

PODCAST 2: SERIES DRY EYES

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ARTIST AND HOST: JORGE MENNA BARRETO

[Vignette]

Before we begin, let me reinforce the invitation made in the first episode: listen to this podcast with your eyes closed.

Try to disconnect from the stimuli around you. Allow yourself a moment of introspection, focusing only on the sounds and the sensations and images they produce in your body.

[Introduction]

Welcome to *Olho Seco*: a space that connects literature, art, and the socioenvironmental crisis. I'm Jorge Menna Barreto, and in this episode, we'll explore how Brazilian poet João Cabral de Melo Neto's poetry and contemporary literature address drought and the climate crisis.

[Sophia Faustino reads João Cabral de Melo Neto's poem "Psicologia da composição (VII)"] (Psychology of Composition (VII)¹).

T.N. Each poem or verse cited in the podcast transcript appears first in the original Portuguese followed by published English translations where available and if not free translations]

[Sound effect: writing on paper]

¹ Charles Bernstein. "João Cabral de Melo Neto (1920-1999). "Psychology of Composition (VII)" Translated by Charles Bernstein, Horacio Costa and Régis Bonvincino, based on the published translations of Djelal Kadir. <https://sibila.com.br/english/joao-cabral-de-melo-neto-1920-1999/12668> (Accessed September 2025)

*É mineral o papel
onde escrever
o verso; o verso
que é possível não fazer.*

*São minerais
as flores e as plantas,
as frutas, os bichos
quando em estado de palavra.*

*É mineral
a linha do horizonte,
nossos nomes, essas coisas
feitas de palavras.*

*É mineral, por fim,
qualquer livro:
que é mineral a palavra
escrita, a fria natureza*

da palavra escrita.

It's mineral the paper
on which to write
verse; verse
that is possible not to make.

Mineral are
flowers and plants,
fruits, animals
when in a state of words.

Mineral
the horizon line,
our names, those things
made of words.

Mineral, at last,
any book:
'cause the written
word is mineral, the cold nature
of the written word.

You heard part of the poem "Psicologia da Composição VII" (Psychology of Composition VII) by João Cabral de Melo Neto. The reader was Sophia Faustino, poet and research assistant on this project.

My interest in João Cabral deepened in 2009, during my doctoral studies. At the time, I was taking a literature course at USP[University of São Paulo] with Professor Ari Vidal.

It was there that I learned how to "unpack" a poem, to delve into its complexity, and to truly inhabit it. I remember there were afternoons when we would dedicate ourselves to reading just one verse, rehydrating the time that had been compressed into words.

Now, fifteen years later, João Cabral's poetry has helped me understand the landscape where I live: California.

In this semiarid landscape, and amid the global advance of desertification, revisiting João Cabral is not only relevant; it has become a necessity.

On my morning walks, I've been carrying a recorder. As I walk, I record my thoughts, creating images and soundscapes.

[Audio recording Jorge Menna Barreto]

[Sound effects: ambient sound, person walking, footsteps, and cars passing by]

In what way is a word a dehydrated version of reality?
The word drought [T.N. "seca" = drought and dry in Portuguese] is drier than what it describes.
The word drought is drier than drought itself.
Of all its letters, the driest is S.[T.N. S of "seca"]
The C in the dry season has the sound of K, which is what cuts.
In drought the sound of K is what cuts.
And E and A, once exposed, evaporate in the heat of the sun.
And E and A, once exposed, evaporate in the heat of the sun.

João Cabral de Melo Neto's relationship with dry land is nuanced. His style goes far beyond simple subject matter. In fact, few of his poems directly address the Northeastern *sertão* [Brazilian semiarid region].²

But, in his poetry, the dry and arid climate of the *sertão* is transformed into something more profound: a style of his own, marked by subtraction, economy of words and surgical precision.

To delve deeper into the Cabral I had explored from fifteen years ago, I resumed my conversation with Professor Ari Vidal.

[Interview with Ariovaldo (Ari) José Vidal]

My name is Ariovaldo, Ariovaldo José Vidal. In everyday life it's just Ari, because it's simpler.
I'm a professor at USP, in the Department of Literary Theory and Comparative Literature.

Cabral's poetry is very different from the traditional idea we have of lyricism. It is rational, concrete, and even "anti-lyrical." In other words, Cabral's poetry rejects the exaggerated sentimentality of confessional poetry, exploring a less subjective language and way of seeing.

[Interview with Ari Vidal continued]

When we think about ways of seeing in João Cabral's poetry, about how images are configured in his poetry, we are simultaneously dealing with how his lyricism is configured. This is quite peculiar, as we know, given the tradition of lyricism in the Portuguese language. A lyricism that critics and the poet himself have called antilyrical.
The first point is that his poetry cultivates a concentrated way of seeing objects in the world.
In other words, the image arises from the [very] concentration on seeing the object. In this sense, his lyricism fulfills a first

² *Sertão* refers to the semiarid region in northeastern Brazil, comprising parts of the states of Alagoas, Bahia, Pernambuco, Paraíba, Rio Grande do Norte, Ceará, Maranhão, Piauí, Sergipe, and Minas Gerais. The word also refers in general to Brazil's hinterlands similar to the Australian outback.

commandment of lyric poetry as a whole: to feel intensely drawn to the figure before you.

