dark brown eyes of the family he was born into.

The heavy clouds had thinned a little, the first torrent of rain had slowed. The man stepped out onto the path, looked up questioningly at the sky, turning to the four cardinal points, and said to his wife, We’d better go, we can’t stay here until it’s dark. And his wife said, Let’s go then. She withdrew her nipple from the baby’s mouth, the child sucked air for a moment, seemed about to cry, then stopped, rubbed his face against the now withdrawn breast and,

sighing, fell asleep. He’s a quiet child, good-humoured, and a friend to his mother.

They were walking along together now, wrapped about by the rain, so wet that not even a cosy barn would tempt them, they’ll only stop now when they reach their new home. The night was coming on fast. In the west, there was only a last faint glow that grew gradually red, then was gone, and the earth was a dumb, black well, full of echoes, how large the world seems at nightfall. The squeaking of the wheels seemed louder, the stuttering breath of the donkey as unexpected as a secret suddenly spoken out loud, and even the whisper of their wet clothes was like a continuous murmured conversation between friends, with no awkward silences. For leagues around, not a light was to be seen. The woman crossed herself, then made the sign of the cross over her son’s face. At this hour of night, it’s best to defend the body and protect the soul, because ghosts begin to appear on the roads, either passing in a whirlwind or sitting down on a rock to await the traveller, of whom they will ask three questions to which there is no answer, who are you, where do you come from and where are you going. The man walking alongside the cart would like to sing, but he can’t, all his energy is going into pretending that the night doesn’t frighten him. Not much further, he said, when they reached the road, we just keep going straight now and this is a better road too.

Ahead, far away, a flash lit up the clouds, no one could have guessed they were so low. Then a pause and, finally, the low rumble of thunder. That’s all we need. The woman said, Holy St Barbara save us, but the thunder, if it wasn’t a remnant of some distant storm, seemed to be taking a different route, either that or St Barbara had shooed it away to places of lesser faith. They were on the road now, they could tell because it was wider, although any other differences could only be found with extreme patience and by the light of day, they had come through mud and

potholes and through mud and potholes they continued, and now it was so dark that they couldn’t even see where they were putting their feet. The donkey advanced by instinct, walking alongside the ditch. The man and the woman skidded along behind. Now and then, if the road curved, the man ran blindly ahead to see if he could catch a glimpse of São Cristóvão. And when they saw, amid the darkness, the first white walls, the rain suddenly stopped, so abruptly that they barely noticed. One moment it was raining, the next it wasn’t. It was as if a vast roof had stretched out over the road.

It’s hardly surprising that the woman should ask, Where’s our house, a perfectly understandable question in someone who needs to take care of her child and, if possible, put the furniture in its proper place before laying her weary body down in bed. And the man answers, On the other side. All doors are closed, only a few faint chinks of light betray the presence of the other inhabitants. In a yard somewhere, a dog barks. There’s always a dog barking when someone walks past, and the other dogs, caught unawares, pick up the first sentinel’s word and fulfil their canine duty. A gate was opened, then closed. And now that the rain had stopped and the house was near, husband and wife were more aware of the cold wind that came running along the street, before plunging down the narrow alleys, where it shook the branches that reached out over the low roofs. Thanks to the wind, the night grew brighter. The great cloud was moving off, and here and there you could see patches of clear sky. It’s not raining now, said the woman to her child, who was sleeping and, of the four, was the only one not to know the good news.

They came to a square in which a few trees were exchanging brief whispers. The man stopped the cart and said to the woman, Wait here, and walked under the trees towards a brightly lit doorway. It was a bar, a *taberna*, and inside three men were sitting on a bench, while another was

