

# PODCAST 2: SERIES DRY EYES

**BY: JORGE MENNA BARRETO**

**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.

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## [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) translated by Charles Bernstein, Horacio Costa and Régis Bonvincino based on translations of Djelal Kadir<sup>1</sup>].*

*[Sound effect: writing on paper]*

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<sup>1</sup> 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].<sup>2</sup>

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. But people call me Ari, it's simpler. I'm a professor at the University of São Paulo, 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]*

Thinking about how seeing operates in João Cabral's poetry, it's not only about how the visual is configured in his poetry, but also, 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 focused way of seeing objects in the world.

In other words, the image arises from the [very] focus on the object. In this sense, his lyricism fulfills a first commandment of lyrical poetry as a whole: to feel intensely drawn to the figure before you.

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<sup>2</sup> *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.

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

*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.*

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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.)

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.

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<sup>3</sup> “O Engenheiro” in: 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)

You heard Sophia Faustino reciting the poem "The Engineer." Cabral's 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 remouvoir*. 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."<sup>4</sup>

*[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.

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

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<sup>4</sup> 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.

I asked Sophia Faustino to read the poem “Menino de engenho”, from the book *A escola das facas* [The School of Knives, 1980].

[Sophia Faustino reads “Menino do engenho” (*The Boy from the Mill*) translated by Richard Zenith<sup>5</sup>]

[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.*

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“Plantation Boy”

The cut sugar stalk is a sickle.  
Cut at a sharp angle it gains  
the whetted edge of the sickle  
that cut it to a sickle: a mutual giving.

When I was a boy, the edge of a stalk  
once cut and almost blinded me,  
and a scar, which left no visible mark,  
knew how to make its mark inside me.

Though I no longer have the scar,  
what was inoculated is in me still;  
I have never discovered  
if it is a virus or vaccine.

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<sup>5</sup> João Cabral Melo Neto, “Plantation Boy” in: *Education by Stone*, translated by Richard Zenith (New York: Archipelago, 2005) 217.

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 capital of Bahia, 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 once more, 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 Bonaventura, 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's no landscape without language. The landscape isn't natural. In fact, the so-called "natural" is already a language, because it's 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.

I'm from Paraíba. I was born in Campina Grande, Paraíba. I have a dual [if not multiple] career path. I joke with my students that I'm a bit like *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. I work in the fields of creative fiction, literary criticism, and 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.

The thing is that, whatever our perception of space may be, whether from the most urban of spaces to those of absolute ecological degradation, or, to ones supposedly untouched by man, space is, in short, always produced. Even if not literally, at least symbolically, from the vantage point of those managing and/or living within it. The landscape [as a construct] can dispense with the empirical and natural worlds. That's why the landscape is so significant. It is, simultaneously, a fiction that we construct and a bridge, so that, in our human anguish and solitude, we can in some way access this inhuman absolute that surrounds us, 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.

There's a fascinating thing about Los Angeles, the mornings and afternoons in LA, California, in general, have 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 rock climbing, while I was

researching my novel. So, without a doubt, there's a connection. You know, there's something else [to note here as well]. It's impossible for us to see Los Angeles for the first time. It's not possible, at least, for a Brazilian, to see the semiarid Northeast for the first time either. Because, even for those of us who are from here, whether from Paraíba or other states, it's very clear that [the Northeast] is already an experience mediated by a discourse that is more than a hundred years old, about what the Northeast is, and 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.

Yes, there is a dryness to João Cabral de Melo Neto's language. This dryness is present in the way he observes a stone, a xique-xique [kind of tree cactus] or an oxcart. He subtracts this dryness from the elements of the semiarid region. But the fascinating thing about Cabral is, just as he proposes dryness to us, he also allows us, [behind-the-scenes as-it-were], into the *making of* dryness. That's partly why the metalanguage of Cabral's poetry is justified. Why? Because all the time Cabral is aware that he's creating a landscape, and that this landscape is a social, natural, and intimate landscape, while, simultaneously, 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]*

Let's put it this way, drought does not dry out the work. In a play on language [Cabral] transforms drought into dryness. [His poetry] is, at once, about dryness and the world of drought.

