

## **Tunes, and Other Matters (like Potatoes): Talking about Poetry and Life**

Ana Luísa Amaral

Plenary Lecture,

Institute for World Literature, 29 June 2015

*Before all, I would like to thank the organizers, David Damrosch and Helena Buescu. Also, a very special thanks to Margaret Jull Costa, for the wonderful translations. Thinking about the recent events in Greece, I would like to dedicate this lecture to the Greek people.*

---

### **1. Tunes and other matters (like potatoes). And love.**

I will start by reading two poems of mine.

#### **TUNES**

I make my excuses, saying my daughter needs to sleep  
and I lie down beside her,  
my head sharing her pillow.

Outside, the voices, in symphony, are  
shrill violins, neatly played.  
I detach myself from their sounds  
and struggle to hear something different.

Bartók to the others.

My daughter sleeps.  
A sudden hope: let her not be, like me, in dissonance  
with other things and other sounds,  
a proud,  
sad Bartók.

Nor like them,  
a neatly played,  
a well-tuned violin.

This is a poem about love and legacy, its point of departure the idea of “tunes” (musical, poetic and political) and the desire to inhabit a place made neither of consonances nor of dissonances. Consonance means harmony, to be in tune; but it can also mean to agree, to consent, to comply. Dissonance means disharmony, to be out of tune; but it can also mean to disagree, to dissent, to be an outsider. Both places involve a high price – to observe rules, or to resist; the resolution of these places: a paradox. The second poem’s title is “Testament”:

I’m about to fly off somewhere  
and my fear of heights plus myself  
finds me resorting to tranquillisers  
and having confused dreams

If I should die  
 I want my daughter always to remember me  
 for someone to sing to her even if they can't hold a tune  
 to offer her pure dreams  
 rather than a fixed timetable  
 or a well-made bed

To give her love and the ability  
 to look inside things  
 to dream of blue suns and brilliant skies  
 instead of teaching her how to add up  
 and how to peel potatoes

To prepare my daughter  
 for life  
 if I should die on a plane  
 and be separated from my body  
 and become a free-floating atom in the sky

Let my daughter  
 remember me  
 and later on say to her own daughter  
 that I flew off into the sky  
 and was all dazzle and contentment  
 to see that in her house none of the sums added up  
 and the potatoes were still in their sack forgotten  
 entire

Focusing, like the first one, on the idea of bearing witness and on integrity as legacy, this poem is also about hope for a future where domestic chores need no longer to be ascribed to women, where gender roles and binding norms become unnecessary. (Notice that the word in Portuguese is “*íntegra*”, impossible to translate into English – but Margaret Jull Costa did a wonderful job, by using the word “*entire*”, which beautifully corresponds to “*íntegra*”). It speaks about a time when the materiality of potatoes and the one of poetry don't need to exclude each other. Written around 1988, both poems belong to my first book, *Minha Senhora de Quê*, published in 1990, the year I went for a long period to Brown University, as a Visiting Scholar, to work on my PhD on Emily Dickinson. I was then starting to reflect on feminist theory and there is another poem of that same period, titled “*Metamorphoses*”, that reads

Let there be light  
 in this profane world  
 which is my place  
 of work:  
 a pantry.

Other women were once  
 shut up in attics,  
 but I bustle around in the pantry,  
 at home with the ham and the rice  
 the detergents and the books.

May the light enter  
 my narrow

mental  
attic

And may these sheets of paper  
I so gently cradle  
change the ham  
into a royal coach!

For anyone familiar with feminist studies, it is more than easy to detect the underlying reference (and this is, of course, an exercise I can do only *a posteriori*) to a book I was then reading, *The Mad Woman in the Attic*, by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979). The subversive tone of my poem mixes the biblical language with themes from fairy tales and with everyday life, concluding with the “cradling of the sheets of paper” as metaphor both to child nurturing and to madness.

