

Stella Maris

Brian Castro

Há! It means ‘there is’ in Portuguese. There is what? There is that letter I wrote to her when I thought she was still alive. *Poste restante, Chalet Saudade* on the historic hilltop town of Sintra in Lisbon.

She loved lighthouses. She adored lighthouses that were built in the roughest Atlantic, swirling about like tops in monumental turbulence. *Fastnet, La Jument, Þrídrangaviti, Tevennec, Sule Skerry*. She wanted to be a lighthouse keeper, but those jobs were only for men and were usually passed down from father to son. They said women couldn’t take the isolation. Women needed communities, telephones, talk and more talk. Or women went into the Carmelite order, where there was a high incidence of Alzheimer’s, caused by silence and a lack of social interaction. Women weren’t good at forgetting, she wrote in her diary, since multi-tasking kept the brain active, so dementia became a side-effect, to swell the quotidian drudgery of potato soup, solitude, silence and prayer, a reaction by the mind to evade noisy problem-solving and lip-smacking recipes. But she knew that she was good at isolation; she could do it for months, even years. Above all, she knew deep inside her heart that she was both a beacon and a warning. And besides, there were all these figures swimming in her. Figures that kept mutating in somatic rhythms.

Yes, you could say an ‘irregularity’ ran within her. So how could she ever aspire to be a lighthouse-keeper, whose life is based on ceaseless regularities, trivial but meaningful tasks that guarantee good navigation and ward off tragedy? Precision – digression – obstacles – fragments: the lighthouse epitomises the tiny interior space of simultaneity; multi-tasking; a woman’s time. Look at those bearded men in their towers. Beaming with their importance, their sacred mission of preventing lost lives gives them authority. They represent, she said to herself, the symbolic order; *domine, domine*, dominance. The Lord’s day is their everyday. They can only do one thing at a time. How she yearned for her matriarchal days as her everyday, resurrecting all those lost lives inside of herself! Children of her inspiration!

Look at the Portuguese dictator Salazar. Oh, you have to get away from his image: that Brylcreemed hair gleaming with importance; mineral oil stabilised by beeswax. You would

never need to wash it. It was a helmet. Bees could live in it. Inside Salazar's hair were whole jungles of guerrillas which he needed to control with God and DDT, Family and the G-3, 7.62mm assault rifle. Her husband was in Angola. Her husband was conscripted by Salazar's government. Her husband said they played recordings of parrots so the enemy wasn't warned by the silence of the birds. He had been away a year already. For her, a year of the silence of the birds. He wrote to her in code; their own private code, embedded in erotomania, which the army allowed. In the sex of the text their knowledge of semantic networks enabled the message to become clear through the use of nodes of associations: bird; wing; flight; orgasm. She replied: I dance the beguine; my white woman's infatuation; the rhumba of the hips. She made preparations for his desertion and their exile to Belgium and rented a beguinage first in Louvain, then in Jodoigne and finally in Herbais. In these sixteenth-century brick apartments with cobbled drives once dedicated to sisterhoods of mature women who had lost their husbands in the Crusades, peace and tidiness accompanied the cooing of doves and the quiet murmur of prayer. Here she could write like a demented nun, sampling all kinds of realities.

But there was no peace and quiet. Her husband was making furniture in the other room. He used to make quality guitars. It was his trade. But now he couldn't get the rosewood and maple at the right price. She loved him for being able to adapt, but it was noisy. All that hammering became the crucifix of her life. She wanted him to rent a workshop in town. The dead started appearing: Nietzsche, Musil, Thomas Müntzer. Blake too, made a racket in her head. Her very self was a network of these relations and voices. They didn't sound like the restless sea, rhythmic and regular. It was a hammering. Sometimes you hear it when builders are working close. They don't have a sense of rhythm, like Nietzsche, who is taking apart his Zarathustra. Yes, normal people are always scared of mystics since they don't see and hear what mystics see and hear and yet normal people accept the superior senses of dogs without any question. *Madness and delirium are frightening: mystics ought to be tamed and imprisoned.* On the contrary, mystics should be experienced as part of the social world, not least as a reprieve from the solitude of boredom.

She wished she were a Carmelite. She wrote fragmented discourses of the dead. She said to her husband: let's not speak for a few weeks. He was very sweet about it and obeyed her. He knew a few weeks could last a year. She was fine with him in Angola. Now sharing the same bed, they communicated only by signs. There was already too much language inside and outside.

Then they slept in different rooms, because he complained of her two cats climbing all over the bed and when he moved his feet they pounced and dug their claws into his soles. She was even beginning to appear in the habit of a very devout nun. Nothing ostentatious. Just a small leather pouch on a belt around her waist containing wooden rosary beads. She played *Begin The Beguine* on her record player. Cole Porter was the composer, his name from *Colporteur* – a man neither of the collar, nor a coal-carter but a door-to-door peddler of religious books. She liked this peddling. She played the tune again and again and found a long-playing record of it performed by an unknown guitarist, his photo on the cover, handsome, expertly picking the strings with a lit cigarette between his fourth and fifth fingers in her now quite crowded beguinage with John of the Cross in one corner and Nietzsche in another and Musil was smoking by the fridge and there was Rilke, with his flat head (from the back) which seemed to fit right into the wall, poems issuing from his mouth directly onto a text in the wallpaper. Glossolalia inhabits the living room, but she only invites them in when it is dark, during her night diaries, when such figures enter and speak at first in low voices, murmurations in the thick solitude of her stone beguinage, and her husband, who now sleeps in the next room with his furniture-in-the-making, listens in and turns over and places the pillow over his ears. He says to her that he is deafened by the noise of parrots and that he expects an ambush at any minute. She plays *Begin the Beguine* for him on the record player to soothe him. She loves the beguine, a nun's dance, because you hardly ever touched your partner, though she will have to curb the lasciviousness of her hips, crush the creole from her lips when she dances with Virginia Woolf who always seems disdainful of having to dance at all.

