

THE BOOK OF CHAMELEONS¹

(an excerpt)

José Eduardo Agualusa

THE SMALL WORLD

JOSÉ BUCHMANN laid the photographs out on the big living room table, large A4 copies, black and white on matt paper. Almost all of them showed the same man: an old man, tall, slender, with a mass of white hair that tumbled down to his chest in thick plaits then disappeared into the heavy strands of his beard. As he appeared in the photographs - dressed in a dark shirt, in tatters, on which you could still make out a sickle and hammer on his chest, and with his head held high, his eyes ablaze with fury - he'd remind you of some olden-day prince now fallen into disgrace.

'I've followed him everywhere these past few weeks, morning to night. Want to see? Let me show you the city from the perspective of a wretched dog.'

- a) The old man, seen from behind, walking along disembowelled streets.
- b) Ruined buildings, their walls pockmarked with bullet-holes, thin bones exposed. A poster on one of the walls, announcing a concert by Julio Iglesias.
- c) Boys playing football, tall buildings all around them. They're terribly thin, almost translucent. They're immersed, suspended in the dust like dancers on a stage. The old man is sitting on a rock, watching them. He's smiling.
- d) The old man is sleeping in the shade of the husk of a military tank that's eaten away by rust.
- e) The old man is standing up against a statue of the President, urinating.
- f) The old man, swallowed up by the ground.
- g) The old man emerges from the sewer like an ungovernable God, the unkempt hair glowing in the soft morning light.

'I've sold this story to an American magazine. I'm off to New York tomorrow. I'll be there a week or two. Longer, perhaps. And you know what I'm planning to do there?'

Félix Ventura wasn't expecting the answer. He shook his head.

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'But that's crazy! You do realise how ridiculous that is, don't you?'

José Buchmann laughed. A serene laugh. Maybe he was just joking:

*'A long time ago, when I was in Berlin, I was surprised to receive a telephone call from an old friend of mine, an old schoolmate from my beloved Chibia. He told me that two days earlier he'd left Lubango, he'd travelled by motorcycle to Luanda, and from Luanda flown to Lisbon, and then from Lisbon he'd set off for Germany - he was fleeing from the war. He had a cousin who was meant to be meeting him, but there was no one there, and so he decided to try and find his cousin's house - he left the airport, and got lost. He was anxious. He didn't speak a word of English - still less of German - and he'd never been in a big city before. I tried to calm him down. *Where are you calling from?* I asked. *From a phone box,* he replied. *I found your number in my address book and decided to call.* I agreed: *You did the right thing. Stay where you are. Just tell me what you can see around you, tell me anything you can see that looks unusual, that attracts your attention, so I can get a sense of where you are. Anything strange?* I asked. *Well, on the other side of the road there's a machine with a light that goes on and off, and changes colour, green, red, green, and in it there's a picture of a little man walking.'**

He told the whole story imitating his friend's voice, the broad accent, the anxiety of the unfortunate man on the other end of the line. He laughed again - uproariously this time - till he had tears in his eyes. He asked Félix for a glass of water. As he drank he began to calm down:

*'Yes, old man, I know New York is a very big city. But if I was able to find a traffic light in Berlin, and a phone box opposite it, with an *acorrentado* - a man in chains... that's what they call people from Chibia, did you know that?... If I was able to find a phone box in Berlin with an *acorrentado* inside it, waiting for me, I should in New York be able to find a decorator called Eva Miller - my mother! God, my mother! Within the fortnight I'm sure I'll find her.'*

My dear friend,

I do hope this letter finds you in excellent health. I realise that what I'm writing you isn't really a letter, but an email. No one writes letters any more these days. But to tell you the truth, I do miss those days when people communicated by exchanging letters - real letters, on good paper, to which you might add a drop of perfume, or attach dried flowers, coloured feathers, a lock of hair. I feel a flicker of nostalgia for those days, when the postman used to bring our letters to the house, and we were glad, surprised to see what we'd received, what we opened and read, and at the care we took when we replied, choosing each word, weighing it up, assessing its light, feeling its fragrance, because we knew that every word would later be weighed up, studied, smelled, tasted, and that some might even escape the maelstrom of time, to be re-read many years later. I can't stand the rude informality of emails. I always feel horror, physical horror, metaphysical and moral horror, when I see that 'Hi!' - how can we possibly take seriously anyone who addresses us like that? Those European travellers who spent the nineteenth century travelling across the backwoods of Africa always used to refer jokingly to the elaborate greetings exchanged by the native guides when - during the course of a long journey - they happened to cross paths with a friend or relative in some favourably shady spot. The white man would wait impatiently, until after several long minutes of laughter, interjections and clapping had passed, he finally interrupted the guide:

‘So what did the men say? Have they seen Livingstone or not?’