The late eighties, beginning of the nineties, were the decades when feminist studies started to emerge in Portugal, still looked at as a foreign and strange subject, in the aftermath of the Revolution of 1974 and the new constitution of 1976, which established equality between men and women before the law. Since then, major advances were achieved on gender and sexualities issues. But, notwithstanding our constitution, the socialist agenda of the 25<sup>th</sup> of April of 1974 gradually dissolved, the spirit of the law contradicted by the harsh reality of old habits, reenacted. I wrote a poem in which I tried to express the difficulty of articulating what I saw as a schism between the power of compulsory norms and gender roles and the freedom I wish I could find in poetry. In this poem, as if in a recipe, another matter is added: no longer potatoes, but **onions** (a recurrent metaphor in my poetry, as it has often be pointed out, by scholars like Maria Irene Ramalho). And onions with their multiple layers – real and symbolic:

#### **No man's land**

I need space  
or some recipe  
to take its place

A proper space  
a no man's land  
because it's simply not big enough  
the space conquered at the expense  
of silences, wardrobes  
and upsetting onions

My syncopated self  
built a stronghold but  
it's not enough: everything fades  
butterflies and dreams  
and even the onions viciously  
repeat themselves

I need space  
or some recipe

to take my place

When I came back from the United States, in 1993, Portugal was already starting to show a major change, with right wing politics. Everything became more dramatic in the years that followed, until the announcement of the crisis, the ratings, the inclusion of new words in our vocabulary, such as troika, agency rates, or the country *thrown into the trash*. Forty years after the revolution that brought democracy to Portugal, and as result of new-liberal capitalism, the most sensitive and (apparently) most useless areas, such as arts, culture, education, have been enfeebled. So is health care or what was once administered by the State. This is not an isolated and local phenomenon, but a global one. Countries are profoundly threatened by statistics and trapped in an economic model ruled by the so called “financial industries”, in which capital overcame labor, power having evaporated into the fluid space of the virtual, national policies losing their sovereignty. We are witnessing, in a sort of silenced or resigned way, the failure of the *res publica* (in other words, the social state) and the near obliteration of the human strength and potency. Never before have we heard about so many norms and rules and how dangerous it is to break them. In this urgency of continuously summoning norms, we run the risk of creating a false idea of unity. And of generating violence, a different one that rules and norms were apparently meant to contain, but violence, still.

In a poem, written in 1998, I use as point of departure a poem by Jorge de Sena, titled “Letter to my children on Goya’s Executions”, a wonderful poem written in 1963 during fascism. Both poems are of ekfrastic nature, as they both refer to Goya’s painting *The third of May 1808* and the execution of the Spanish villagers by the Napoleon soldiers. In Sena’s poem, we can read, in Richard Zenith’s translation:

(...)  
 Sometimes, for belonging to a certain race  
 or class, they atoned for all the wrongs  
 they had not committed or had no awareness  
 of having committed. But it also happened  
 and happens that they were not killed.  
 There have always been infinite methods for dominating,  
 annihilating quietly, gently,  
 through ways inscrutable, as they say of God’s ways  
 (...)

Sena’s beautiful poem points out race and class as sources for discrimination, yet, skips gender and sex. But then, we were in the beginning of the 60s – and none of this diminishes the greatness of his poem. **SLIDE 14** In my own poem, written almost forty years later, the last lines recall the overwhelming emotion triggered in the viewer by the whiteness of the shirt of that man who opens his arms and offers his breast to the rifles. It is about that emotion or, again, that integrity, together with the idea of respect for differences (also sexual ones) that I tried to speak –

differences free from hierarchies. The “line” I mention there does not mean precedence, only a *state of being*, a mode of existing – and of *becoming*. The title of my poem borrows, as I said, from Sena’s title, but reads instead “Only a Bit of Goya: Letter to My Daughter” (I will only quote a few stanzas):

Do you remember saying that life was a line?  
 You were only little then and your hair was fairer,  
 same eyes, though. In that metaphor given  
 by childhood, you were asking out of your astonishment  
 about death and birth, and about who came next  
 and why, or the total absence  
 of any logic in that chain-skein of wool.