standing at the bar, drinking, holding his glass between thumb and forefinger as if posing for a photograph. And behind the bar, a thin, shrivelled old man turned his eyes to the door, through which the man with the cart entered saying, Good evening, gentlemen, the greeting of a new arrival wishing to gain the friendship of everyone in the room, either out of fraternal feeling or for more selfish commercial reasons, I've come to live here in São Cristóvão, my name's Domingos Mau-Tempo[1] and I'm a shoemaker. One of the men sitting on the bench joked, Well, you certainly brought the bad weather with you, and the man who was drinking and had just emptied his glass smacked his lips and added, Let's just hope his soles are better than the weather he brings, and the others, of course, laughed. These were not intended as rude or unwelcoming words, but it's night-time in São Cristóvão, all the doors are shut, and if a stranger arrives bearing a name like Mau-Tempo, only a fool could resist making a joke of it, especially after that heavy downpour. Domingos Mau-Tempo responded with a reluctant smile, but that's to be expected. Then the old man opened a drawer and produced a large key, Here's the key, I was beginning to think you weren't coming, and everyone stares at Domingos Mau-Tempo, taking the measure of this new neighbour, every village needs a shoemaker and São Cristóvão is no exception. Domingos Mau-Tempo offered an explanation, It's a long way from Monte Lavre, and it rained while we were on the road, not that there's any need for him to account for himself, but he wants to be friendly, and then he says, Let me buy you all a drink, which is an excellent way of touching the pockets of men's hearts. The men who were seated stand up and watch the ceremony of their glasses being refilled, and then, unhurriedly, each man again picks up his glass with a slow, careful gesture, this is wine, after all, not cheap brandy to be drunk down in one. Won't you have a drink yourself, sir, says Domingos Mau-Tempo, and the old man, who knows the ways of the big

city, answers, Here’s wishing good health to my new tenant. And while the men are engaged in these niceties, the woman comes to the door, although she doesn’t actually come in, the *taberna* is reserved for men only, and she says quietly, as is her wont, Domingos, the child is restless and what with the furniture and everything being so wet, we need to get unloaded.

She is quite right, but Domingos Mau-Tempo disliked being summoned by his wife like that, what will the other men think, and as they cross the square, he scolds her, If you do that again, I’ll be very angry. The woman did not respond, too busy trying to quiet the baby. The cart went slowly on, jolting over the bumps. The donkey had stiffened up with the cold. They went down a side street, where the houses alternated with vegetable gardens, and they stopped outside a low hovel. Is this it, asked the woman, and her husband replied, Yes.

Domingos Mau-Tempo opened the door with the large key. In order to enter, he had to lower his head, for this is no palace with high doors. There were no windows. To the left was the fireplace, with the hearth at floor level. Domingos Mau-Tempo lit a handful of straw and held the flickering torch up so that his wife could see their new home. There was a bundle of firewood by the chimney-breast. Enough for their immediate needs. In a matter of minutes, the woman had laid the child down in one corner to sleep, gathered together some logs and some kindling, and the fire had sprung into life, like a flower on the whitewashed wall. The house was once again inhabited.

Domingos Mau-Tempo led the donkey and the cart in through the gate to the yard, and started unloading the furniture and carrying it into the house, where he set it down willy-nilly, until his wife could come and help him. The mattress was wet on one side. The water had got into the clothes chest, and one leg of the kitchen table was broken. But on the fire was a saucepan of cabbage leaves and rice,

and the baby had suckled again and fallen asleep on the dry side of the mattress. Domingos Mau-Tempo went out into the yard to do his business. And standing in the middle of the room, Sara da Conceição, Domingos' wife and João's mother, stood quite still, staring into the flames, like someone waiting for a garbled message to be repeated. She felt a slight movement in her belly. And another. But when her husband came back in, she said nothing. They had other things to think about.

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1 Mau-Tempo means bad weather.

DOMINGOS MAU-TEMPO will not make old bones. One day, when he has given his wife five children, although not for that most mundane of reasons, he will put a rope around the branch of a tree, in a desolate place almost within sight of Monte Lavre, and hang himself. Before he does this, however, he will carry his house on his back to other places, run away from his family three times, but fail to make his peace with them on that third occasion because his hour will have come. His father-in-law Laureano Carranca had predicted just such an unfortunate end when he was forced to give in to Sara's stubbornness, for, so besotted was she with Domingos Mau-Tempo that she swore that if she could not marry him, she would marry no one. Laureano Carranca would roar furiously, He's a ne'er-do-well and a drunkard and will come to no good. And so the family war raged on until Sara da Conceição fell pregnant, a conclusive and usually highly effective argument when persuasion and pleading have failed. One morning, Sara da Conceição left the house, in May it was, and walked across the fields to the place where she had arranged to meet Domingos Mau-Tempo. They were there for half an hour at most, lying among the tall wheat, and when Domingos returned to his lasts and Sara to her parents' house, he went off whistling with satisfaction, while she was left shivering despite the hot sun beating down on her. And when she crossed the stream by the ford, she had to crouch down beneath some willows and wash away the blood flowing from between her legs.