‘Oh, no, they haven’t said anything about that, boss,’ the guide explained. ‘They were just saying hello.’

I expect just that time-span from a letter. Let us pretend that this is a letter, and that the postman has just handed it to you. Perhaps it would smell of the fear that nowadays people sweat and breathe in this vast, rotting apple. The sky here is dark, and low. I keep making wishes that clouds like these might float over to Luanda, a perpetual mist which would suit your sensitive skin; and wishes too that your business carries on, full steam ahead. I’m sure it must do, as we all so need a good past, especially those people who misgovern us in our sad country, as they govern it.

I always think of the lovely Ângela Lúcia (I do think she is beautiful) as I beat my way rather disheartened through the anxious chaos of these streets. Perhaps she’s right, perhaps the important thing is to bear witness not to the darkness (as I’ve always done) but to the light. If you’re with our friend do tell her that she did manage at least to sow the seeds of doubt in me, and that in the past few days I’ve lifted my eyes up to the sky more often than ever before in my life. By lifting our gaze we don’t see the mud, we don’t see the little creatures scabbling in it. So what do you think, Félix — is it more important to bear witness to beauty, or to denounce horror?

Maybe my careless philosophising is beginning to annoy you. If you’ve read this far I imagine you’re beginning to understand what it was like being one of those European travellers I referred to earlier:

‘So what does this guy want? Did he find Livingstone or didn’t he?’

No, I didn’t. By consulting the telephone directories I was able to find six Millers called ‘Eva’, but none had been in Angola. I then decided to put an ad in Portuguese in five popular newspapers. Not one response. But then I did find my way onto the trail...I don’t know if you’re familiar with the Small World Theory, also known as Six Degrees of Separation. In 1967 the American sociologist Stanley Milgram of Harvard University set up an odd challenge for three hundred residents of Kansas and Nebraska. His hope was that these people - using only information obtained from friends and acquaintances by letter (this being in the days when people still exchanged letters) - would be able to make contact with two people in Boston, for whom they knew only their name and profession. Sixty people agreed to take part in the challenge. Three succeeded. When he came to analyse the results, Milgram realised that there were on average just six contacts between the originator and the target. If his theory was correct, I’m now just two people away from my mother. Everywhere I go I bring with me a cutting from the U.S. edition of Vogue, the one you gave me, which reproduced an Eva Miller watercolour. The report was signed by a journalist by the name of Maria Duncan. She left the magazine years ago, but the Editor still remembered her. After a lot of hunting around I was able to track down a telephone number for her in Miami, where Maria lived when she still worked for Vogue. My call was answered by a nephew of hers, who told me his aunt no longer lived there. After the death of her husband she’d gone back to the city of her birth, New York. She gave me the address. And would you believe the irony? - it’s a block from the hotel where I was staying. I went to see her yesterday. Maria Duncan is an elderly lady with scrawny gestures, purple hair, and a strong, certain voice that

seems to have been stolen from a much younger woman. I suspect that loneliness weighs heavily on her - it's an ill that befalls old people, and so common in big cities. She welcomed me with some interest, and when she learned of the reason for my visit became even more excited. A son looking for his mother- bound to touch any feminine heart. 'Eva Miller?'- no, the name didn't mean anything to her. I showed her the cutting from Vogue and she went off to fetch a box of old photographs, magazines and cassettes, and the two of us spent hours rummaging through it all, like two children in their grandparents' attic. It paid off. We found a photo of her with my mother. And more importantly, we found a letter that Eva had written to her to thank her for sending the copy of the magazine. The envelope bore an address in Cape Town. I imagine Eva had been based in Cape Town before settling in New York. But I fear that in order to find her here - or wherever she now is - I'll have to retread her whole tortured path. I fly to Johannesburg tomorrow, on my way back to Luanda; it's just a step or two from Johannesburg to Cape Town. It may be a most important step for me. Wish me luck, and receive an affectionate greeting from your true friend,

José Buchmann

THE SCORPION

Out of habit, and out of genetic predisposition (because bright light bothers me), I sleep during the day, all day. Sometimes, however, something will wake me up - a noise, a ray of sunlight - and I'm forced to make my way across the discomfort of the daytime, running along walls till I find a deeper crack, a deeper damper crack where I can, once again, rest. I don't know what it was that woke me this morning. I think I was dreaming about something severe (I can never remember faces, only feelings). Perhaps I was dreaming about my father. The moment I awoke I saw the scorpion. He was just a few centimetres away. Motionless. Closed in a shell of hatred like a mediaeval warrior in his armour. And then he fell upon me. I jumped back, climbed the wall, in a flash, until I was up at the ceiling. I could hear quite clearly the dry tap of the sting against the floor - I can hear it still.

I remember something my father said once when we were celebrating - with only pretend joy, I like to think - the death of someone we disliked:

'He was evil, and he didn't know it. He didn't know what evil was. That is to say he was pure evil.'

