

'Enchantment' ('Fascinação') by Hélia Correia (transl. by M.M. Lisboa)

Fearful moons.

Dona Sol loved her brother more than she loved her husband, and she disregarded all the voices that spoke of it. Everyone must have been asleep, people must have been resting, the servants too. Everything on God's Earth, Christian souls and animals alike, went to bed with the sun. All shut their eyes, made way for night's creatures, which knocked on the boards of the gates, like waves on a pitch black sea.

But on that exceptional twilight, in which enormous lights flew over the wicked hills to the southwest, a fear, a kind of euphoria which gave rise to screeches and flying skirts, the behaviour of the locals changed.

Well might some say, the most cautious ones, that it was a festival for the Moors, the conquered ones, those who had been expelled from the towns, those destined to see their hands, destroyed by hard labour, dropping from the spade into the snow. A Moorish festival might awaken in the Lord's villagers a longing for the mass murders of yore. The clinking of weaponry in the hay lofts would ring louder than church bells filling the air. The men would snort deep in their throats with a relief more heartfelt than the moans of the sated flesh, as they looked at the weapons, scourged and dented in wars gone-by. And they would hurtle down the slopes, forgiven in anticipation, followed by the slobbering of holy fathers who stumbled behind them.

The moons rose in the sky, scarlet, first two, than four, like the eyes of a pack of wolves shining in the dark. It is true that the Moors worshipped it, that crescent they carried on their flags, like a beast's horns, like a serpent's tongue. But there was no way in which they could have hammered so many stars upon the surface of the sky, and no one accused them of it. And so the hunger for bloodshed went through the houses but found no target upon which to relieve itself. A fear that the world might end, that the graves might yield up their dead, bringing forth last-minute despairs, rotting remains hopeful of a divine cleansing, overcame everyone, like the effect of a new wine.

Dona Sol lifted her skirt a little, but the light from the torch was too weak for any significant disclosure. She stooped and touched her feet, bare despite the winter cold. She caressed the ten toes as though age had frozen them and it pained her. She sighed, leaning against the wall, whose unevenness, so real, so harsh against her flesh, caused her to tremble.

It was not her mother, then, the Lady with Cloven Hooves, who, by means of those moons, was letting Sol know that she, too, had been transformed into an unchained creature from Hell.

She remembered that mother, beautiful as she sang, who had bewitched D. Diogo Lopes and lured him into proposing marriage, to which she had said yes on the condition that he never again made the sign of the cross.

Both of them, she forgetting her cloven hooves, he forgetting to cross himself, lived years in such perfect harmony that two children were born to them, just as it happens in unions upon which God has smiled. Inigo and Sol, such were their names, did not hide away in the kitchens of the manor, and showed their faces to all visitors. From their mother they had inherited that glow which makes redheads in equal measure objects of desire and of wariness. It was from their colouring, which however was not uncommon to humankind, that there rose a glow, a sign that in that household there prevailed a sin, the wretchedness of the heathen. Everyone in the vicinity said so, as people came and went, stopped by waterwells, blessing themselves, unaware that D. Diogo never did likewise.

In a way, when the tragedy took place, it was a relief, at last making sense, as it did, of what had made none before. In the hovels, in church cloisters, among the spirit sellers who came close to the town, the tales captured the attention of even the most hardened audiences, telling of how the wife of the great huntsman had metamorphosed into a demon. Upon an ill-fated hour the knight, angered more greatly than he ought to have been by the death of his favourite hound at the jaws of his wife's bitch, an animal until then entirely tame, upon that ill-fated hour, they said, he had done something imprudent that had transformed the lovely lady into a dark, hairy, wiry creature who flew into the air stretching out her claws towards her children.

What had befallen? As told by the servants, some had seen him swear an oath, others still saw him making the sign of the cross, an over-reaction, one might say, seeing as what was in question was two dogs, without sin although powerfully bloodthirsty. It was as if his hand, set loose and taking advantage of its owner's momentary distraction, had made the sign of the cross wilfully and of its own volition.