[Excerpt of João Cabral de Melo Neto reading his poem “The Engineer”³]

*A luz, o sol, o ar livre
envolvem o sonho do engenheiro.
O engenheiro sonha coisas claras:
superfícies, tênis, um copo de água.
O lápis, o esquadro, o papel;
o desenho, o projeto, o número:
o engenheiro pensa o mundo justo,
mundo que nenhum véu encobre.
(Em certas tardes nós subíamos
ao edifício. A cidade diária,
como um jornal que todos liam,
ganhava um pulmão de cimento e vidro).*

*A água, o vento, a claridade,
de um lado o rio, no alto as nuvens,
situavam na natureza o edifício
crescendo de suas forças simples.*

The light, the sun, the open air
envelope the dream of the engineer.
The engineer dreams bright things:
surfaces, tennis, a glass of water.

The pencil, the carpenter’s square, the paper;
the design, the project, the number:
the engineer thinks the world just,
world which no veil conceals.

(On certain afternoons we’d go up
into the building. The everyday city
like a newspaper that everyone read,
acquired a lung of cement and glass.)

³ Three Poems by João Cabral de Melo Neto. Translation by Rhett MacNeill. Issue 18 *Latin American Literature Today*, June 2021
<https://latinamericanliteraturetoday.org/2021/06/three-poems-joao-cabral-de-melo-neto/>
(Accessed September 2025)

The water, the wind, the brightness,
to one side, the river, on high, the clouds
situated the building in nature
growing from its simple forces.

You heard João Cabral himself reciting the poem "The Engineer." His poetic work is not based on sentimentality, but on objects and meticulous construction, as an engineer constructs a building: without excess, with precision and economy.

This approach is already evident in the epigraph of *The Engineer*, a book that shares the same title as the poem recited by Cabral.

Here, the poet appropriates an expression by the Swiss architect Le Corbusier, who defined painting as a *machine à emouvoir*. In Portuguese, "máquina de comover." [T.N. In English, a machine that moves us].

The Brazilian poet and critic Antonio Carlos Secchin, one of the greatest scholars of João Cabral's work, proposes a thought-provoking idea based on the translation of Le Corbusier's expression into Portuguese: transposing the expression "máquina de comover" to describe how this machine works in Cabral by transforming it into a machine of "how [pause] to see."⁴

[Sound effect: picking of cords of a string instrument]

To move means to cause a commotion, to make something move, to move out of place. But by cutting through the emotion and focusing only on "how [pause] to see," what emerges is an investigation of vision: precise and analytical. Considered an optical poet, who drew heavily from the visual arts, this transposition also operates as a second translation of Le Corbusier's expression, this time for the specificities of Cabral's universe.

⁴ T.N. This plays on the sound and meaning of the Portuguese "comover" - to be moved by something - and "como ver" meaning how to see.

João Cabral didn't grow up in the Northeastern *sertão*. He was born in Recife in 1920, into a wealthy family that owned land dedicated to sugar production. Cabral often described himself as a "sugar mill boy."

I asked Sophia Faustino to read the poem "Menino de engenho", from the book *A escola das facas*.

[Sophia Faustino reads "Menino do engenho" (The Boy from the Mill)]

[Sound effects: wind blowing in a field of sugar cane and the cutting of sugarcane]

*A cana cortada é uma foice.
Cortada num ângulo agudo,
ganha gume afiado de foice
que corta em foice, um dar-se mútuo.*

*Menino, o gume de uma cana
cortou-me ao quase de cegar-me,
e uma cicatriz, que não guardo,
soube dentro de mim guardar-se.*

*A cicatriz não tenho mais;
o inoculado, tenho ainda;
nunca soube é se o inoculado
(então) é vírus ou vacina.*

Cut sugarcane is a sickle.
Cut at a sharp angle,
it gains the sharp edge of a sickle
cuts like a sickle, a mutual giving.

Boy, with the edge of a cane
cut me to the point of almost blinding me,
and a scar, which I do not keep,
knew how to keep itself inside me.

I no longer have the scar;
I still have the inoculation;
I never knew if the inoculation
(then) was virus or vaccine.

The sugarcane scar, and what it inoculated Cabral with, tells us about the poet's relationship with the Northeast: close, yet mediated by distance.

Although his writing frequently revisits the *sertão*, Cabral only had direct contact with this landscape at the age of 20, during a 13-day trip to Rio de Janeiro.

Journalist Ivan Marques recounts in *João Cabral de Melo Neto: Uma biografia* (João Cabral de Melo Neto: A Biography) what this journey of discovery into the interior of the country was like:

[Sound effect: radio music of the time period]

[Bruno Bonaventura narrates Cabral's journey]

The first leg was by train: from Recife to Maceió. From there, he took a bus to Penedo, in the interior of Alagoas. From Penedo, he traveled down the São Francisco River to Propriá, in Sergipe.

From Propriá, he took another train to Salvador. After a brief stop in the Bahian capital, he continued his journey to Jequié. From there, he faced a three-day bus journey, crossing the arid interior until reaching Montes Claros, in northern Minas Gerais.