Treating these elements in positive ways, he creates a style and a poetic personality that [also] creates a very radical [and] very new poetics. It's incredible, without hesitation, he always wagered on 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:

*[The following features an excerpt of João Cabral de Melo Neto reading his poem “Educação pela pedra” (Education by Stone) in the original Portuguese. This is followed by Sofia Faustino reading the translation of the poem by James Wright.<sup>6</sup>]*

*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.*

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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:  
the lesson in poetics, its concrete flesh:

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<sup>6</sup> “Education by Stone,” translated by James Wright in: *João Cabral de Melo Neto: Selected Poetry 1937-1990*, ed. Djela Kadir. (Hanover/London: University Press of New England) 1994, p.130

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 [Professor Vidal] says, these images don't fall into an "easy beauty."

Instead of a flower, [there's] a stone. [With Cabral] it's always about searching for what is essential, there's no fear of the prosaic. It's about searching for something that in its very form is beautiful. [But] it's never an easy beauty. [It's not about] beautifying.

It's about educating how we see: to learn to look at the smallest things and see beauty in the smallest and most ignored of things.

During our conversation, Professor Vidal remembered the poem "The 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 Egg" translated by Richard Zenith<sup>7</sup>]*

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<sup>7</sup> João Cabral Melo Neto, "The Egg" in: *Education by Stone*, translated by Richard Zenith (New York: Archipelago, 2005) 159.

*[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.*

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The Egg

To the eye an ego suggests  
the integrity of a block.  
A single, uniform substance,  
wholly and compactly eggish.

Without an inside and outside,  
pulpless as a stone, or pulp  
all in all: inside and outside  
one and the same throughout.

But if to the eye an egg  
appears to be unanimous,  
the hand which holds it  
discovers something suspicious:

that its weight is not the cold,  
inanimate, addled weight of stones  
—not a dead weight — but the tumid,  
warm weight of something living.

As Professor Vidal says, the language of the dry and minimal is revealed in the concreteness of things. In this excerpt from the poem "A palo seco," which Professor Vidal will now analyze, we see how this poetic voice is pared back to the essential, to silence, evidencing its bladelike condition. On the translation note, palo seco, which is the title of this poem, is a type of Flamenco song and Spanish term for frankness and directness.

*[Ari Vidal analyses the poem "A palo seco"]*

So, Cabral is referring to the Flamenco tradition of "Palo seco," the acappella and bare form of unaccompanied singing. In the poem, this bareness occurs in three distinct moments. First, the poem 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.*

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They call "palo seco"  
singing without a guitar;  
singing without; just the song;  
the song without anything else;  
what they call "palo seco"  
is this stripped-down singing:  
a singing sung  
in absolute silence.

In other words, a song sung alongside or within silence. Literally, a desert song. Then, [as the poem continues] he notes that singing "A palo seco" is [both] a form of language and conduct that identifies situations and beings:

*[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.*

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Situations and objects  
stripped bare:  
Graciliano Ramos,  
architectural drawings,  
whitewashed walls,  
the elegance of nails,  
the city of Córdoba,  
the wire of insects.

Finally, from this recognition, the lyrical self who speaks in the poem draws from this condition a teaching that reiterates the principles of [Cabral's] poetics.

*[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.*

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to be the dry palo seco,  
extracting  
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." You might hear it differently after this lesson with Professor Vidal.

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: "Seville was the diplomatic post that impressed me the most and where I always felt at home." Like some regions of the northeastern hinterland of Brazil, Seville experiences intense summers. Temperatures often exceed 35°C or 95°F.

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]<sup>8</sup> region's vegetation.

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<sup>8</sup> 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.



[Podcast soundtrack]

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 catastrophe, 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 and I have seen the surrounding landscape change very quickly. A landscape that would have been considered very dense Atlantic Forest, but has now given way to summer homes and condominiums, built without much planning or thought to the implications. When we start to observe these changes, we also notice that when we lose these landscapes, we lose things forever. The pain of this loss touches me deeply. It hurts me deeply to see this happening. I remember [recently] after they completed some earthworks to build a house, 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?

