



## THE LOVE OF SINGULAR MEN VICTOR HERINGER

In the heat of a Rio de Janeiro suburb, a boy is growing up in the midst of football matches, backyard chinwags and his father's past as a doctor under the dictatorship of the 1970s. While still a teenager, our protagonist's family took in another boy, whom his father in particular took under his wing, but the boy was killed a short while later in a violent attack. Our narrator grows up haunted by this troubling past, which

shapes the direction his life is to take. This apparently ordinary story is narrated by Victor Heringer with a masterly touch and a grandeur worthy of Machado de Assis. In flowing and versatile prose, beside this rather unforgiving view of life, the author demonstrates complete assurance in the construction of scenes and characters. His finely-tuned angle on reality cannot fail to move his readers.

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*In this brief, delicate and gripping novel, young writer Victor Heringer positions himself as one of the most unusual and interesting storytellers in Brazilian literature.*

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VICTOR HERINGER

# The Love of Singular Men

Translated by Sophie Lewis



As soon as born the infant cries  
For well his spirit knows  
A little while, and then he dies  
A little while, and down he lies

Kitty Smart, madwoman  
*Hymns for the Amusement of Children* (1771)

A thousand unborn eyes weep with his misery.  
Antinous is dead, is dead for ever

Fernando Pessoa

#### WEATHER REPORT

The temperature of this novel is maintained above 31°C.  
Relative ambient humidity: never less than 59%.  
Wind: never higher than 6km/h in any direction.

The sea is very far from this book.

1.

In the beginning our planet was hot, yellowish and smelled of stale beer. The ground was slick with viscous, boiling mud.

The first things to surface in the world were the suburbs of Rio de Janeiro, even before the volcanos and sperm whales, before Portugal invaded, before President Getúlio Vargas ordered the construction of social housing. The neighbourhood of Queím, where I was born and grew up, was one of those suburbs. Nestled between Engenho Novo and Andaraí, it was created out of that primordial clay stuck together in various forms: lone dogs, flies and steep hills, a train station, almond trees and shacks and houses, bars and weapons depots, haberdasheries and local lottery stands and an enormous wasteland set aside for the cemetery. But everything remained empty for now: there were no people.

They soon came. The streets collected so much dust that man had no choice but to exist: he was required to sweep them. And in the afternoons, to sit on the verandas and moan about his poverty, spread rumours about the others and stare at the pavements encrusted with sunlight, and the buses on the way home from work coating everything with dirt over again.

2.

I read in one of my school books that, close to the very hottest regions of the world, there was a people that hated the sun. The men would spit abuse at the dawn five times a day and when dusk fell they would pray, happy at last. As soon as they saw the first rays, the women would cover their heads and eyes with a rough cloth, just as they did when burying their dead, and only at nightfall would they uncover themselves. Thanks to the sun, this people was black and their continent was Africa.

Despite being so white I'm almost green, I'm a true child of this people. I've hated the sun since childhood, yet I've spent my life being licked by it, like a puppy. I've ended up tolerating its presence; once or twice I've come to believe I loved it, but no: I hate the sun. I mutter obscenities at it five times a day.

I was thirteen years old over the summer holidays of 1976. The summer hadn't even properly got started and already my skin was peeling for the third time. My arms and shoulders, inflamed with tiny bubbles, would soon come out in strips of dead flesh. My nose earned a fresh coat of charring. My roasted head was too tender for me to comb my hair. My back too painful for sleep. It was already almost noon.

We'd been at the pool all morning. My youngest sister Joana was diving and floating about and giggling with the top half of her bikini off, although her nipples were already nicely braised. I couldn't swim. I had to stay sat on the edge with my feet in the water and my thighs resting on the hot granite, watching the sun nibble away at the shadows on the ground little by little. Sitting on the first-floor veranda, Maria Aína was watching us while Paulina, the maid, looked after lunch or the dust.

According to my boyish calculations, Maria Aína must have been 279 years old. She was our neighbour who came to look after us when our mum asked her to. (I don't know if she was paid.) She'd been born right here in Queím, she lived and died here, in a shack that had been here since the neighbourhood was just one great farm. She'd never left Rio – the furthest she been in all her life was Jurema, where the indigenous people's souls live.