In Montes Claros, Cabral boarded a train again, this time bound for Belo Horizonte. From the capital of Minas Gerais, he caught his last train and finally reached Rio de Janeiro, his final stop on this journey.

The narrator of João Cabral's journey was Bruno Bonaventure, editor and sound designer for this project.

This journey was not just a geographical displacement; it was also an initial contact with landscapes and ways of life that left their mark on his poetry.

Interestingly, Cabral was never physically in the *sertão* while writing about it. His creative process [rather] stemmed from his memories of the place.

[Interview with Cristhiano Aguiar]

There is no landscape without language, because landscape is not natural. And, in fact, the natural itself is already language, because it is already a symbolic construction, right?

You've just been listening to Cristhiano Aguiar. He's a writer and literature professor at Mackenzie Presbyterian University in São Paulo.

[Interview continued]

I'm from Paraíba, I was born in Campina Grande, Paraíba. I have a double career. I joke with my students that I'm a bit like that Robert Louis Stevenson novel, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

I work in the fields of both creative fiction and literary criticism, education, and teaching.

In his doctoral work, Cristhiano explored the concept of space in Latin American fiction. He explains that the perception of space is always a symbolic construction based on language.

[Interview continued]

The perception of space, whatever it may be, from the most urban of spaces or spaces of absolute ecological degradation to spaces supposedly... untouched by man, is, in short, always produced. Landscape is independent of the empirical world. Landscape is independent of the natural world. That's why the landscape is so significant. Landscape is, at the same time, a fiction that we construct and a bridge, so that, in our human anguish, in our human solitude, we can access this inhuman absolute that surrounds us in some way, which is this world that we call the natural world, the world of nature.

Cristhiano, like me, also felt an unexpected affinity between the semiarid Northeast and California. During the month he spent as a visiting scholar at UCLA in Los Angeles, he explored this proximity—this non-geographical proximity that breaks with the way we describe landscapes.

[Interview continued]

There's a fascinating thing about Los Angeles, the mornings and afternoons in LA, California, in general, which is a kind of infinite, blue sky, a very deep blue. It's not an intense blue, but it's a very deep blue. And this very deep blue, for example, I rediscovered when I went to the interior of Paraíba, while researching my novel, rock climbing. So, without a doubt, there's this connection. And another thing, right, it's not possible to see Los Angeles for the first time. It's not possible for a Brazilian, at least, to see the semiarid Northeast for the first time either. Because, even for us who are from here, in some way, right, from Paraíba or other states, it is very clear that it is already an experience mediated by a discourse that is more than a hundred years old, about what the Northeast is, especially about what the *sertão* is and about what the semiarid region is and so on.

In the first episode of the *Olho seco* podcast, we discussed how the colonial and predatory gaze distorts the perception of the *sertão*.

Now, we're focusing on an adjacent issue: dry formulations in language itself.

[Interview continued]

Yes, there is a dryness to João Cabral de Melo Neto's language. This dryness is there in the way he observes a stone, a xique-xique [kind of tree cactus] or an oxcart; he deduces this dryness from these elements, for example, from the semiarid region.

But that's the fascinating thing about Cabral, because just as he proposes dryness to me, he draws me in, lets me into, into the *making of dryness*. Because all the time, and that's partly why the metalanguage of Cabral's poetry is justified. Why? Because Cabral is aware that he's creating a landscape—this landscape is a social landscape, a natural landscape, an intimate landscape—and at the same time, he's constantly discussing the making of the poem.

It's important to emphasize that, in Cabral's work, dryness and aridity are not seen as negative aspects. They are embraced as a way of creating poetry. I'll bring Professor Ari Vidal back to continue this conversation.

[Interview with Ari Vidal]

Drought does not dry out the work.

Let's say, to make a pun, drought becomes dryness, that is, he speaks simultaneously of dryness and the atmosphere of drought. But, in fact, he creates a style, creates a poetic personality from there that is positive, that creates a very radical, very new poetics. It's incredible how he always bet on this, without fear: poetry, lucidity, thought.

João Cabral creates a new—and dry—language to talk about aridity. The way of speaking thus resembles what is being said in a meeting of theme and style that inaugurates a way of looking, that teaches us how to see.

Let us listen to the poem “Education by Stone”, read by Cabral himself:

[*João Cabral de Melo Neto reads “Educação pela pedra” (Education by Stone)*⁵]

*Uma educação pela pedra: por lições;
para aprender da pedra, frequentá-la;
captar sua voz inenfática, impessoal
(pela de dicção ela começa as aulas).
A lição de moral, sua resistência fria
ao que flui e a fluir, a ser maleada;
a de poética, sua carnadura concreta;
a de economia, seu adensar-se compacta:
lições da pedra (de fora para dentro,
cartilha muda), para quem soletrá-la.*

*Outra educação pela pedra: no Sertão
(de dentro para fora, e pré-didática).
No Sertão a pedra não sabe lecionar,
e se lecionasse, não ensinaria nada;
lá não se aprende a pedra: lá a pedra,
uma pedra de nascença, entranha a alma.*

An education by stone: through lessons;
to learn from the stone, to go to it often,
to catch its level, impersonal voice
(by its choice of words it begins its classes).
The lesson in morals, the stone's cold resistance
to flow, to flowing, to being hammered:

⁵ “Education by Stone,” translated by James Wright in: *João Cabral de Melo Neto: Selected Poetry 1937-1990*, ed. Djela Kadir.

the lesson in poetics, its concrete flesh:
in economics, how to grow dense compactly:
lessons from the stone, (from without to within,
dumb primer), for the routine speller of spells.