I think that fiction can play a very important role in this conversation. Because fiction, to quote a colleague of mine who I adore, who is also a writer, Gisele Mirabai, can *move* people. Sometimes, it is not enough to cite data, to coldly list off numbers, [like a] catastrophic avalanche. Even Timothy Morton, the philosopher, mentions this avalanche of data. People need to be moved. They need, not only to take responsibility, but also, in the sense of being agents of this change, to see themselves, not only as part of the problem, but also, as part 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 the hardship of his people.

We will now listen to Sophia Faustino reading the last part of this poem translated by Richard Zenith.<sup>9</sup>

*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*

---

<sup>9</sup> João Cabral de Melo Neto, "The Dog Without Feathers" in: *Education by Stone*, translated by Richard Zenith, 47.

*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).*

\*\*\*

The river  
exists in memory  
like a living dog  
inside a room.  
Like a living dog  
inside one's pocket.  
Like a living dog  
under the sheets,  
under one's shirt,  
one's skin.

A dog, because it lives,  
is sharp.  
Whatever lives  
doesn't numb.  
Whatever lives wounds.  
Man,

because he lives,  
clashes with the living.  
To live  
is to wend among the living.

Whatever lives  
inflicts life  
on silence, on sleep, on the body  
that dreamed of cutting itself  
clothes out of clouds.  
Whatever lives clashes,  
has teeth, edges, is heavy.  
Whatever lives is heavy  
like a dog, a man,  
like the river.

Heavy  
like everything real.  
The river  
is heavy and real.  
As an apple  
is heavy.  
As a dog  
is heavier than an apple.  
As the blood of a dog  
is heavier  
than the dog itself.  
As a man  
is heavier  
than the blood of a dog.  
As the blood of a man  
is much heavier  
than the dream of a man.

Heavy  
as an apple is heavy.  
As an apple  
is much heavier  
if a man eats it  
than if a man sees it.  
As it is even heavier  
if hunger eats it.  
As it is yet heavier still  
if hunger sees  
but cannot eat it.

The river  
is heavy  
like the heaviest reality.  
Heavy  
because of its heavy landscape,  
where hunger  
deploys its secret battalions  
of visceral ants.

And heavy  
because of its fable's heavy plot,  
because of the flowing  
of its earthen jellies,  
heavy when it gives birth  
to its islands of black earth.

Because life that multiplies  
itself in more life  
is much heavier,  
as a fruit  
is heavier  
than its flower,  
as the tree  
is heavier  
than its seed,  
as the flower  
is heavier  
than its tree,  
etc etc:

Heavy,  
because life is heavier  
when it is fought for  
each day,  
because the day is heavier  
when it is won  
each day  
(like a bird  
conquering each second  
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 city of Pernambuco, [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"<sup>10</sup> — 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 an artistic language based on it, observed from afar.

Professor Vidal 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]*

[His work] shows that the problem is not in nature, but rather in a process of exploitation of these poor populations. [An exploitation] that has its origins in the slave system.

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<sup>10</sup> 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.



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

[In his work Cabral] discovers a kind of poetry that constructs [itself through] imagery. The image is constructed, it unfolds, it speaks. Images in his poetry speak. They are not just suggestions, [but rather,] images loaded with suggestion. Even though speaking [directly], it is not something that exhausts itself in the saying. It's always loaded with meaning. Then he moves away from the Northeast theme. Fortunately, he doesn't just talk about that. Otherwise, the poetry would also fall into a great deal of repetition. He [moves beyond and] expands this conceptual point of drought and dryness. So, dryness, which could lead to nothingness, to a reduction *ad infinitum*, becomes a criterion through which he will read everything. And he will read dryness inside-out. He will read dryness inside-out. He reads poets that, even though [effusive in their work] write with [great] rigor. The dry becomes [...] 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.

Our guest Ana Rusche addresses this point when commenting on Graciliano Ramos's *Vidas secas*, a classic novel that follows migrant workers struggling in the arid northeast.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> 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.

*[Interview with Ana Rusche]*

[ *Vidas secas*] does not associate the existence of drought itself with human action. It rather associates human action with the drought industry. The question of the Anthropocene, present in Euclides da Cunha [‘s 1902 novel], is not in Graciliano Ramos [‘ novel, from 1938]. In João Cabral, for example, drought is seen as part of life. Today, however, we are seeing [widespread] deforestation caused by the meat and soy industry, which has destroyed several forest regions in the Pantanal and in the Amazon. This dimension of human action is not something this [modern] literature was portraying. [But] as I said, we may bring this perception to these works, but it’s not [inherently] there.