His wife released the most frightful howl that any Christian soul ever heard. And, as though dragged upwards, something which led many listeners to shrug in disbelief, since it is well known that demons do not rise, the lady, now blackened, was lifted upwards, the roof opening up sufficiently for her escape. But woe, whether impelled by a mother's heart who from its darkness longs for its young, or by an order from its master, Beelzebub, who craved young flesh for some unspeakable purpose, she stretched towards her children what were now tarantulas' pincers rather than hands. The father, aghast, hurled himself on the boy in a tight grasp and held him to the ground. It is not for me, discreet lady and narrator that I am, to remark upon the choice made by the nobleman. Perhaps he was closest to Inigo, and, as the experienced huntsman that he was, he guessed at the probability of success. Those who told the tale have not specified the relative positions of the four participants. The most reliable one, who put this account in writing, tells us that Dona Sol had already been dragged up from the ground when Diogo Lopes came to his senses and prevented his son's kidnap. Who knows, however, whether, in having to choose, and accustomed as he was to choosing one wager over another, he might have been influenced by the advantages of keeping his male heir rather than the less valuable maiden. Be that as it may, it was Inigo Guerra who remained and we are left gazing upon the air-born Dona Sol, so stunned, so dumbfounded, that her skirt swirled around her, herself swinging like a pendulum, like a body

recently hung from the gallows. She said nothing, nor was any weeping heard from her. Her soft hair, let loose, glowed auburn against her mother. And her gaze fell disconsolately on the desolate eyes of her brother.

Many tales are told of Inigo Guerra. All is known of the ferocity which his entire life drove him into the woods, growling louder than any growling beast. The plunging of the knife, the spilling of blood from the neck, be it of deer or of poachers, gave him a pleasure unmatched by anything ever experienced by his father. For his father had loved the Lady with the Cloven Hoof, and the whole world knows that ardour in bed finds its match that of the hunt. But as for Inigo, in his entire life he had loved no woman.

He was a taciturn man, and that very glow of redheads discouraged any closeness, keeping even shadows at bay.

And what of Dona Sol, wrenched away from her dogs and her playthings, stolen from a brother who had been everything to her? Clutched in her mother's claws she flew through the air for three days and three nights, glimpsing, from on high, valleys and habitations in a way no mortal will ever see them, or not until Satan invents a device that will permit it.

It is not open to us to conjecture the nature of the circumstances in which she grew up. Whether it was in Hell's dark lands, amidst the ashes of spectral regions or in a pagan Eden forgotten by God's annihilating wrath, no Christian soul ever heard it from her lips. To be sure it must have taken place in the company of women, since she was a consummate mistress of the arts of hairdressing and needlework.

Wherever it might be, she wasted away. And her poor mother, much respected amongst the damned for the great powers at her command, could do nothing to dry the tears that ever shone in the girl's eyes. Not parties nor balls nor a thousand suns garlanded upon the night sky; not even the fairies of the woods or the agitated sisterhood of goats succeeded in bringing a smile to her lips. Because, although herself a redhead, Dona Sol was no stranger to the torment of the dark peoples of Hispania, and she knew the pain of love.

She was in love with Inigo, her brother. In the whirlwind of dancing and laughter which ruled her days, to judge by the sabbaths later depicted in books, she conjured as in a mirror the image of the brother chained to the father whose impulse had sundered them. He looked at her, amidst the remains of food and the corpses of dogs, and she rose. And, binding them, the thread of their gaze, with elastic resilience, enduring, overcoming immeasurable distances.

Sol grew up, undergoing the laws of human bodies, because in her, her mother's infernal substance played no part. Her small, pink feet with ten toes drew so much attention that it made her shy.

She dwelt among strangers. Oddly, that which strengthened her in her conviction that she was a Christian was also what swept her away from her church, by which I mean that her longing for the company of her brother was also the one thing which rendered her somewhat diabolical: the brutish desire of incest. In this, she resembled her mother who, in order that she might enjoy the pleasures of the flesh with D. Diogo, behaved all her married life like the most Christian of wives. Now, beyond the laws of both worlds, her maternal love endured.

At the sight of Sol suspended in such a void, she suffered like any woman who, amidst sighs, spies the daughter whose broken heart causes her to pine. Being a lady with cloven hooves, however, she had a deeper understanding than an ordinary mother. And she saw reflected in the maiden's the tormented face of her own son, which, it must be acknowledged, flattered her. Because not only was this love entirely contrary to all Christian rules, but what was loved here was she herself, in the two versions of her own being which she had borne. And she decided that the two should meet, that their innermost selves might rejoice in the encounter. She would return Sol to daylight and to the Earth.

– Be gone, then – she said. And she hurled her upon the castle where she herself had lived happily with D. Diogo and where her son Inigo now ruled.

Another arm, however, that of the Lord, intervened, and pushed Sol away, a further twenty leagues to the south, where the last Christians battled against the enemy. These were sun-drenched whereabouts, where water was scarce and no hunting was to be had other than rabbits and wild donkeys. On a stone ledge beside wilting oleanders, Dona Sol rested her feet. And, raising her lyre, she sang the most poignant of songs.