(...)

I don’t know what others will tell you in a not-too-distant future,  
 if those who inhabit the spaces in between lives  
 have giant’s eyes or monstrous horns.  
 Because I love you, I would like to give you an antidote  
 like an elixir, that would make you suddenly  
 grow up and fly, like a fairy, along that line.  
 But because I love you, I can’t,  
 and on this hot night tearing at the edges of June,  
 I want to talk to you about the line and the skein  
 and all the many forms of love,  
 all made up of quiet cries of astonishment,  
 if all that is fair and human does there embrace.

Life, my daughter, can be  
 a quite different metaphor: a tongue of fire;  
 a white shirt the colour of nightmares.  
 But it is also the bulb you gave me  
 and which, a year later, has just flowered.  
 Because there was soil, a little light rain,  
 and a balcony to set it walking.

I believe that even when it was thought as laborious work over language, poetry was never, in fact, divorced from the world. Being, as I have defended elsewhere, the very space of possibility (actually, a line from Emily Dickinson, “I dwell in Possibility / a fairer House than Prose”), a language of *intensities* itself, poetry has always been less ruled by capital (less than novel, for sure!), and thus more detached from the equation that turns equivalent time and capital. Even lyrical (or maybe for that very reason), poetry can be the quintessence of resistance. “What kind of times are these”, is the question Adrienne Rich choses for the title of her poem written already in the 21th century, that speaks about a secret place, “a place between two stands of trees where the grass grows uphill”. “I won’t tell you were the place is”, says the poet,

(...)  
 the dark mesh of the woods  
 meeting the unmarked strip of light—  
 ghost-ridden crossroads, leafmold paradise:  
 I know already who wants to buy it, sell it, make it disappear.

And I won't tell you where it is, so why do I tell you  
 anything? Because you still listen, because in times like these  
 to have you listen at all, it's necessary  
 to talk about trees.

It is necessary to talk about trees, indeed – even in times like these, or because of times like these. “The poem is not written with weapons / It is written with the body. / But the body burns / Every time / It writes”. These words are from Alberto Pimenta and his moving book *Marthya de Abdel Hamid*, where one can read, in a clear accusation of the invasion of Iraq: “They want to tell / The whole / Story // But the story / Is not only theirs / Nor of the other half / Of the gang” (Pimenta, 2005: 32). Pimenta’s book allows me to think about poetry and the world, because it is a book about the elegy for the death of a people, which, necessarily, implicates all of us, and our own European past of imperialism and colonization, even if to recognize that involves discomfort – and it is not by chance that, when the book was presented here in 2005, in the mosque of Lisbon, its presentation would be boycotted in several Portuguese bookshops. In it we can also read: “Never, however, / Did life ceased to be ruled / By the heart.”

I lightly brought up the issues of gender, sex and sexualities. I would like now to connect these issues in a more explicit way, with the more than controversial theme of “women’s writing”, as an area of literary studies. In 1938, when George Whicher, a Dickinsonian scholar, wanted to “elevate” Emily Dickinson to the pantheon of the “great writers”, he titled his book *This was a poet*, explaining that Dickinson was a poet (not a poetess), whose value could be compared to the very best that Western poetic tradition had produced. And the very best was, of course, poetry written by men. Or think of Harold Bloom, who, in *The Western Canon* (1994) talking about the “School of Resentment”, contended that it threatened the very nature of the canon and might lead to its eventual demise. Bloom echoed a common concern among other reputable critics that, at worst, the literary tradition could be at risk of being lost or, at best, of being tarnished by the inclusion of what had been, until just over half a century, considered “minor” or marginal. As in life, and today, are considered “minor” or “marginal” the migrants, the landless, the homeless, or, for example, those who, since 2010, have been fleeing from the Syrian Civil War, from the Horn of Africa, from the Irakian crisis, and who have died in their thousands, in the Sicily Channel, in the Mediterranean. Those inhabiting the line of poverty, or living below it. And, among those, more acutely, are, we all know, children and women, women and their children.