João was made or, to use a more biblical term, conceived, on that same day, which, it would seem, is most unusual, because, in the haste and confusion of the moment, semen does not necessarily do its job the first time, only later. And it's true that there was considerable consternation, not to say suspicion, regarding João's blue eyes, for no one else in the family had such eyes nor, as far as they could recall,

had any relative, close or distant, we, however, know that such thoughts were grossly unfair to a woman who, after much soul-searching, had deviated from the straight virginal path and lain down in a wheatfield with that one man alone and, by her own choice, opened her legs to him. It had not been the choice, almost five hundred years before, of another young woman, who, standing alone at the fountain filling her jug with water, was approached by one of the foreigners who had arrived with Lamberto Horques Alemão, the governor of Monte Lavre appointed by Dom João the first, by a man whose speech she couldn’t understand, and who, ignoring the poor girl’s cries and pleas, carried her off into the bracken where, purely for his own enjoyment, he raped her. He was a handsome fellow with pale skin and blue eyes, whose only fault was the fire in his blood, but she, naturally enough, could not bring herself to love him and, when her time came, she gave birth alone. Thus, for four centuries, those blue German eyes appeared and disappeared, just like the comets that vanish and return when we least expect them or simply because no one has bothered to record their appearances and thus discover a pattern.

This is the family’s first move. They came from Monte Lavre to São Cristóvão on a strangely rainy summer’s day. They traversed the whole district from north to south, what on earth can have made Domingos Mau-Tempo decide to move so far away, well, he’s a bodger and a good-for-nothing, and things were getting difficult for him in Monte Lavre, because of drink and certain shady deals, and so he said to his father-in-law, Lend me your cart and your donkey, will you, I’m going to live in São Cristóvão, By all means go, and let’s hope you acquire a little common sense, for your own good and for the sake of your wife and son, but be sure to bring that donkey and cart back promptly, because I need them. They took the shortest route, following cart-tracks, or highways when they could,

but mostly heading across country, skirting the hills. They lunched in the shade of a tree, and Domingos Mau-Tempo gulped down a whole bottle of wine that he soon sweated out again in the heat of the day. They saw Montemor in the distance, to the left, and continued south. It rained on them when they were just one hour from São Cristóvão, a deluge that presaged no good at all, but today it is sunny, and Sara da Conceição, sitting in the garden, is sewing a skirt, while her son, still rather unsteady on his legs, is feeling his way along the wall of the house. Domingos Mau-Tempo has gone to Monte Lavre to return the donkey and cart to his father-in-law and tell him that they're living in an excellent house, that customers are already beating a path to his door and that he won't lack for work. He will return on foot the following day, as long as he doesn't get drunk, because, apart from his drinking, he isn't a bad man, and God willing, he'll sort himself out, after all, there have been worse men than him and they've turned out all right in the end, and if there's any justice in the world, what with one small child and another on the way, he'll shape up to be a respectable father too, and as for me, well, I'll do what I can to give us all a good life.

João has reached the end of the wall, where the picket fence begins. He grips it hard, his arms being stronger than his legs, and peers out. His horizon is quite brief, a strip of muddy road, with puddles that reflect the sky, and a ginger cat sprawled on the doorstep opposite, sunning its belly. Somewhere a cock crows. A woman can be heard shouting out, Maria, and another almost childish voice answers, Yes, Senhora. And then the silence of the great heat settles again, the mud will soon harden and return to the dust it was. João lets go of the fence, that's quite enough looking at the landscape for the moment, executes a difficult half-turn and commences the long journey back to his mother. Sara da Conceição sees him, puts her sewing down on her lap, and holds out her arms to her son, Come here, little one,

come here. Her arms are like two protective hedges. Between them and João lies a confusing, uncertain world with no beginning and no end. The sun sketches a hesitant shadow on the ground, a tremulously advancing hour. Like the hand of a clock on the great expanse of the latifundio.