Another education by stone: in the backlands
(from within to without and pre-didactic place).
In the backlands stone does not know how to lecture,
and, even if it did would teach nothing:
you don't learn the stone, there: the stone,
born stone, penetrates the soul.

It's educating us about poetry, but also an education that is an unlearning of previous conceptions. Despite being considered an optical poet, the images Cabral creates don't seduce the retina, and in fact, they don't even pass through it; on the contrary, they challenge the eye.

As Ari says, these images don't fall into an "easy beauty."

[Interview with Ari Vidal]

Instead of the flower, [we have] the stone. It's always like this, the search for, without fear of prosaism, the search for what is essential, which comes in the form of beauty. It's never an easy beauty. He doesn't beautify.

There is an education of the eye, which learns to see the smallest things, which learns to see the beauty of the smallest and refuted things.

During our conversation, Ari remembered the poem "The Chicken's Egg," which we used to discuss in his classes. In these verses, João Cabral analyzes something as simple as a chicken's egg, but without resorting to grand metaphors or equivalences, such as the origin of the world.

He speaks only of the egg—literally, of the egg. Now, Sophia will read the first part of this poem:

[Sophia Faustino reads "The Chicken Egg"]

[Sound effect of an egg being rolled on a surface]

*O ovo de galinha
Ao olho mostra a integridade
de uma coisa num bloco, um ovo.
Numa só matéria, unitária,
maciçamente ovo, num todo.*

*Sem possuir um dentro e um fora,
tal como as pedras, sem miolo:
e só miolo: o dentro e o fora
integralmente no contorno.*

*No entanto, se ao olho se mostra
unânime em si mesmo, um ovo,
a mão que o sopesa descobre
que nele há algo suspeito:*

*que seu peso não é o das pedras,
inanimado, frio, goro;
que o seu é um peso morno, túmido,
um peso que é vivo e não morto.*

The chicken's egg
To the eye shows its integrity
as a whole thing, an egg.
In a single, unitary matter,
massively egg, a whole.

Without having an inside and an outside,
like stones, without a core:
and just a core: inside and outside
fully contoured.

However, if the eye shows itself
to be unanimous, an egg,
the hand that weighs it discovers
that there is something suspicious about it:

that its weight is not that of stones,
inanimate, cold, rolling;
that it is a lukewarm, tumescent weight,
a weight that is alive and not dead.

As Ari says, the language of the dry and minimal is revealed in the concreteness of things. In this excerpt from the poem "A palo seco," [T.N. palo seco is a type of

flamenco song and a Spanish term for frankness and directness] which Ari will now analyze, we see how this poetic voice is pared back to the essential, to silence, evidencing its bladelike condition.

[Ari Vidal analyses the poem “A palo seco”]

In the poem, this [bare essentialness] happens in three distinct moments. First, he describes the song.

[Sound effect: the flamenco music “palo seco”]

*Se diz a palo seco
o cante sem guitarra;
o cante sem; o cante;
o cante sem mais nada;
se diz a palo seco
a esse cante despido:
ao cante que se canta
sob o silêncio a pino.*

It's said the “palo seco”
is sung without a guitar;
sung without; the song;
the song without anything else;
it is said to be palo seco
to this naked song:
to the song that is sung
under the pinnacle of silence.

In other words, a song that exists alongside or within silence. Literally, a dry song. Later, he realizes that the song “A palo seco” is a trait of language and behavior that identifies situations and beings. He says,

[Sound effect: flamenco music “palo seco”]

*A palo seco existem
situações e objetos:
Graciliano Ramos,
desenho de arquiteto,
as paredes caiadas,
a elegância dos pregos,
a cidade de Córdoba,
o arame dos insetos.*

Palo seco exists
situations and objects:
Graciliano Ramos,
architect's drawing,
the whitewashed walls,
the elegance of nails,
the city of Córdoba,
the wire of insects.

Finally, from this recognition, the lyrical self who speaks in his poem draws from this condition a teaching that reiterates the principles of his poetics. Here are a few examples:

[Sound effect: flamenco music “palo seco”]

*de ser a palo seco,
dos quais se retirar
higiene ou conselho:
não o de aceitar o seco
por resignadamente,
mas de empregar o seco
porque é mais contundente.*

to be dry,
from which to withdraw
hygiene or advice:
not to accept the dry
resignedly,
but to use the dry
because it is more forceful.

[Voice of Jorge Menna Barreto reading the last four lines of the poem as if through a megaphone]

*Not to accept the dry
resignedly,
but to use the dry
because it is more forceful.*

Here's Cabral, revealing his magic, the making-of his practice, as Cristhiano Aguiar puts it. By being more forceful, the dry ceases to be a subtraction and is reinterpreted.

