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a novel

**Sylvain
Prudhomme**

translated by Jessica Moore

The Greats

Sylvain Prudhomme

translated by Jessica Moore

Bookthug, 2017

FIRST ENGLISH EDITION

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I MURI.

Zé on the phone said these two words as gently as possible, doing everything he could to make them less cutting.

I muri Couto, she's dead – repeating *I muri* as though he'd feared that the two words weren't enough the first time, as though he himself needed to say them again.

Couto do you hear me you're not saying anything.

Couto looked at the afternoon sun rushing in through the small skylight and falling on the bedroom floor lined with ageless colourless linoleum, looked at the specks of dust suspended in the ray and the ceiling mildewed with humidity and the stumps of melted candles on the window ledge, the incense spreading its pungent scent from the holder beside the bed, the faded photograph of Zé and Malan and all the others, elated, stepping down from the helicopter in Bubaque, in the Bissagos Islands, thirty years earlier.

His eyes met Esperança's where she lay stretched out naked beside him and he knew instantly that she had guessed it, he saw her bend her knees, pull the sheet over the triangle of her belly as though over something that had suddenly become obscene, saw her burrow into the pillow and close her eyes.

Esperança you are like the dogs that hide away before the storm, Couto thought, you are deeply moving like animals that feel the thunder coming and, long before the first rumbles, huddle against the walls trying to disappear into the mud and straw. Esperança all we were was caresses and mouths and legs all tangled listening only to our hunger for one another and now we lie still, this sheet pulled over us, both cold in this bed, you and me side by side. Esperança your pussy is so good, I said, *bu panpana i sabi demais*, your pussy your beloved apple cashew is good and juicy like a good fruit and your breasts too that I catch and want to take into my mouth like good fruits, and same for me, you said as you took it catching it lovingly, Couto your cock is good too, *bu abu i sabi demais*, I want to steal it and take it home and then even when you're not there I can keep having it and using it and thinking of you, that would give me pleasure.

Couto, Zé kept saying on the phone, and now his voice was faraway, unreal, everything seemed in a state of suspension.

What happened.

They don't know Couto.

What do you mean they don't know.

No one knows anything.

Who told you then.

Bruno.

Bruno that sellout.

Stop.

Couto lay back without saying anything and waited for the pain to come, waited for the sadness of the news to bloom inside his body. But it didn't come. There was nothing but this numbness, this torpor that came upon him slowly and at first seemed to be the opposite of pain, seemed instead to be a collapsing through sluggishness, a disconnection of his whole being, which had become incapable of feeling anything, of experiencing even the least grief, of shedding a single tear, his eyes desperately dry, his breathing vaguely obstructed by something that could just as well have been only a deep fatigue. So this was what Dulce's death did to him?

What's going to happen.

He said this out loud, to himself as much as to Zé.

Do you want us to get together, Zé asked. Do you want me to tell the others to come to the house.

Couto exhaled.

I think I'd rather be alone.

He thought of the light outside. Of the shadows of trees along the slanting streets. Of the red and yellow parasols in the Bandim market, which must be teeming with life at this hour.

I think I'd rather go out and get some air.

We can just say we'll see each other later, Zé said. At the end of the afternoon.

Couto said yes.

At Diabaté's place.

At Diabaté's place, yes.

The thought of the tables in the open air had done him good. He knew it would be bright, and that he would be glad to see the others.

He hung up and lay back down.

Esperança came close, ran her hand through his hair, slowly stroking his head and his temples. Placed her hand on his hip like an anchor, a way of saying I'm here, I'm holding you.

Esperança full of grace.

Esperança who could name each white hair on his head and who baptized him with glorious names, heroes' names, my grizzled crazy Couto, my handsome black old man, my Mandinka whitened by the years who will soon look like a wise man but who thank God is still just a child.

Her top and her skirt were there, on the floor, beside their underwear abandoned on the linoleum. Sagging, pathetic. Balls of shapeless cloth.

She knew as he did what Dulce's death meant. What patience they would both need before the news of this passing retreated from the space between them, faded, left them again to each other. And there was nothing to do but wait.

That devil woman you're still in love with, she'd say, laughing, when one of Dulce's songs came on the radio. That sorceress I'm powerless against.

Dulce's voice would flow through the room, float between the walls around them, childlike, graceful.

Carros di botton sines, dissan na mbera.

Cars with pretty leather bucket seats,
Leave me be to walk in peace.

Able to see her again as though she was there onstage in front of him, clapping her hands like she used to, turning to wait for his guitar riffs, smiling at him.

That she-devil who will be returning to take my man from me as long as I live, to steal him away for the length of a song as though I didn't even exist.

Dulce's voice would soar and Esperança would come near to Couto, pinch him to wake him up.