If literature, perceived in abstract, as a possibility, does not exclude nor discriminate, theory, the politics of publication, grammar, literary studies, in their turn, can do so and have done so. To discuss the existence of a woman’s writing, or even writing as a woman, would then turn out to be an absolutely useless task and, concurrently, an extremely relevant one. It is therefore, about dominant ideologies that we talk about, either we speak of life or of writing. Shouldn’t we reflect

upon the structures of privileges and oppressions, be aware of the different ways in which sexual inequality is projected (like other inequalities) in the symbolic forms of the poetic phenomenon, as well as in life? I have a poem that may reflect this concern:

### **Common places**

In London I went  
 into a greasy spoon (it's not only us  
 who have greasy spoons, the English too  
 and they once had other things too, now  
 it's just Scotland and a little bit of Ireland and those  
 little tiny islands, but anyway)

In London I went  
 into a greasy spoon, worse even than one of our  
 beach bars (I say this for those who cannot even  
 imagine the things they have there), it was  
 a proper greasy spoon,  
 not that it was a spoon, of course, but it was greasy  
 in the sense that it was full of clutter and greasy  
 food. Really low class.

Of course, all my female prejudices  
 came to the fore, because the café  
 was full of men eating eggs and bacon and tomatoes  
 (in Portugal it would be cheese sandwiches),  
 but I thought: I'm in London, I'm  
 alone, what do I care about men, Englishmen  
 don't bother you the way Portuguese men do,  
 and so on...

I went into the greasy spoon, with a plastic  
 tree in one corner.  
 It was only then that I saw a woman  
 sitting and reading. And I felt  
 stronger, I don't know why, but I did.  
 There was a tribe of twenty-three men and her alone  
 and then me.

I ordered a coffee, which wasn't at all bad  
 for a greasy spoon like that and the man  
 who served me said: There you are, love.  
 I felt like saying: I'm not your bloody love or  
 Go to hell or something like that, but then  
 I thought: It's so deep  
 in their culture and he meant no harm and, besides,  
 I'll be leaving soon, I have a plane to catch,  
 what do I care

And I paid for my coffee, which wasn't at all bad,  
 and I sat for a while looking round  
 watching the tribe eating their eggs and bacon  
 and then I saw what time it was and thought the taxi  
 would be arriving any moment and I had to leave.  
 And when I got up, the woman smiled  
 as if she were saying: That's it

and she looked around at the bacon  
 and the eggs and the men all eating  
 and I felt stronger, I don't know why,

but I felt stronger

and I thought it doesn't matter if it's London or us,  
that everywhere  
you find the same

Is it possible, then, to think that literary tradition is beyond sex, or that it is (according to those who write it, read it and validate it) neutral? But then, what happens when it comes to *poiesis*, the artistic construction, where the issue of identity is apparently dismantled? I shall now focus on these themes, with something very clear in my mind: I do not have a definite answer for my question.

## **2. Potatoes, and other matters, like the body. Life and poetry: intersections –**

It is a well-worn observation that women have been excluded from spheres of intellect and artistic productivity based upon the understanding of their body as an obstacle to reason and morality, faculties required for philosophic-artistic competence. And it would suffice to think about the hideous remarks on women by Schopenhauer in 1851: “When the law conceded women equal rights with men it should at the same time have endowed them with masculine reasoning powers” and “Neither for music, nor poetry, nor the plastic arts do they possess any real feeling or receptivity: if they affect to do so, it is merely mimicry in service of their effort to please”. Or of Gerald Manley Hopkins’s observation in a letter dated 1886 that “[t]he main quality of the artist is masterly execution, which is a kind of male gift (...) The male quality is the creative gift”. Male sexuality, in other words, is not just analogically but actually the essence of literary power – just like, for some, the one of scientific power (we only need to remember the words, last month, of the Nobel scientist Tim Hunt, about the need for separate labs for women and men, arguing that “[t]hree things happen when girls are in the lab: you fall in love with them, they fall in love with you, and when you criticise them they cry.”