Perhaps some of you know "A palo seco", the song by [Brazilian musician and singer] Belchior. You might hear it differently after this lesson with Ari.

But in Cabral's poem, the term "a palo seco" refers to a flamenco musical style, usually sung a cappella and accompanied only by percussion. A sound we might call... dry?

[Sound effect: "palmas" (hand clapping) of flamenco music]

João Cabral lived in Spain for many years, working in Brazilian embassies. He lived in Madrid and Seville. Regarding the latter, he used to say: open quotation marks: "Seville was the diplomatic post that impressed me the most and where I always felt at home." Close quotation marks. Like some regions of the northeastern hinterland, Seville experiences intense summers. Temperatures often exceed 35°C.

Another interesting commonality between the two regions is the vegetation. Seville has Mediterranean vegetation adapted to drought, with cacti and small trees that shed their leaves during the dry season to reduce water loss. This adaptation is similar to that of much of the *caatinga* [semiarid Brazilian biome]⁶ region's vegetation.

[Podcast soundtrack]

⁶ The *caatinga* is an exclusively Brazilian, semiarid biome in the Northeast of the country, characterized by a long dry season and a unique, hardy vegetation adapted to arid conditions. Its Tupi-Guarani name means "white forest," referring to the whitish appearance of its plants during the dry period when they lose their leaves. The *caatinga* is home to many endemic species, making it a significant center of biodiversity, but it faces threats from human activities and lacks sufficient legal protection.

As I mentioned at the beginning, this episode of *Olho seco* focuses on revisiting João Cabral's poetry based on the reality of the increasing droughts and dryness we are experiencing today.

As I record these words, global aridification not only continues but is accelerating. It reinforces the colonial logic that views land as a resource to be exploited, to be squeezed dry.

[Soundtrack mix of news headlines and reports]

Spain is experiencing extreme heat

It's really warm, it doesn't feel like winter.

Major heat wave sends temperatures skyrocketing in eastern half of US

Tonight the extreme heat is expanding east. It's hot, really, really hot.

Canicule en France: unprecedented heat • FRANCE 24

France will suffocate in the next few days...

La settimana del grande caldo, temperature record - Estate in direct
07/17/2023

A torrid broth, a record broth...

Brazilians from 15 states and the Federal District are beginning to feel the
effects of yet another wave of #heat #JN #g1

The country is entering its ninth heat wave of the year.

Can art and literature teach us something about how to view and address the environmental crisis?

In times of climate crisis, the language used by mainstream media seems insufficient to convey the complexity of the phenomena we are facing. And raw scientific data is often too abstract and lacks the impact needed to provoke a societal response. Could João Cabral's poetry, written in the last century, have something to tell us about the relationship between language and climate, and perhaps even strengthen our ability to view and respond to the climate crisis?

To help us reflect on this question, we invited Ana Rusche, a writer specializing in science fiction and the intersections of literature and ecology. She told us about the first time she noticed a disturbing [environmental] change in the world around her.

[Sound effect: drums]

Curiously, it wasn't through extreme heat or cold, but through the transformation of the soundscape.

[Interview with Ana Rusche]

I grew up between the capital of São Paulo and the municipality of Ubatuba, on the northern coast of [the state of] São Paulo, bordering Rio de Janeiro. I'm 45 years old. I have witnessed the landscape change very quickly. And it was a landscape, what we might consider to have been a very dense Atlantic Forest, but which has given way to summer homes, several condominiums built without much planning or greater thought about what that meant. When we start to observe these phenomena, it's very noticeable that we lose landscapes, that we lose things forever. And the pain of this loss touches me deeply, it hurts me deeply to realize this. For example, when they did some earthworks to build a house, and a marsh where I would always hear frogs, became silent.

How do we talk about these losses, these silences, and this pain? How do we respond?

[Interview continued]

I think that fiction has a very important role in this conversation, because fiction, quoting a colleague of mine that I love, who is also a writer, Gisele Mirabai, can *move* people, because sometimes it is not enough to bring data, to bring cold numbers, this catastrophic avalanche. Even Timothy Morton, the philosopher, mentions this avalanche of data. People need to be moved and evidently, not only to take responsibility, but also in the sense of being actors and actresses of this change, to think [of themselves as] not only as part of the problem, but also of collective solutions.

As we reflect on this question, reading João Cabral de Melo Neto's poems can broaden the debate, finding new ways for how to move [us] or how to see. However, neither Cabral nor other writers of his generation were aware of the climate

emergency as we understand it today, or of the relationship between the problems facing the earth and the human actions that devastate it.

In "O cão sem plumas," (The Dog without Feathers) published in 1950, Cabral addressed the social issue more directly for the first time. He addressed the consequences of this issue in Pernambuco, his home state.

At the time, he lived in Barcelona, where he was working as a diplomat. It is from this distant perspective that he revisits his origins and critiques the reality of his people.

Now, let's listen to João Cabral himself reading the last part of this poem.