That's what I felt at precisely the moment that I opened my eyes and the scorpion was there.

THE MINISTER

After the episode with the scorpion I wasn't able to get back to sleep. This meant that I was able to witness the arrival of the Minister. A short, fat man, ill at ease in his body. To watch him you'd think he'd been shortened only moments earlier and hadn't yet become accustomed to his new height... He was wearing a dark suit, with white stripes, which didn't really fit and which troubled him. He lowered himself with a sigh of relief into the wicker chair, with his fingers wiped the thick sweat on his face, and before Félix had the chance to offer him a drink he shouted to Old Esperança:

‘A beer, woman! Nice and cold!’

My friend raised an eyebrow, but restrained himself. Old Esperança brought the beer. Outside, the sun was melting the tarmac.

‘So you don’t have air conditioning in this place then?!’

This he said with horror. He drank up the beer in large gulps, greedily, and asked for another. Félix told him to make himself at home - wouldn’t he like to take off his jacket, perhaps? The Minister accepted. In his shirtsleeves he looked even fatter, even shorter, as though God had carelessly sat down on his head.

‘Do you have anything against air conditioning?’ he joked. *‘Does it offend your principles?...’*

This sudden camaraderie irritated my friend even more. He coughed, a bark of a cough, then went off to fetch the file he’d prepared. He opened it on the little mahogany table - slowly, theatrically - in a ritual I’d observed so many times. It always worked. The Minister, anxious, held his breath as my friend revealed his genealogy to him:

‘This is your paternal grandfather, Alexandre Torres dos Santos Correia de Sá e Benevides, a direct descendent of Salvador Correia de Sá e Benevides, the famous carioca who in 1648 liberated Luanda from the Dutch...’

‘Salvador Correia?! The fellow they named the high school after?’

‘That’s the one.’

‘I thought he was Portuguese! Or a politician from the capital, or some colonial; otherwise why did they change the name of the school to Mutu Ya Kevela?’

‘I suppose it was because they wanted an Angolan hero - in those days we needed our own heroes like we needed bread to feed us. Though, if you’d rather I can fix up another grandfather for you. I could arrange documents to show that you’re descended from Mutu ya Kevela himself, or N’Gola Quiluanze, or even Queen Ginga herself. Would you rather that?’

‘No, no, I’ll keep the Brazilian. Was the fellow rich?’

‘Extremely. He was cousin to Estácio de Sá, founder of Rio de Janeiro, who – poor man – met a sad end, when the Tamoio Indians caught him with a poisoned arrow full in the face. But anyway, what you will want to know is that during the years he spent here, running this city of ours, Salvador Correia met an Angolan woman – Estefania – the daughter of one of the most prosperous slave-traders of the day, Felipe Pereira Torres dos Santos, and fell in love with her. And from that love – an illicit love I hasten to add, as the governor was a married man - from that love three sons were born. I’ve got the family tree here, look – it’s a work of art.’

The Minister was astonished:

‘Fantastic!’

And indignant:

‘Damn! Whose stupid idea was it to change the name of the high school?! A man who expelled the Dutch colonists, an internationalist fighter of our brother-country, an Afro-antecedent, who gave us one of the most important families in this country - that is to say, mine. No, old man, it won’t do. Justice must be restored. I want the high school to go back to being called Salvador Correia, and I’ll fight for it with all my strength. I’ll have a statue of my grandfather cast to put outside the entrance. A really big statue, in bronze, on a block of white marble. (Yes, marble - don’t you think?) Salvador Correia, on horseback, treading with contempt on the Dutch colonisers... The sword’s important. I’ll buy a real sword - he did use a sword, didn’t he? Yes, a real sword, bigger than the one Afonso Henriques has got. And you can write something for the gravestone. Something along the lines of *Salvador Correia, Liberator of Angola* with the gratitude of the nation and the Marimba Union Bakeries - something like that, or something else, whatever, but something respectful - yes, hell, respectful! Have a think about it and get back to me. Oh and look, I’ve brought you some sweets, ovos moles from Aveiro - do you like *ovos moles*? These are the best *ovos moles* in Aveiro, though in fact they’re “Made in Cacuaco”, the best *OVOS moles* in all Africa, in the whole world - even better than the real thing. Made by my master-patisserie, who’s from Ilhavo - do you know Ilhavo? You ought to. You people spend two days in Lisbon and think you know Portugal. But try them, try them, then tell me if I’m right or not. So I’m descended from Salvador Correia – caramba! - and I never knew it till now. Excellent. My wife will be ever so pleased.’

The narrator, a lizard, lives on Felix Ventura’s living-room wall; Felix is a man who sells pasts – if you don’t like yours, he can come up with an entirely new one for you – full of better memories, , with complete lineage (as distinguished as you like, photos and all.