She breathed the long, whistling breaths of an aged beast and had seen everyone who was alive being born, even dad. Magrela, whose parents were slaves, used to speak in our great-great-grandparents' language when she didn't want us to understand. She had only to look at young green fruit and it would ripen. She used to make pumpkin sweets in September, on the feast day of Saints Cosmas and Damian, and brought them to us still warm. I have never forgotten that taste, the crunch of the shell as it broke and, inside, the slightly gritty, pulpy cream. We were first to get to eat them, after the *erês*: she would leave a bowlful deep in the jungle for them. The sweets used to shrivel up and vanish. That's how spirits eat.

Maria Aína liked me because I was born as she was: with the umbilical cord wrapped around my neck. Years later, only days before she died, she told me: "Whoever is born like that, it's because they stay solid on the edge of peril, *ossí* Camilo."

3.

Joana came up to the edge and splashed water on my thighs to soothe the burns. She got out of the pool and set up a parasol to protect me. I remember the face she made looking after me so well: a tight smile, constrained by the lack of some teeth, her eyebrows shaped by sad solemnity, because I wasn't able to walk as well as she was. I have a weak leg. Monoparesis of the lower left limb. Crippled, but not badly. At five I was already limping, at eight I had crutches.

During the holidays, I'd hide the crutches and use a guava-wood staff that was almost as tall as me, with a crook at the top. Like that I felt wild, like a vagabond or a shaman, or an ordinary boy. (Most of the time, I had to hold on with both hands.) This very stick of wood today serves me as a cane, aged and leaning on it. It belonged to some relative of Maria Aína; she gave it to me. I don't know who made it, but it's one of the things I love most. When I'm in a delicate mood, I can feel the soul in everything made of that wood.

I cannot eat guavas.

Joana jumped back into the water. She swam about aimlessly

for a few moments then swam back to me. She smiled, showing her neat little teeth.

I understood that smile. She wanted to tell me something. My sister would die of shame over her toothlessness, but she couldn't help smiling when she wanted to reveal or be party to secrets. She would smile to show that her mouth too was free of mystery, that her tongue could never slander anyone. She was an open-hearted girl. (When mum died, at the beginning of the noughties, Joana smiled from ear to ear, then gave me the news.)

"Mum didn't water the plants. She didn't water them today, again," she said, and put on her private detective face. To prove it, she climbed out of the pool, hopped over to the small garden and returned with some fern leaves. I poked one leaf, which flaked away in my hand. The sun had scorched mum's garden. She can't have watered it for weeks.

Joana lobbed me a question with her eyebrows. I replied with fish-lips. She sighed, imitating the adults, arms akimbo, eyes to the heavens. She knew a good deal more than I and, even so, she didn't know anything.

I was afraid of just one thing: if the plants were starting to dry up, they would soon go yellow. If they all went yellow, Autumn would have arrived early and the summer would be over. Without summer, there wouldn't be any summer holidays. We'd have to go back to school.

We didn't even guess at the crisis that had for months been turning our parents' marriage upside down. We didn't even know who was running the country. We were living under the bizarre dictatorship of childhood: we looked without seeing, listened without hearing, spoke but were never taken seriously. But we were happy throughout the regime. The weave of our small lives was dense and hid us completely, an eyeless burqa.



The first tear opened up that day. The noise of dad's car reached even us. Light was to invade our little hidey hole. Vrm-varroom, that was the Corcel taking a corner. It stopped in before the front gate and roared again, vra-vroom, demanding to be let in. No one came to let him in. Mum appeared on the veranda, said a few words to Maria Aína, made as if to stay but then went back inside. Dad, who was climbing over the iron gate, didn't see her. He parked in beside the pool, honked and the sun shone full on the mucus-yellow bodywork of the Corcel, and right into our eyes. 3,5

4.

Maria Aína stood up bit by bit, her frame weary and resistant, and stood there looking on from above. Joana brought my staff and helped me stand up, her toothless smile begging to know what presents dad would give us, as he always came back from his travels with presents. He stepped out of the car, slammed the door, snorted as he straightened his trousers. Heat. The Corcel was turned off and snoring asthmatically before going completely to sleep. My sister gave a shriek and made a dash wrapped in her towel.

Only then did I see his head framed by the back window. The shaved head of a boy as much of a boy as I was.

But I had hair and I wasn't that milky coffee colour. I was red in the summer and greenish-white in winter. His head must always be that in-between colour, a nothing colour with extra watery milk. He looked strong – I was thinner – but breakable, limp. But his eyes were the most delicate part, like a bird's neck, the eyes of a little boy realising he's caught in a rat-trap.