[João Cabral reads "The Dog without Feathers - IV Speech of the Capibaribe"]

*Aquele rio
está na memória
como um cão vivo
dentro de uma sala.
Como um cão vivo
dentro de um bolso.
Como um cão vivo
debaixo dos lençóis,
debaixo da camisa,
da pele.
Um cão, porque vive,
é agudo.
O que vive
não entorpece.
O que vive fere.
O homem,
porque vive,
choca com o que vive.
Viver
é ir entre o que vive.
O que vive
incomoda de vida
o silêncio, o sono, o corpo
que sonhou cortar-se
roupas de nuvens.
O que vive choca,
tem dentes, arestas, é espesso.
O que vive é espesso*

como um cão, um homem,
como aquele rio.
Como todo o real
é espesso.
Aquele rio
é espesso e real.
Como uma maçã
é espessa.
Como um cachorro
é mais espesso do que uma maçã.
Como é mais espesso
o sangue do cachorro
do que o próprio cachorro.
Como é mais espesso
um homem
do que o sangue de um cachorro.
Como é muito mais espesso
o sangue de um homem
do que o sonho de um homem.
Espesso
como uma maçã é espessa.
Como uma maçã
é muito mais espessa
se um homem a come
do que se um homem a vê.
Como é ainda mais espessa
se a fome a come.
Como é ainda muito mais espessa
se não a pode comer
a fome que a vê.
Aquele rio
é espesso
como o real mais espesso.
Espesso
por sua paisagem espessa,
onde a fome
estende seus batalhões de secretas
e íntimas formigas.
E espesso
por sua fábula espessa;
pelo fluir
de suas geleias de terra;
ao parir
suas ilhas negras de terra.
Porque é muito mais espessa
a vida que se desdobra
em mais vida,
como uma fruta

*é mais espessa
que sua flor;
como a árvore
é mais espessa
que sua semente;
como a flor
é mais espessa
que sua árvore,
etc. etc.
Espesso,
porque é mais espessa
a vida que se luta
cada dia,
o dia que se adquire
cada dia
(como uma ave
que vai cada segundo
conquistando seu voo).*

That river
stays in memory
like a living dog
inside a room.
Like a living dog
inside a pocket.
Like a living dog
under the sheets,
under the shirt,
of the skin.
A dog, because it lives,
is sharp.
What lives
does not numb.
What lives wounds.
Man,
because he lives,
clashes with what lives.
To live
is to be among what lives.
What lives
disturbs life
silence, sleep, the body
that dreamed of cutting itself
clothes of clouds.

What lives shocks,
has teeth, edges, is thick.
What lives is thick
like a dog, a man,
like that river.
Like all reality
is thick.
That river
is thick and real.
Like an apple
is thick.
Like a dog
is thicker than an apple.
How is the dog's blood
thicker than the
dog itself.
How is it thicker?
a man
than the blood of a dog.
How is it the blood of a man
much thicker
than a man's dream.
Thick
like an apple is thick.
Like an apple
is much thicker
if a man eats it
than if a man looks at it.
How is even thicker
if hunger eats it.
How is it even much thicker
if you can't eat what
hunger sees.
That river
is thick
like the thickest reality.
Thick
for its thick landscape,
where hunger
extends its secret battalions
and intimate ants.
And thick
for his thick fable;
by the flow
of its earth jellies;
when giving birth

its black islands of land.
Because it is much thicker
a life that unfolds
in more life,
like a fruit
is thicker
than its flower;
like the tree
is thicker
than its seed;
like the flower
is thicker
than its tree,
etc. etc.
Thick,
because it is thicker
the life that is struggles
every day,
the day you acquire
each day
(like a bird
that every second
conquers its flight).

João Cabral wrote “The Dog Without Feathers” after being shocked by news that life expectancy in Recife [his home town] was only 28 years.

Let me refer here again to the book *João Cabral de Melo Neto: Uma biografia*, written by Ivan Marques, which contains an enlightening quote on this subject.

As a privileged-class Pernambucan, [Cabral] felt he had a duty to *do something*. He decided to write a social poem, a *protest* against that reality.

Once again, that was the voice of Bruno Bonaventura.

Do something, write, protest. Be moved, Cabral takes action and cultivates his ability to respond to what he sees and what distresses him. But how to write? And how to respond?

[Podcast soundtrack]

The 1934 Federal Constitution already provided for defense against the effects of droughts in northern Brazil, but it was Law No. 175 of 1936 that delimited the area to be served, using a polygonal perimeter.

This region, technically described in legalese, includes six states and the north of Minas Gerais, but was not yet called the "Drought Polygon"⁷ — a name that would only be consolidated later.

Cabral appropriates the *sertão* and transforms it into poetic fuel. His response is not only to create an image of the *sertão*, but also a language based on it, observed from afar.

Professor Ari explains that, in Cabral's poetry, drought and dryness are linked to the condition of the people who inhabit this space. They are "populated landscapes," as he alludes to in one of his books.

[Interview with Ari Vidal]

This shows that the problem is, not only or above all, in nature, but in a process of exploitation of these poor populations, which has its origins in the slave system.

The critique of the exploitation of human beings is reflected in the text itself. It is presented as a poem.

