Also by John Mateer

Poetry

Burning Swans
The Civic Poems
Anachronism
(Echo)
Spitting Out Seeds
Mister! Mister! Mister!
Barefoot Speech
Loanwords
Makwerekwere
The Ancient Capital of Images / Imaji no Koto
The Brewery Site: Six Poems
Words in the Mouth of a Holy Ghost
Southern Barbarians
The Republic of the East
Elsewhere
The Travels / Viagens
Ex-white / Einmal-weiss: South African Poems
The Azanians
This Dark Book / Este Livro Escuro
Unbelievers, or ‘The Moor’

Prose

Semar’s Cave: an Indonesian Journal
The Quiet Slave: a History in Eight Episodes
Sure I was with Isis, but I told her my name was João.

—Mário Cesariny de Vasconcelos
SAMPLER
Merely one of the 108 Buddhist sins erased as the bell tolls, gonging in the icy New Year night. That team of monks stepping back, silent, from the released pole under the TV spotlights. From in the crowd it seemed to João the shattering of skulls numberless and holy, pure extinction, as if all the many thousands seeing the bell, the millions, knew by telepathy what was lurking in his soul, that ghost. He closed his eyes, felt lost, slowly recalling, within the depth of his dim, honeycomb body, arriving at a temple in the far mountains of Honshu. Pilgrims were already there, kneeling, and the monk, blessing them with a long leafy branch, beckoned him in to also pay homage to the transparent box, the mummified saint. João heard: *He could also be you...*
Sublime, as the cliché would have that aria,
at breakfast in a Brisbane cafe. Which? João can’t remember
the opera, though he does, well, the Singaporean
poet Cyril, the singer. Years later João would read, when young,
he had been an escort as well as an excellent student of voice,
confiding in the interview how he used to give sympathy
fucks to men whose lives seemed so desultory
the carnal was their only kindness. Recalling Cyril, not as castrato,
as genuine angel, João is reflecting that Sunyata, or Infinity,
is such a being, who in the midst of breakfasting poets
brings La Traviata and Brisvegas into a synergy
that can only be listen to unspeaking, marvelled
at. That moment was real, João feels, and worldly.
He had thought: I hope they’ve noticed, too. Not just me.
João keeps seeing in his mind that monochrome picture of kindly Joanne, his then girlfriend, inside a dark caravel, a real, timber caravel. She was unamused, he could tell even then, by the surrealism of a furniture-maker in Victoria reclaiming lumber from coastal windbreaks to spend a decade of weekends building his ghost ship, dreaming of sailing first to New Zealand, taking things easy, then to on Timor, and later, of course, to Lisbon. In contemplating Joanne’s face, she seems awkward, unhappy. Though João’s remembering the comic pleasure of that weekend: Warrnambool totally Portuguese for the festival, Lusitania’s secret celebration of discovering Australia; on the windward side of a knoll overlooking the town, their small padrão. Maybe, in her clear, calm eyes, she had already lost her João.
João left the theatre totally appalled after hearing Rushdie charm the audience with a sporting quip and the repartee needed to retain the attention of fame. A million years ago João had bought *The Satanic Verses*, reading and reading the illicit: *This is Literature!* But he, too, was now among them, even if still an amateur poet in his own heart. He was staying in a downtown hotel with Vikram, whom he’d meet again in Sri Lanka, our João’s only festival act had been talking with ghetto kids, Afro-American, Polish, Mexican, about the Poem, its ironic magic, while their teacher, scowling, observed him, the White African. One of those kids asked if he knew Swahili or Zulu. There João was again disappointing, untrue, somehow always a ghost, slipping out of sight.
Yvonne, taller than a reed, willowy as a model, was speaking, not kiSwahili, her gentle accent in the Queen’s English, as she led João through an ideal museum of African art. She was saying recently she had been to Ethiopia, loved the churches, the people, that he should go: “They will love you: a poet, sensitive. Besides, you are African, too.” Suddenly that infinitive was in his mind like the black bee of love-interest buzzing in from a Mogul miniature: *To be African, able to move through cities knowingly…* They stopped at an Ethiopian shield of elephant hide, looking close. Then João had an intimation of what he had been, boasting of another life. And of a future, too, he saw Yvonne, in Zanzibar, reciting this poem for you.
Coral arranged for them to meet at Casa del Poeta, a dim vacancy wherein João found the usual book-table and that intimacy of microphone and word, everything a skull, crystal, secretive, almost invincible. Unlike the publisher and Ruth, the elderly, bespectacled lady, English but American, who had once translated Sophia de Mello, really knowing only Spanish... João'd read those yellowed pages, their Hellenic, bleached, midday hallucinations, readying himself for his Portuguese beachcombing, Warrnambool’s padrão. Ruth was astonished he had. Then, unintentionally, he was invited to a penthouse dinner – huge steak! – among the starry views, Aztec antiquities. In conversation with her husband, the Lonely Long-Distance Runner, whose novel João hadn’t yet read, he was informed they’d just arrived, from Senora, in a drug-dealer’s plane.
The bliss of lime soup from the Yucatán Peninsula
tasted in an upper floor restaurant a few blocks from the Zócalo;
or an African-American, on paseo, with his tiny local wife and cigar;
or the granite snake coiled mandala-like for Joào’s
edification in one of DF’s vast museums: all are midst the squalor
of his thoughts. Very near his hotel in Zona Rosa,
on a crowded pavement, he has a déjà vu moment,
mistaking himself for Christopher Columbus in his befuddlement,
his colossal, historical – actually continental – error. Joào’s memory
is of an identical street, but in Medan, Sumatra,
its bitter blue exhaust smoke, small talkative people,
each recognising him as the young, lost poet
Joào really isn’t. Yet Chapultepec Park was his favourite moment,
eternally repeated, being greeted with the revolutionary: “Amigo!”
Anna said she hadn’t wanted to wake you to see the first snowflakes. This she told you after she woke. You had been staring for hours over the Manhattan roofs and the Hudson, out into your long lost Canadian childhood. She had exclaimed “João!” on arriving, exhausted, sleepy, and you had entered one another like waves.