Couto would grab her, laughing. Tell her to listen to Tundu's solo, Armando's congas. Lift a finger to make her hear one note he played that he was proud of, one note just dissonant enough from the rest of the band, did she hear it, there, that note in the major while everyone else at that moment was in the minor, ah if she could have seen him onstage with his hair his beard his tight pants, ah if she could have known him when he was handsome, she who was happy enough to love him a little now when he was nothing but a washed-up old man.

Esperança didn't give a damn about his note, didn't give a damn that he had a beard and wore tight pants.

That she-devil only has to sing for ten seconds and she's got you again.

Her hips would sway in rhythm, her arms would knot and unknot around his shoulders coaxing him.

Come on come to me. Come here mister Couto the guitarist, player of major notes.

She pulled him against her, her mouth warm, her kisses deep.

Esperança of bluntness, of abundance, who in the early days lashed him with desire. Her way of saying in Creole *mistiu*, I want you, I desire you, *mistiu* slipped into his ear in a mischievous voice, already untying her wrap-around skirt to offer herself up to his caress. Was there a single Mandinka word to say that? A real word full of desire and capable of having the same effect on whoever heard it as this *mistiu*? A word that wasn't just technical, wasn't mainly a word for animals and didn't boil down more or less to saying I would like to mate with you or I would like to service you or some other phrase just good for a laugh?

What are you going to do.

Couto pulled the sheet up over him.

What do you think we should do.

Are you still going to play.

Couto thought of the concert planned for that evening, of all the rehearsals of the past weeks.

He let his eyes wander over the ceiling of the little room, slide slowly along the walls warped by humidity, stop on the thin black-and-white streaks of lizard shit stuck to the walls.

Crummy old room, he thought, pulling his knees up to his belly. Miserable little nest for a couple rolled up in their dirty sheets, their worn-out sheets.

He felt Esperança's hand on his forehead, restorative, tender.

Esperança as dark as Dulce was once pale and changing. Esperança terra firma while everything in Dulce was cracked, wild.

He felt her stretch out near him, smelled the scent of

her hair, her shoulders, the oils she slathered on her body, the charms she filled their room with as soon as his back was turned. There were the ones he recognized, kola nut, dried lemons, perfumed shells placed in the open on the window ledge, beside the incense holder. And then there was the multitude whose presence he only guessed at, swelling the lining of a cushion, blocking the crack in a wall. He didn't look for them, never looked under the bed or behind the furniture. He simply knew they were there, detectable from the slightly sour smell they emitted, smell of rot, of horn, of eau de cologne gone off.

Sometimes when he came back from a concert he'd find a palm nut in his pocket. Or his bare foot would come down on an ossicle that pricked his sole. He'd curse, bend down to pick it up, throw it far away into the banana trees.

Hey! Esperança would say. You know that's our good luck you're tossing out the window like that.

Esperança who knew all the spells.

Couto looked at the photograph tacked to the wall in front of him, one of the few he'd kept from all those years. One of the oldest, too: 1977, the first of the three prosperous years they'd had before the group split up. You could feel the euphoria of beginnings, the wonder at being there, among the palm trees of Bubaque, at the beginning of a tour that would take them for the first time to Cap-Vert, to Mozambique, to Portugal, to Cuba. They had just come down from the helicopter, and the photographer had told them to pose there, in front of the trees, without ceremony.

Dulce stood in the middle, the only woman among

the musicians of the group, most of them bearded and a good head taller than her, and older too, by five or six years. Standing between the eccentric figures of Couto and Miguelinho, the two rhythm guitarists, she looked shyly at the lens, a bit stiff, like a little girl in her straight skirt and white schoolgirl's blouse, her hair short like a boy's.

Atchutchi, the band leader, and Malan, one of the singers, had heard her at a village ceremony three months earlier. A choir of old women was singing outside a house, accompanied by the beat of wooden shuttles. In the intervals, a voice responded, egging them on. A high, childish voice with a light phrasing that dominated all the others without ever sounding forced, and set them off again with authority. That was Dulce.

Can you read music.

That was all Atchutchi could think of to ask her in the end, with his serious air of a naval engineer just back from the war in Mozambique. Of course she had never held a single sheet of music, never heard of Super Mama Djombo, never been to the União Desportiva Internacional in Bissau where the band played each weekend, never been to a single concert in a single club in Bissau. And of course, no one cared a bit. She came to a practice and from one day to the next it was as though all of their music reared up, took flight, no longer weighed down by effort, by labour. For months they had just been men, the Creole would say *matchus*, in the badly ventilated room of the UDIB. And here she came in her schoolgirl skirt, with that voice – clear, naturally disarming, entirely in her throat, laid bare. Voice of a laughing child soldier. Of a girl who sang with joy, without affect, without calculation.

That day, Armando on percussion and Zé on the drums went completely buck wild.

Bunch of goddamn roosters, Couto snorted.

Armando threw himself into his solo on “Mortos Nega” and his bare arms raced from one barrel to the next, whipping the skins, thrashing them madly, then suddenly coming back to caresses.

Watch it Armando! said Chico, the bassist. You’re gonna piss red again.