When he discovers this, he discovers a poetry, so to speak, in which he constructs the image. The image is constructed, it unfolds, it speaks. It speaks. Images in his poetry speak. They are not just suggestions, [but] images loaded with suggestion. Saying something [about the thing] is not exhausted by saying the thing. It's always loaded with meaning. And then he moves away from the Northeast theme, because he doesn't just talk about that either, fortunately. Otherwise, the poetry would also fall into a great deal of repetition. He expands [beyond] this concept, this conceptual point of the drought and dryness. So dryness, which could lead to nothingness, to an *ad infinitum reduction*, becomes a criterion

⁷ The "Brazilian drought polygon" refers to the Brazilian semiarid region, a large, dry area in Northeast Brazil characterized by low and irregular rainfall, shallow soils, and high evaporation rates. This region covers about 12% of Brazil's territory.

through which he will read everything. And he will read dryness inside-out. He will read dryness inside-out. He reads poets who, even though they talk a lot, have rigor in their writing. The dry becomes, for him, a criterion of rigor. Rigor. That's the point.

[Voice of Jorge Menna Barreto repeats the phrase "Read dryness inside-out" as if through a megaphone]

Read dryness inside-out.

Inside-out of dryness. Let's save this idea of inside-out and revisit it later.

In works such as "O cão sem plumas" (The Dog Without Feathers), *Morte e vida Severina* (Death and Life of Severina) e "Habitar o tempo" (Inhabiting Time), Cabral addresses social issues. However, this link between the population's hardships and human action is not explicit, as is the case with the devastation caused by sugarcane monocultures.

Ana Rusche addresses this point when commenting on Graciliano Ramos's *Vidas secas*⁸:

[Interview with Ana Rusche]

Vidas secas associates the existence of drought with human action. It associates the drought industry with human action. But the Anthropocene thing that was there in Euclides da Cunha's text is not in Graciliano Ramos, from 1938. For example, in João Cabral, drought is seen as something that happens. Now what we are seeing is not... it is this deforestation caused by the meat and soy industry, which has destroyed several areas that were forest, in the Pantanal and in the Amazon... so, this increasing dryness, there is a link to human action, which this literature does not yet portray, but as I said, this may be part of the perception, but it is not there.

⁸ First published in 1938, *Vidas Secas* by the author Graciliano Ramos, translated into English as *Barren Lives*, is a classic novel that follows migrant workers struggling in the arid northeast.

The text Ana mentions by Euclides da Cunha is called "Desert Makers." It's a chronicle from 1901. In it, he links the country's rising temperatures to large estates and fires. Euclides accuses humans of being, I quote, a "nefarious geological accident," unquote. In a way, this idea anticipates what is now called the Anthropocene: humans as the defining force of a new geological era.

During our conversation with Ana, in September 2024, the state of São Paulo was shrouded in smoke, the result of criminal fires.

[Sound effect: aerial news reports via helicopter]

Brazil records more than 45,000 fires in the first 11 days of September alone

Fires are spreading across the country. 643 municipalities have declared a state of emergency. According to INPE, in 2024, Brazil recorded more than 172,000 fires and accounted for almost half of all areas affected by fires in South America.

In the state of São Paulo, the number of fires has skyrocketed. Yesterday there were 55. Today, there are 327.

Although João Cabral did not explicitly investigate the anthropogenic causes of drought in his poems, we can see that there are seeds for this thought there.

Seeds that, if watered, can germinate into readings that move us and teach us something about how to view the reality we are facing now.

To expand on this reflection, let's hear again from writer and professor Cristhiano Aguiar.

[Interview with Cristhiano Aguiar]

[Cabral and Ramos] at the same time, build complexity out of the real and build commonplaces within the real. So, despite the two authors, I think it is despite the two authors' knowledge, that at the same time, they establish the complexity of this semiarid world, this world of the *sertão*, or Cariri, at the same time, there is a side effect of these representations that construct a crystallized vision of what this place might be.

Cristhiano also revisits the *sertão* landscape in *Vidas secas*, highlighting a crucial aspect.

The hostility of the *sertão*, in Graciliano Ramos, does not come from something intrinsic to it, but from a social context that makes it a space of exclusion.

[Interview continued]

The *sertão* landscape in *Vidas secas* is hostile. There's no doubt about it; it's very eloquent how hostile it is in Graciliano Ramos's prose. But it's never hostile in its very essence, that's my point. Not even in *Vidas secas* is this *sertão* landscape hostile, it's difficult for humans, but it actually creates hunger, death, and disease, because this *sertão* landscape is socially produced to be a place of exclusion.

The problem that Fabiano [T.N. character in the novel] faces in *Vidas secas* is not the *sertão*. The problem is that the *sertão* has been socially produced as a space of social exclusion.

Vidas secas was revisited by Cristhiano and four other authors in the anthology *Árido*, published in 2024. Each author, representing a [different] region of the country, wrote a short story about their own landscapes and realities.

[Interview continued]

So, in the case of my story, just to contextualize, the story is called "The Bad Place." And it starts from a premise which is the idea that, what if, in *Vidas secas*, Fabiano, in an attempt to escape the difficult situation that he and his family face, decided to make a pact with the devil.