She had felt the angry blow which had pushed her away from the path that would have led her back home and hurtled her instead to where she now found herself. Loneliness encircled her like a bell jar. She called her mother who appeared, blacker, if that is possible, from rage. Twice, thrice she propelled her daughter with her breath which was the breath of a dragon, towards D. Inigo's bed. Twice, thrice God intervened and slapped her away.

Dona Sol found herself once again in a gentle and sleepy countryside where sometimes there glittered a blade, or what appeared to be a blade. A curse forced her to sing. Moors and Christians heard her and all covered their ears, fearful of the lure of such a seductive tune.

One day Afonso Pena, a warrior weary of war, rode by. He rode at some distance from his servants and, unaccustomedly for him, he dreamed. The dust clinging to blood and sweat gave him the appearance of a leper. He was just returning from the slaughter of ten innocents whom he had come upon in his way. They were women and children who tried to escape, shouting out and raising a dangerous alarm. Although they were no more than infidels in whose death the Lord gloried, at the moment of their deaths their eyes were so sad that he was moved and his will weakened. But then he killed them, dutifully.

For one moment he thought that that deep and shameful reluctance to kill was the sound he heard, like the voice of a beautiful singer. Then he raised his eyes and saw her, so white and auburn-haired that it ought to have acted as a warning, but it did not.

Just as D. Diogo had married the Lady, so too Afonso married Sol. But she imposed no conditions. They led the blameless life of Christians, bowing as priests went by, lying prone in penitence over the tombs of nuns. Dona Sol had one single fault: she liked to ride alone, leaving behind her pages, incapable of such speed. They would watch her ride away and they doubted their own eyes when the lady, in the distance, seemed to fly, as though born aloft in the hot air.

Sometimes she returned very late, stained from the mud swamps and their devotion angered her. "How could we return without your ladyship?" they asked tearfully. They were either very young or already old, they were unsure of their position. They took her to D. Afonso and he dismissed them away to the kitchens. She lay down in disquiet and her husband left her with her ladies-in-waiting. He withdrew to his room to languish in the pains of love. He never discovered that Dona Sol sought her brother and did not find him, because she did not speak of it. Her mouth was dry with desire and nothing sisterly drove her on.

Inigo Guerra lived near-by and was famous among Moors and Christians alike. He inspired fear in all who met him. He hunted beasts and infidels alike in placid silence and even the priests condemned such a solitary way of carrying out God's work. However, no scandal attached to him and for this reason he gave no occasion for gossip. He did not even excite curiosity, even though he lived in semi-seclusion and occupied himself with very mysterious expeditions. It could not even be said that he was feared because fear is the fuel for scandal and no scandal circulated about him.

Dona Sol sought the company of the servants but no rumour offered her any information. And she dared not ask, fearful that the question might reveal the depth of her sinfulness.

She was not known to have a brother, nor parents, nor possessions, nor anyone to vouch for her. She was said to have been the prisoner of Moors since childhood, and to have escaped alone on the occasion of the great slaughter, when the women had relaxed their vigilance for a moment. Such things happened. And D. Afonso did not ask for a dowry or family connections, thinking that in that redhead he was carrying all the gold in the world into his bed.

God prevented the encounter between the siblings, which, were it to happen, would turn them into lovers.

Sometimes they were close to one another, so close as they rode through the woods that their horses reared up and touched the emptiness with their hooves. Yes, emptiness. Because the Lord sent the legions of his angels to thin the air with their wings, turning those places into no-man's

land. Sometimes a deep darkness fell between them though it was noon. Very faraway the Lady with Cloven Hooves stretched her black maw and howled. But she was no match for him.

- You will only be together, my daughter – she said to Sol on one of the occasions they met, late at night, on the terraces – if you become a Lady with Cloven Hooves. What we, the damned, do, is no business of that Other One.
- So what are you waiting for, why don't you change me, mummy? She contemplated her bare feet, and the ten toe nails which glowed in the moonlight. Her mother always wore shoes with a low heel, the colour of wine. She always made herself beautiful for her meetings with her daughter. It was that woman with sapphire-blue eyes and alabaster skin who had once captured the soul of Diogo Lopes.

- That would require deeds you could not imagine, not even in your wildest dreams she replied, and promptly disappeared. It was in the summer and the witches frolicked shamelessly through the heavens, waving their cloven feet and kicking the yellow moons. Dona Sol returned to her chamber where her maids slept on rugs. They, watching her, saw her kneeling and trembling as though a mortal peril threatened her soul. By now D. Afonso feared her so much that he no longer sought her. Though in reality nothing had happened, travellers kept away, avoiding the vicinity of the castle. A woman sang on the ramparts. They say that she looked at her feet as if she had already gone mad.