My first instinct was to hate him. I wanted to poke out eyes, make him disappear from the face of the planet. I don't know why. Hatred has no reason or object. Love has an object but hatred

doesn't. Love's purpose is the perpetuation of the human race; it protects us from dying out and from the worst loneliness. Hatred is bigger, has longer tentacles and speaks with more mouths than love. Love is a physiological function; hatred is a sublime and furious hunger. It's the reason why we are the dominant species on the planet. Hatred is the vector of our species.

I hated dad's voice saying, "You can come, come here," and I hated the boy's slowness as he slunk out from behind the half-open car door, and I hated his name – "His name is Cosme," said dad, and I hated the baby-blue t-shirt he was wearing (bought by my dad, for sure), and his awkward shuffle into the protecting arc of *my* father, who cuddled him with those great hands of his. I hated him with a historical hatred, in a language that only Maria Aína would know and which I'd never decode.

With her towel wrapped around up to her bare chest, my sister walked up to the boy haughtily, stared him in the face and gave a suspicious hi. He said hi in return, eyes pinned to the floor, and I hated the frightened little voice he had. She said her name was Joana and held out her hand. He accepted it, bowing nobly. Dad burst into fits over his mini grown-ups, and looked over at me, still with tears of laughter in his eyes. Then I realised that I was only wearing my trunks, vulnerable, practically naked and leaning on the guava-wood staff like some dreadful lemur.

I must have been ashamed, for I thought I heard mum's voice. From inside the house, mum was calling my name. An everyday call, as if she wanted me to come and try on a new pair of pyjamas or drink cherry cough mixture, which was delicious and I used to drink it without a fuss. Even imaginary, her call was irresistibly magnetic, more powerful than the terror I felt at dad's voice which was big and reached further than a block. I had to go. I excused myself, without looking at this new boy Cosme, and hobbled to-

wards the house. Dad didn't try to stop me. Boys belong first to their mothers.

“Tell her we're here.”

I turned to them and shaded my eyes with my hand, to protect them from the cursed sun. Then I asked if this was our new little brother. I asked to hurt them. Everyone focused on dad's face.

He made as if to begin explaining but ended up explaining nothing: “Well, he's, he's not...” Cosme hung onto those few words. His mouth hung half-open, as if he'd seen a chameleon for the first time.

5.

Rua Enone Queirós, formerly 47, Avenida Suaçu. My childhood address. Two floors, four bedrooms, one master suite, six toilets. Living room and dining room, verandas, maids' rooms. A spacious backyard with a swimming pool. An avocado tree, a palm tree (the palm was mine, the avocado Joana's), various shrubs, an electric fence, undesirable creatures, lots of insects, now and then a skunk. A family neighbourhood, without any slums too nearby. The full range of shopping and a bus that stopped outside.

These days, it's two blocks from one of the biggest malls in the North Zone and four buildings along from the apartment I'm living in (2bds, 1 ensuite). After more than thirty years living far from Queím, I returned. I want to die right here where I was born. We all have a yearning for symmetry.

The neighbourhood was almost all knocked down. In Rua Enone, all that was left of the old buildings, from the time of the Queím farm, was the façade of the former slave quarters; that was pulled down by the city heritage people. And only the façade remained: inside it had become a car park. Here and there plate-glass buildings are rising up instead of the aging shambles of

houses. The streets have been tarmacked and the corners brushed up by Light, the electricity company. Everything has shrunk.

This city suffers a fever which from time to time gives rise to these visions of former glory. *Knock it down, we're going to start again from scratch!* This is the modernising parasite, the malaria from Miami, which was once the malaria of Paris. In past deliria, they tore a mountain out of the land in order to bury a section of the sea, they cleaned it all up. In the next craze, I don't doubt they'll clean up all the citizens too.

Oh well.

The house I was born in now belongs to the owner of a famous construction materials shop. It's worth a lot more now. If Joana and I hadn't sold it when mum died, I'd be much better off. But what's done is done. The relatives of the people who owned the farm which gave its name to the neighbourhood must be thinking the same thing: Ah! If only we hadn't chopped it all up into parcels and sold it to those worthless little people.



RENATO PARADA

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**VICTOR HERINGER** was born in Rio de Janeiro in 1988. He writes fiction, poetry and essays, and contributes a fortnightly column to *Pessoa* magazine. His first novel, *Glory* (2012), won the 2013 Jabuti Prize. He has also published *The Writer Victor Heringer* (2015), a conceptual book of photos, and *Automatograph* (2011), a collection of poetry, among other books.

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