[Podcast soundtrack]

We won't tell you the whole story. That part is up to you. [But] I asked [Cristhiano] if unusual narratives, like horror [stories], can help us respond to the unprecedented contexts we are living in.

[Interview continued]

I'll say it this way, fantastic fiction, fantasy too, but science fiction and horror, in particular, have already given us all the grammar we need to understand what is happening in 2024, which is the year we are recording this conversation.

So, the importance is this, it is already symbolized, it is already narrated, the language already exists, and it can be very interesting for us to think about solutions, about possible futures. And the possible future is right here, not the science fiction of building a rocket and going to Mars, with Elon Musk and his gang. The future is here, the future is trying to start from this imaginary, not only from it, but getting closer to this imaginary, trying to build possible solutions for what we have been experiencing.

When, for example, you suddenly wake up in the morning and the sky has darkened and the sun has shrunk and you're bewildered by what's happening. So, what does literature do? It organizes experience. It organizes experience. Regardless of whether it's speculative or not, all literature organizes experience. This organization, obviously, isn't methodical and systematic, like theory, philosophy, or historiography, but there is an organization of experience.

Ana Rusche goes further, highlighting that poetry has the power to connect seemingly disconnected elements, creating unexpected meanings.

[Interview with Ana Rusche]

I think that poetry can connect things that initially make no sense. It gives meaning where we see none. And that's very comforting. We need that, sometimes, even to keep going, even to get back on our feet, to think in new ways. And one of the things I think poetry does is make the world strange through language, but in a very radical way.

Science fiction does that, historical fiction does that, mimetic literature does that too. But what I think is that in poetry, as an experiment in language, it's more powerful, it's more radical, you can effectively bring something *other* there.

And I think that poetry has the ability, sometimes, to get it right without meaning to, in the sense that it thinks about how it might be very different and then brings it [into being]. So I think, I don't know, it's a great exercise, writing poetry, reading poetry, we can learn a lot from how it's presented.

It's very interesting how it really provokes, wakes up the body.

As Ana Rusche observes, utopias can fail — but it is precisely in this failure that we find the stimulus to dare to imagine the impossible.

Thus, exercising imagination and searching for utopias not only helps us understand the present, but also creates alternatives for a possible future.

[Interview continued]

It is more difficult to imagine a utopia because we have to move our political imagination much more.

And imagination, it's like anything else, we have to train to develop it, it's not as if I was born creative, no, you see references, and so on, sometimes a person can have an ease with something, but it's also a doing, right. Having sharper, bolder, political imaginations requires that we know other models, right, it's the same thing, right, and so it's difficult for us to imagine utopias because they always fail, right. There's a phrase by Fredric Jameson that the best utopias are the ones that fail the best.

But utopias, they don't last very long, precisely because we start to see them crumbling. So you say, oh, okay, it could be like this, like that, there comes a time when you think of a principle that you can't resolve, and why is that good? Because it makes you start to have to imagine everything again, right? So, it's very important for the brain, in reality, and for our health even, to imagine utopian scenarios.

If I can imagine Brazil without the *plantations* why don't I do it? Because maybe it's very difficult to do that, actually I know why, because it's really difficult, and people will ridicule me, but at the same time, isn't that exactly the Brazil I should be trying to outline?

Ana Rusche sees the MST, the Landless Workers' Movement, as a clear example of a utopia in practice.

If I take the MST, right, which is one of the movements I admire most in Brazil, it's a great exercise in utopia, it's really thinking that we're going to be able to give people land, housing, food, without poison, right, without excessive use of pesticides, so, what is this about, it is...it is utopia in practice. Will there be a lot of mistakes? Obviously, yes, but that's what ends up making us keep doing things, right?

Exercise your imagination. Cultivate utopias.

[Sound effect: a shovel digging dry earth]

[Sophia Faustino reads João Cabral de Melo Neto's "Psychology of Composition VIII"⁹]

*Cultivar o deserto
como um pomar às avessas.
A árvore destila
a terra, gota a gota;
a terra completa,
cai, fruto.
Enquanto, na ordem
de outro pomar,
a atenção destila
palavras maduras.
Cultivar o deserto
como um pomar às avessas.
Então, nada mais
destila; evapora.
Onde foi maçã,
resta uma fome.
Onde foi palavra
(potros ou touros contidos),
resta a severa
forma do vazio.*

To cultivate the desert
like an orchard in reverse.

(The tree distills
the earth, drop by drop;
the whole earth
drops, fruit!

While in the order
of another kind of orchard
attention distills
ripe words.)

⁹ "Psychology of Composition VIII. Translated by Djelal Kadir in *João Cabral de Melo Neto: Selected Poetry 1937-1990*

To cultivate the desert
like an orchard in reverse:
then, nothing more
distills; evaporates;
where there was an apple
a hunger remains;

where there was a word
(colts or bulls contained)
the severe form
of emptiness remains.

Cultivate the desert

like an orchard

in reverse.

[Podcast soundtrack]

Before we wrap up, one last note: complete transcripts of this episode in Portuguese and English are available on our website. The link is in this episode's description.

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