Last night: Anna and João on the Empire State, alone, icy minutes before midnight. Yesterday: mistaken for a Sugarbabe and Daddy in a West Village street, though she was the more worldly, and you lost, near nameless.

Then: Anna laughing, sneaking into your hotel-room in Chicago, Anna forever doing cartwheels down an autumnal avenue, Anna, gymnast, gun-savvy, the Californian who almost loved you.
On the beach below Diamond Head the lifeguard was confessing he hadn’t used cocaine for a year. João noted tattooed hipster chicks here for the weekend, from Brooklyn. The usual, overheard, reassured him Hawaii, like the rest of the US of A, was a movie. Though this one has the Natives, before lunch in a Filipino restaurant, singing a hymn, praying for the bounty of Coke and pork adobo, has a dark store in Honolulu filled with hibiscus bouquets, and, on the Big Island, not only the small stone memorial where Captain Cook was killed but also that empty volcanic crater, vast as God’s ear, surrounded by miles of starry black sand. Deep in this tropical cinema João, somewhere, swam with turtles and nymphs, followed endless, lava-strewn roads.
Naples begins with two Nigerians on a train. João watched them. One a resident, the other visiting with his Spanish wife. They greeted, in great detail explaining origins, biographies. When the local was aghast, hearing his brother had been in Rome, but hadn’t seen the Vatican, the Poet, secretly from eGoli, repressed his smile.
“You must be careful here. Napoli is worse than New York, much worse.” The local was shaking his head, likely to enumerate crimes and suffering. Their foreboding talk was forgotten on João’s stepping from the station, out into a bustling street lined with African stalls leading him into an inexplicable, baroque devastation of hot days and churches and that uncared for museum where the statue of a goddess sprouted dog’s teats.
Boatmen, stout, sweating, enjoying being crass locals indifferent to the tourists they were rowing, paddled in slow circles at the mouth of the Blue Grotto, complicit with the hot sunlight, wasting time. To João, this fiddle, as a Joburger would have called it, was defeating his hope on coming to Capri – his only reason for visiting this boutique of an island, to revisit this cave. Shouting, the rowers were saying they can’t enter unless they wait, though the heat will kill the tourists... The Grotto, luminous, turquoise in João’s mind, was where his father, who couldn’t swim, hesitating, trembled, having to leap from one boat to another, before again day would blind them with the obvices. His father, straining in that moment, and João, a swimmer, six years old, was wanting to hold him, wanting his dear Dad to be forever unafraid.