When Lamberto Horques Alemão stepped out onto the terrace of his castle, his gaze could not encompass all that lay before him. He was the lord of the village and its lands, ten leagues long and three leagues wide, and he had the right to exact a tribute, and although he had been charged to go forth and multiply, he had not ordered the rape of the girl at the fountain, it happened and that was that. He himself, with his virtuous wife and his children, will scatter his seed where he pleases, depending on how the mood takes him, This land cannot remain as uninhabited as it is now, for you can count on the fingers of one hand the number of settlements in the whole estate, while the uncultivated areas are as many as the hairs on your head, Yes, sir, but these women are the swarthy cursed remnants of the Moors, and these silent men can be vengeful, besides, our king did not call on you to go forth and multiply like a Solomon, but to cultivate the land and rule over it, so that people will come here and stay, That is what I am doing and will do, and whatever else I deem appropriate, for this land and everything on it is mine, although there are sure to be people who will try to hamper my efforts and cause trouble, there always will be, You are quite right, sir, you obviously gleaned such knowledge from the cold lands of your birth, where people know far more than we natives of these remote western lands, Since we are in agreement, let us discuss what tributes should be imposed on these lands I am to govern. Thus, a minor episode in the history of the latifundio.

THIS SO-CALLED shoemaker is really nothing but a cobbler. He soles and heels and dawdles over his work when he isn't in the mood, often abandoning last, awl and knife to go to the *taberna*, he argues with impatient customers and, for all these reasons, beats his wife. Not just because he is obliged to sole and heel, but also because he can find no peace in himself, he's a restless man, who has no sooner sat down than he wants to get up again, who as soon as he has arrived in one place is already thinking about another. He's a child of the wind, a wanderer, this bad-weather Domingos, who returns from the *taberna* and enters the house, bumping into the walls, glancing sourly at his son, and for no reason at all, lashes out at his wife, wretched woman, let that be a lesson to you. And then he leaves again, goes back to the wine and his carousing mates, put this one on the slate, will you, landlord, of course, sir, but there's quite a lot on the slate already, so what, I always pay my debts, don't I, I've never owed anyone a penny. And more than once, Sara da Conceição, having left her child with the neighbour, went out into the night to search for her husband, using the shawl and the darkness to conceal her tears, going from *taberna* to *taberna*, of which there weren't many in São Cristóvão, but enough, peering in from outside and, if her husband was there, she would stand waiting in the shadows, like another shadow. And sometimes she would find him lost on the road, abandoned by his friends, with no idea where his house was, and then the world would suddenly brighten, because Domingos Mau-Tempo, grateful to have been found in that frightening desert, among hordes of ghosts, would put an arm about his wife's shoulder and allow himself to be led like the child he doubtless still was.

And one day, because he had more work than he could cope with, Domingos Mau-Tempo took on an assistant, thus giving himself more time with his fellow drinkers, but then, on another ill-fated day, he got it into his head that his wife,

poor, innocent Sara da Conceição, was deceiving him in his absence, and that was the end of São Cristóvão, which the guiltless assistant had to flee at knifepoint, and Sara, pregnant, quite legitimately, for a second time, underwent her own painful via dolorosa, and the cart was loaded up again, another trek to Monte Lavre, more toing and froing, We're fine, and your daughter and grandson are happy, with another on the way, but I've found a better job in Torre da Gadanha, my father lives there and will be able to help us out. And once more they set off north, except that, this time, the landlord was waiting for them on the way out of São Cristóvão, Just a moment, Mau-Tempo, you owe me for the rent and the wine that you drank, and if you don't pay up, me and my two sons here will make you, so pay me what you owe or die.