Under this nicely oiled “architecture of patriarchy”, it has always been harder for women to articulate the private (or domestic) sphere with the issues of creativity and the belonging to a tradition. I read another poem that seems to illustrate that struggle, at the same time that it is precisely that difficulty that becomes the inspiration for the poem. The poem is called “No nymphs or muses” (in Portuguese the word is “tágides”, the nymphs of the Tagus, invoked by Luis de Camões, in *The Lusiads*, as source of inspiration):

### **No nymphs or muses**

No nymphs or muses:  
only a force that comes from within,  
a touch of madness, of the abyss



that frightens  
and seduces

A fountain of thread-thin water  
finer than fine  
(a too-bright moonbeam  
would dry them up)

No river no lyre  
no female flood of nymphs:  
only some inherent inherited force,  
in a fountain where the moon  
does not shine

Where do life and art intersect? I think of myself and of my poetry, of its writing and its reception. Moulding, or framing, my identity is a myriad of identities, among which the one of being a woman-poet – perhaps the identity more difficult for me to define. Although I am a feminist, I do not share the view that we are all ‘sisters’. And I ask: the fact that I am female, use a woman’s name, speak sometimes in my poetry about the kitchen, or about my daughter, does that allow for readings of my poetry as a "woman’s poetry", or, worse, as a “feminine” poetry? If, when one is speaking about the author as an abstract entity, one distinguishes between empirical author and textual author, why is it easier and more common among critics to read the female empirical author and the female textual author as juxtaposed? And yet, this has been a trait stressed by some critics: to locate some of my poems in a "feminine" universe, forgetting that the "feminine" is a construction.

Nevertheless, as I said, in comparison to men, women, as we know, arrived late to the literary canon (never mind to the poetic one – I am excluding Sapho, but that would be a topic for a different discussion). Their voices have either been silenced or unheard – or not even put into use. I recall the famous complaint by Elizabeth Barrett Browning: “I look everywhere for grandmothers, but see none”. She wrote “grandmothers”, but might as well have written “mothers”, since it was the lack of the inclusion in the literary tradition she was grieving for. Could there be a new psychic, emotional and physical geography where women might feel more at ease? That new geography wouldn’t have to exclude the topic of poetic faking (in Fernando Pessoa’s words), or of the existence of *personae*. The learning of that new geography does not need to be at odds with the consciousness that the very possibility of speaking and being heard is, like Adrienne Rich says, “verbal privilege”. Let me give you an example:

They say there are loves that go beyond feelings contained in time. Perfect moments tinged with laughter, tiny tastes to savour or, equally tiny, clouds. Or even - infinite - torment. Like cosmic dust, etymologies are coincidental. And you can as easily hold in your hands pain or paradise. That is the penalty we pay for metamorphosis.

This short text appears in my book *The Art of Being a Tiger* (2003), as an epigraph and as having been written by Aldo Mathias, in 1939. Once, in an interview, someone asked me: “Aldo Mathias, who, by the way, you summon to your writing, says that « it is possible to hold in your hands both pain and paradise». Do you think that these are the “reverses” that your poetry tries to disconnect?” (Silva 2005: 36). Since it was an epigraph, the reading protocol implied that the person who was conducting the interview thought of Aldo Mathias as an autonomous figure, the Rumanian writer of the mid-twentieth century. I won’t tell you my answer, I will only tell you that only a few years ago, at this very University, I said that Aldo Mathias never existed, was an invention of mine, even though he had the honors of a biography: he was born in Bucharest on February 12, 1909, in a wealthy family, the son of a Jewish father and of a mother of Italian descent. He spent most of his childhood and adolescence between Bucharest and Constanta. He studied Ethics and Philosophy and met Eugene Ionesco and Mircea Eliade. He was forbidden to teach at the University of Bucharest when Rumania became ally of Nazi Germany, he ran away to Roussillon, met Samuel Beckett; then, in 1942, with the fall of the Vichy government, he took refuge in London, where he died in April 3, 1945, shortly to the surrender of Germany. He left a novel, unfinished.

