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HOMENAGEM A
IRENE RAMALHO SANTOS

THE EDGE OF ONE OF MANY CIRCLES

ISABEL CALDEIRA
GRAÇA CAPINHA
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ORGANIZAÇÃO

A LONG AND CLOSE FRIENDSHIP

Doris Friedensohn

Dear Irene:

I'm remembering our first meeting, some 35 years ago. We were on a Fulbright panel together in DC, on teaching American Studies abroad. Nothing about the session was memorable. Except for this: you and I connected – in spite of VERY divergent scholarly interests. While you were focused on great poets, lofty poetics and dazzling anti-capitalist theorizing, I was telling stories about immigrants in suburbia, feminism in the classroom, and how we (Americans) eat now. Fortunately, we found common ground: dry white wine, well-aged cheese, and pork every which way. With your support, I came to Coimbra on a Fulbright in 1986 – and returned many times over the years. You began spending the fall semester on my side of the Atlantic. And we began exchanging papers-in-progress.

I sent you my reports on conversations in Korean nail salons, on my poet friend Ishmael who spent 27 years in prison for murder, and on hunting down my plumber at Happy Market, a convenience store in the middle of Leonia which he used as his office. You sent me pieces on Gertrude Stein, Wallace Stevens, Pessoa, differences between European and American poetic practices, and poetry as the vital center of the humanities.

Always, as I plunged into your texts, I felt a twinge of despair: over the range of your references, the complexity of your arguments, the breadth of your scholarship, and the length of your paragraphs. Such a big purview, such brilliant associations, such deep analysis, such far-reaching implications – and all in a foreign (English) language. What IS she saying?

”Irene dear,” I recently wrote. ”You’re such a skilled and clever cook! This dinner to which you’ve invited me – with Pessoa and Emily Dickinson as culinary centerpieces – is stunningly conceived but a bit confusing. More than a bit, in fact. For openers, your soup is made with twelve vegetables, and I wish you had limited it to four, which I might recognize. In fact, I wish you would have skipped the soup (or served it in shot glasses) and started with the main course: maybe a pair of differently seasoned birds (duck for her and goose for him), a mushroom compote to suggest the forest-like density of their shared vision, and a simple couscous to define the surround. Could I suggest reducing the silverware, too? And maybe doing away with one of the wine glasses? Since we’re all thinking ”lean” these days, how about skipping the dessert and ending (sweetly) with a perfect cappuccino?”

My dear trim Irene: you don’t have to think lean – even if you could. In fact, an intellectually lean Irene is a contradiction in terms. I’m fortunate, as are so many of your colleagues, for being pressured to stretch my mental waistband as I read you: for being forced to think hard about the center and the periphery, identity and difference, hierarchy and inequality, globalized America and globalized Europe – all in relation to poetry, poetics and, yes, Pessoa.

It’s a measure of this long and close friendship that you tolerate my dietary finickiness.

You allow me, when challenged by unfamiliar works and abstruse theories, to fret and joke and spin out my own counter narratives.

You let me play and feel smart. I thank you for that – and for these many years of creative dueling and shared understandings.

Much love,

Doris