The text Ana mentions is called "Desert Makers" by Brazilian author Euclides da Cunha." It's a chronicle from 1901. In it, he links the country's rising temperatures to large estates and human provoked 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]*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G9aEScTSKBY>

Although João Cabral did not explicitly investigate the anthropogenic causes of drought in his poems, we can find dormant 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 now facing.

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

[Interview with Cristhiano Aguiar]

[Authors like João Cabral and Graciliano Ramos] give us both the commonplace of the real and its complexity. But, I think that, despite their intentions, even as they establish the complexity of this semiarid world, this world of the *sertão*, or Cariri, there is, at the same time, a collateral effect, where these representations 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 works of Graciliano Ramos, does not come from something intrinsic to it, but from a social context that makes it a space of exclusion.

The landscape of the *sertão* in [the novel] *Vidas secas* is hostile. A hostility that is very eloquently described in Graciliano Ramos's prose, there's no doubt about it. But it's never hostile in its very essence, that's my point. Not even in *Vidas secas* is this *sertão* landscape [in and of itself] hostile. It's difficult for humans, yes, but it only creates hunger, death, and disease, because this *sertão* landscape has been socially produced to be a place of exclusion.

The problem that [the character] Fabiano 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.

Ok, contextualizing here. So, my story [in this collection might be translated as] "The Bad Farm" [or "The Bad Place." It's based on a what-if scenario, that, in *Vidas secas*, Fabiano, in an attempt to escape the difficult situation that he and his family was facing, decided to make a pact with the devil.

[Podcast soundtrack]

We won't give you the details of 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.

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

So, the important thing is that this language has already been symbolized, it has already been narrated. It already exists and can be very useful for us to think about exit strategies, about possible futures.

And the possible future is here right now. It is not the science fiction of building a rocketship and going to Mars, with Elon Musk and his gang. The future is here. The future is about trying to start from this imaginary, not only from it, but getting closer to this imaginary, trying to build possible exit strategies from what we have been experiencing.

For example, when 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, here literature can come in. What does it 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 history, 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, at first glance, might not make sense. It gives meaning where we see none. And that's very comforting. We need that, at times, just to keep going, to get back on our feet, to think in new ways. I think, one of ways that poetry does this, is to make the world strange through language, but in a very radical way.

Science fiction does this, historical fiction does this, and mimetic literature does this too. But, for me, poetry, as an experiment in language, is more powerful, it's more radical, there's something *other* that can be brought to it.

Also, there are times, I think, when poetry gets it right without meaning to, in the sense that just thinking about difference somehow brings it about. So, I don't know, but I think it's a great exercise. Writing and reading poetry, we can learn a lot from how things are put. And it's very interesting how it can provoke and wake 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.

It's hard to imagine utopias because it requires us to more actively mobilize our political imagination. And the imagination is like anything else, we have to train it, so it can be developed. It's not as if I was born creative. No. It's about seeing things that inspire you and so on. Sometimes, a person might have a certain ease with something, but this is also a doing, right? This also applies to having sharper, bolder, political imaginations – [we have to do the work] and to get to know other models, right? But, it's difficult for us to imagine utopias because they always fail, right? Fredric Jameson is known for saying that the best utopias are the ones that fail the best. So, utopias don't last very long, precisely because we start to see them crumble. So, you say, oh, okay, it could be like this or like that and then there comes a time when you think of a principle that you can't resolve. Why is this 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 try to 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 project?

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

The MST, for example, which is one of the movements I admire most in Brazil, is a great exercise in utopia. It's about thinking

that we're going to be able to give people land, housing, food, without poison, without excessive use of pesticides. So, what is this about? 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"<sup>12</sup>  
translated by Djelal Kadir]

*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!

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<sup>12</sup> "Psychology of Composition VIII, translated by Djelal Kadir in *João Cabral de Melo Neto: Selected Poetry 1937-1990* ed. Djelal Kadir (Hanover/London: University Press of New England) 48-49.

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

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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