Why did I feel that need to create a sort of a male heteronym in the twenty-first century? Why did I create Aldo Mathias? In order to answer this question, I need to think first about the genesis of a poem: to give birth to a poem is a process that can be compared to the one of giving birth to a child – and I think of the great Russian woman poet Marina Tsvetaieva who wrote, “every verse is a child of love”, also adding “a destitute bastard slip”. I invented Aldo Mathias so that his reflections on love might be used twice, in two epigraphs, in *The art of being a tiger*; I invented him to explore a place that was not mine, a time that I had not inhabited, a voice that, according to the reader, did not belong to me. Inscribed in the non-fictionalized space of the epigraph, Aldo Mathias holds an authorial independent status; in that regard, his pseudo-citation would never be problematic. And yet, from my point of view, as the empirical author, I recognize myself in those words by Aldo Mathias and I even offer them a condition of truth as important as the one conveyed by poems supposedly autobiographical. Aldo Mathias was a much better vehicle to express ambivalence (the possibility of inhabiting both pain and hell) than, for example, the poem “Echos”:

I tried saying your name out loud:  
the word broke in two  
not even the faintest echo in this room  
almost bare of furniture

Almost a lifetime spent sleeping  
beside you and this is all that's left:  
an absent echo, an absence of name  
repeating itself

Knowing that never more: shrunk  
into one corner of this wide bed,  
the suffocating heat

Instead: my left foot  
slides over to the left side  
of the bed

Your name lies discarded on the floor,  
quite empty now of longing

And yet, Aldo Mathias is also a part of me, Ana Luísa Amaral. For, what is self-representation but a presentation of an always possible self, even if that self is deflected? Or refracted, like the image of a pencil that you put in a glass of water (an image I often use when I go to schools to speak about my poetry)? The so-called poetic subject, differently from its empirical subject, historically situated, being always a de-contextualized subject, intersects the empirical one at certain levels, certain *traces*:

#### **The Historical Truth**

My daughter broke a bowl  
in the kitchen.  
And when I fancied writing a poem  
about the incident,  
I had to put aside inspiration and pen,  
pick up a broom and sweep  
the kitchen floor.

The kitchen swept clean of the broken bowl  
looked different from the kitchen  
with the bowl intact:  
a place ready to be excavated and studied  
a brief archeological map  
of a remote future.

A white china bowl  
decorated with flowers,  
the remnants of processed cereal  
in watertight wrapping  
scattered on the floor.

They weren't grains of wheat from Pompeii  
but respectable cereals  
nonetheless.  
And the bowl, although not exactly Ming dynasty,  
but made in Caldas da Rainha,  
in five or ten thousand years  
should find its own admiring audience.

But disaster  
struck.  
And having slipped from those small hands,

the bowl, achieving neither fame nor advantage,  
was swept up by brooms and memories

Into a miserable cruel blue  
bin  
in modern  
(indestructible)  
plastic

It is true that the reader of this poem is lead to conclude about the existence of biographical data and of a “female identity” by the presence of the conventionally domestic — the kitchen, the litter basket (bin), etc. Even though I was many times, metaphorically and literally speaking, forced to “put aside inspiration and pen, / take up a broom and sweep / the kitchen floor”, the events narrated in this poem do not correspond to a set of palpable truths: never did my daughter break a bowl in the kitchen (although she broke many things, as children do), neither was there a miserable and “cruel blue bin / in modern (indestructible) / plastic”. Finally, even though my kitchen, as any normal kitchen, has bowls and dishes, the bowl of the poem, unbroken, was never “a bowl from Caldas” (a kind of cheap and typical pottery in Portugal), thus, its non-belonging to the Ming dynasty was meant solely as a pretext to speak about how transient life is, but also about the power of human emotions. That is, the *traces* that connected the poem to life were memory and love, and the desire of inscription of a different kind of history, perhaps *Herstory*, in History.