It was a short journey, which was just as well, because almost as soon as Sara da Conceição set foot in the house, she gave birth to her second son, who, for some forgotten reason, was named Anselmo. He was fortunate from the cradle on because his paternal grandfather was a carpenter by trade and very pleased to have his grandson born so close to home, almost next door. His grandfather worked as a carpenter and had no boss and no apprentice, no wife either, and he lived among lengths of timber and planks, permanently perfumed by sawdust, and used a vocabulary particular to laths, planes, battens, mallets and adzes. He was a serious man of few words and not given to drinking, which is why he disapproved of his son, who was hardly a credit to his name. Given Domingos Mau-Tempo's restless nature, however, his father had little time in which to enjoy being a grandfather, just long enough to teach his oldest grandson that this is a claw hammer, this is a plane and this a chisel. But Domingos Mau-Tempo could bear neither what his father said nor what he didn't say, and like a bird hurling itself against the bars of its cage, what prison is this in my soul, damn it, off he went again, this time to Landeira, in the

extreme west of the district. Preferring this time not to approach his father-in-law, who would find such wanderings and uncertainties odd, he had, at some expense, hired a cart and a mule, intending to keep quiet about his plans and tell his father-in-law later. We never seem to settle anywhere, we go from one place to another like the wandering Jew, and it’s not easy with two small children, Be quiet, woman, I know what I’m doing, there are good people in Landeira and plenty of work, besides, I’m a craftsman, not like your father and brothers tied to their hoes, I learned a trade and have a skill, That’s not what I’m saying, you were a shoemaker when I married you and that’s fine, but I just want some peace and to stop all this moving around. Sara da Conceição said nothing about the beatings, nor would it have been appropriate, because Domingos Mau-Tempo was travelling towards Landeira as if to the promised land and carrying on his shoulders his elder son, holding on to his tender little ankles, which were a bit grubby, of course, but what does that matter. He barely felt the weight, because years of sewing leather had given him muscles and tendons of iron. With the mule trotting along behind, with a sun as warm as a cosy blanket, Sara da Conceição was even allowed to ride in the cart. But when they reached the new house, they found that their furniture was once again badly damaged, At this rate, Domingos, we’ll end up with no furniture at all.

It was in Landeira that João, who already had his real godparents in Monte Lavre, found a new and more illustrious godfather. He was Father Agamedes, who, because he lived with a woman he called his niece, provided João with a borrowed godmother too. The child did not lack for blessings, being as protected in heaven as he had been on earth up until then. Especially when Domingos Mau-Tempo, encouraged by Father Agamedes, took on the duties of sacristan, helping at mass and at funerals, because thanks to this, the priest befriended him and adopted João.

Domingos Mau-Tempo's sole aim in being received into the bosom of the church was to find a respectable reason for avoiding work and a respite from his persistent vagabond restlessness. But God rewarded him as soon as he saw him at his altar, clumsily performing the ritualistic gestures he was taught, for Father Agamedes also liked his drink, and thus celebrant and acolyte came together over that other sacrifice. Father Agamedes owned a grocery store, not far from the church, where he worked whenever his priestly duties allowed, and, when they didn't, his niece would come down to the square and, from behind the counter, rule over the family's earthly business. Domingos Mau-Tempo would drop in and drink a glass of wine, then another and another, alone, unless the priest was there, and then they drank together. God, meanwhile, was up above with the angels.

But all heavens have their Lucifers and all paradises their temptations. Domingos Mau-Tempo began to look on his neighbour's companion with covetous eyes, and she, as niece, took offence and mentioned it to her uncle, and that was enough to create bad feeling between those two servants of the holy mother church, one permanent and the other temporary. Father Agamedes could not speak frankly for fear of giving credence to the evil thoughts of those parishioners who had their doubts about that niece–uncle relationship, and so, to drive away the threat to his own honour, he focused on the married status of the offending party. Deprived of his easy access to wine and weary of plying his trade here, there and everywhere, Domingos Mau-Tempo declared his intention at home of avenging himself on the priest. He did not say exactly what he was avenging himself for, and Sara da Conceição did not ask. She continued to suffer in silence.

The church had few parishioners and not all of them regular. It provided no remedy for their ills, nor was it obliged to, since, as far as one could see, it didn't increase them either. That was not the problem. The lack of apostolic