Little vessels in the palms and fingers would burst, the blood going straight to the urine. All conga players know about this. The last time Armando had agreed to accompany an opening act before a concert he had played for five hours straight. At the end of the evening he went to the washroom, came out sheepish.

Bastards. Bissap. You would have thought it was bissap. But why the hell did he need to piss red that day.

Hold up, we’ll show them, Miguelinho laughed.

He elbowed Couto in the stomach and threw himself into it too, jumping up like a mountain goat, followed by Chico. The piece lasted twelve minutes instead of four, they dragged it out like pigs, pathetic, unable to stop.

Brava Dulce, Atchutchi said at the end. Only I don’t know if we can keep you. I’ve never seen them play such a mess as that.

She started coming more often, gaining ease at the microphone, grew used to singing with Malan, adding her colour, guessing all on her own when she should hold back and just double the choruses with a simple hum, and when to dare a phrase that stunned them all with its grace.

One night at a concert little Dulce became Dulce, period, known throughout the whole city, her praises sung even by a journalist who was onto something when he called her “Mama Djombo’s new secret weapon.”

The day after the concert in Bubaque, they played another one at a tiny bar in the city, an evening that dragged on and on where Couto started to think that the beer helping Chico along (that jackal) was going to burn away all semblance of politeness. But when he woke in the morning, it was his neck that Dulce came to stroke. It was him she followed when he whispered *bin no bay*, come on let’s go, a little hesitant at first, and then since she was still looking at him without understanding, come on let’s get out of here, more urgently, *bin no kapli kinti-kinti*, come on let’s go right now before the others wake up.

A seven-seater passed and they jumped in. Miguelinho came out at that moment, just in time to see them waving their hands out the taxi window.

Hey! What are you doing!

The seven-seater hadn’t gone very far: the island was less than ten kilometres long. They got out at a bend in the road and found themselves alone at the edge of the pavement full of potholes, facing the sea, alone incredibly early, barely knowing each other, having never spent more than ten minutes in conversation. Two metres separating them at the beginning, neither one knowing how to cross the gap. Couto following her on the beach in the dizzying light, imagining the burning of her bare feet with each step. Imagining her warmed all through, kindled like the burning stones of Varela he would

stretch out on after swimming as a child. The hunger with which his eyes had strolled over her body at first, filled with wonder to know that soon these shoulders that waist would be his, that just her presence on this beach meant: I will be yours, you will have all of me.

Come on Couto, get up.

Esperança sat up beside him, pushed back the sheet, leaned over to pick up her clothes at the foot of the bed.

Get up, Mr. Guitar Player.

That asshole Miguelinho had his revenge that very day by writing his most beautiful song. Julia I'm looking for you, said the words addressed to the girl he had loved with all his heart before she died, taken by the flu. Julia I'm looking for you, and I see you everywhere. In each new woman I meet. In each beautiful thing my eyes see. In Carlotta who got sick of it and left me. *Carlotta bu fasin lembra di nha morta, bu fasin lembra di Julia*. Carlotta you reminded me of my dead one, you reminded me of Julia.

When they got back the next day Couto and Dulce found them in the middle of practice. They both stood silent it was so beautiful, it flowed so smoothly, Zé's drums underscoring Miguelinho's voice, lifted so lightly, Tundu's guitar solo sweetly stretching out the notes and enshrouding them in mist, the others quiet, just waiting, like them, motionless.

You'll have to sneak off more often, Atchutchi had laughed. Come on let's play it again.

And again Miguelinho's voice. Again his powerful hands on the belly of the guitar held across his chest like a toy, dockers' hands, slaves' hands, hands for anything at

all but not those of a guitarist, not in any case of a guitarist capable of this, this softness and sorrow. Again his calm and this expression on his big square face, a grimace of pain, of an irreparable wound.

Come on, get up.

Esperança had pulled on her shirt. Couto looked at her, smiled to see her all mussed, her wig sliding off, held on only by a single hairpin. He reached out his arm and pulled it off, uncovering her short hair.

Couto!

Without her wig she looked naked, truly naked.

He took her in his arms.

What did you just do, he asked.

What do you mean what did I just do.

Then just now while I was thinking of other things.

He reached out his arm to catch Esperança's hand under the pillow, forced it open. In her palm he saw the shells, pearly white like porcelain.

Not again with these things.

He pulled her to him like a crocodile his prey, forcing her to come and press the whole length of her body against his.

Mr. Guitar Player is waking up, it seems.

She put the shells down on the little table beside the bed. They tinkled softly.

Esperança. Her breasts her belly were warm, were good.

Kiss me.

She wrapped her legs around his to hold him tighter.

Make love to me, come on.

Couto had smelled again the scent of their sex, of their

bodies entangled several times already that afternoon.
Sweetish smell, vaguely obscene. Good smell.

Make love to me asshole.

They came fast, first she, then he, miserably, without joy. They let the silence crush them. Sadness came down.