I wasn't then thinking of Primo Levi, nor of his book *The Drowned and the Saved*, where he wrote: “Human memory is a marvelous but fallacious instrument. The memories which lie within us are not carved in stone; not only do they tend to become erased as the years go by, but often they change, or even increase by incorporating extraneous features.” (1987). Primo Levi feared, as we know, the erasure or fading out of the collective memory of what was surely the darkest period of the 20<sup>th</sup> century History: the Holocaust. In *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (2009), Judith Butler gives the example of the Guantánamo prisoners, whose poems were literally engraved – in polystyrene cups that passed from hand to hand. Not being carved in stone, memories can be engraved, as Primo Levi well knew, in another kind of matter: the skin. And the poems of the Guantánamo prisoners, the ones that clearly represent the figure of the destitute from political rights, were not engraved in stone, nor in the skin, but in another surface, another matter, sometimes polystyrene, sometimes smuggled papers. Those were the marks (of the written word) that helped breaking “the precarious chains of solitude”, our human condition.





This is where I come close to my closure: with this notion of porosity, or permeability, connecting it to poetry, life, tunes and other matters, like potatoes – or bodies:

**Killing is easy**

With my nail I murdered (so easy)  
a small mosquito  
that landed without permission and without a licence  
on this piece of paper

Dressed to be invisible,  
its wings too insubstantial to be seen  
and once dead on the paper, a trace  
of almost nothing

But a trace  
with a trick of magic, a pretext  
for a poem, and though its lymph burned  
for less time  
than my life-time,  
it was still  
a time lived

Laid low by no spear, no dagger,  
no mortal poison  
(a dignified dose of cyanide or strychnine)  
it died, the victim of a fingernail,  
and returned to dust:  
a brief floury powder

But it must contain,  
like all its relatives,  
something concrete,  
in less than a hundred years, it will be  
the same substance

as feeds a poet's tibia,  
a face once loved,  
this piece of paper pulp on the desk before me,  
the tiniest most imperturbable point  
on a comet's tail -

In fact, neither does the body exist in a vacuum, nor are its borders fully stable. The body is contiguous to everything, be it the others' bodies, or every living body, that constitute the world – no exception made to planets, stars, galaxies, or subatomic particles. Because my pores need the oxygen from the air, because the cells of my body merge with the air and with the water existing in the air, invisible, and yet made of matter, too. And, just in the same way that my body is matter, so is the other's body.

What I mean is that we are all exposed to a common condition: the one of precariousness (in the sense that Judith Butler uses it, as an ontological and existential category, related to the frailty, the unquestionable vulnerability, of life). The Elizabethans knew this when they spoke about the sublunary spheres, bound to the passage of time.

Shakespeare knew it well in his famous sonnet 15: “When I consider everything that grows / holds in perfection but a little moment”, as he knew of the power of poetry (the innovative capacity that language entails), in the conclusion of that same sonnet: “And all in war with Time for love of you, / As he takes from you, I engraft you new”.

In what regards women’s writing, I truly have no answers, only these questions that I have shared with you, trying to say how, for me, potatoes and poetry are indelibly related, just like talking of trees, of a broken bowl, or of love can also be a way of talking of politics, and, therefore, of life. I leave you as I started, with a poem to my daughter – “Syllogisms”. With that poem, I close my talk:

My daughter asked me  
 “what does it mean for life?”,  
 and I told her it meant forever.

I lied, of course,  
 but then the concepts of infinite  
 are different: because she asked afterwards  
 what forever meant  
 and I could not tell her of parallel  
 universes, of conjunctions or disjunctions  
 of space and time,  
 not even of death.

A whole life is until you die,  
 but I knew it was inevitable the next  
 question: what does it mean to die?

So I answered that forever  
 was large like this, I spread wide my arms,  
 distracted her with the game, unfinished.

(At the end of the whole game,  
 she told me that tomorrow  
 she wanted to stay with me for life)