She looked at the record album again. On the cover, that photo of the guitarist – looking even more handsome and feline than her black cat – on each side of him a beautiful woman, one blonde, one brunette. He was descended from slaves in Rio and after a military coup in Brazil went into exile in Baden-Baden. John of the Cross whispered to her in bed that this was her dark night of the soul. It's part of the hardship of reaching an ecstatic union with God, he said. You have to get rid of the temptation of your soul. She listened to *Begin the Beguine* the next day and changed her mind. Then she changed back. *There is no me*, she wrote in her diary. She had to get rid of her self. She argued with John of the Cross. After all, he 'directed' a beautiful and devout widow, Ana de Peñalosa, and wrote her a poem:

*O living flame of love
That tenderly wounds my soul ...*

Oh, yes, she said to John of the Cross, you were grooming her, placing your motives behind a divine union with God; motives manifested in sinister protuberances.

She wrote to the radio station which regularly broadcasted the guitarist's music, requesting certain melodies and vocal introductions. She found that the guitarist spoke an accented Portuguese – longer vowels with hissing sibilants – whereas she swallowed certain words as metropolitans do. When he sang, his syllabic rhythms dovetailed with the samba or the bossa nova, allowing extra rhymes and beats. She was falling in love. John of the Cross understood this. Nothing surprised him. Yes, he said while shooing away the cats, it's a sweet cauter, a delicious wound. But you need to act. You need to act and find out. It will not last. He knew precisely that she would never act. The whole idea and behaviour of exiles was that they seldom acted. He did so during the Carmelite wars in 1577 and they imprisoned and tortured him.

Meanwhile her husband was coughing badly in the next room. All those cigars he smoked in Angola. They kept him going during difficult times in the jungle. When you're facing death, a cigar was a companion, even a good woman. But now he was paying for what he owed. He even asked for gun oil to sniff. She didn't know what to do. The doctors said that it was pneumonia. A good death if he slept and slowly sank away. She sat by his bedside but sitting there was doing no good at all. Doctors came and went. A young beguine in a wimple and cornette brought in oxygen bottles. She didn't want all these people in her hermitage.

The nightly voices subsided. They fractured and soon there was only static, like an untuned radio. Could she regain something of her self? Where was Müntzer now, where was John of the Cross, where was Nietzsche or Musil? The self was what she tried to contain, but it was no good, it was now feuding with her husband. He was now leaving her and his self was saying it was enough already. A duet of wills was not what death was about. It was about divorcing life from what was to come, another experience that was neither lonely nor social.

The radio station she listened to – Radio Luxembourg – was now presenting what was called 'live requests' at midnight. An artist or group would be in the studio for an hour and would play songs that people requested by mail. She tried not to listen to these voices and tunes

– her fears of not being able to write came with a succession of nurses, cleaners and plumbers, disrupting her sacred trance. Also, war was looming on the Middle Eastern horizon, which will undoubtedly have its repercussions elsewhere in the form of revenge. To be overlooked was probably a good thing in dark times. She writes: I have no optimism, it's true. Writing was like entering a deep sleep with all the senses alert – a contradiction. Writing was not of this world, though it's obviously connected with it. But perhaps the human mind can no longer receive it. Yes, a matter of reception. She suspected that writing was an attempt to release herself from the fear of her husband's impending death. It was not the solitude she had really planned upon having. Gardening and cooking became substitutes as hedges against fear, since trying to free herself from fear was a guilty pleasure. With the Mother Superior's permission which was only granted to lay-persons, she started a little garden in the courtyard of the beguinage. She grew poppies and lilies, orchids and gerberas. She befriended a little dog, who liked to lie next to her when she was on her haunches, he, rolling over periodically for tickles to his belly.

At midnight she turned on Radio Luxembourg and enjoyed the live performances of listeners' requests. She thought she would write in herself. She asked for the Brazilian guitarist. She wanted to hear the sadness of the samba rendered with his unique finger-style, a cigarette between his fourth and little finger, his friend Johnny Walker beside him, his eyes closed, his dark good looks masking the weariness of a diabetic. She imagined he was shy and wiry and lived only in and for music. She knew it was probably impossible for him to go to the studio in Luxembourg. It would be unreachable like the lighthouse in Virginia Woolf's book – it didn't matter – silence was a semaphore – she wrote in her diary fragmentarily – with longer and longer breaks until the great precarity of the void consumed her like turbulence from a mighty ocean. At midnight, she would say to her husband: let's listen to the man from Porlock – she meant the radio. An interruption and a distraction for both of them.

Then miraculously, a few weeks later, the request hour featured the guitarist. He spoke in a voice that was soft, husky from tobacco. He announced that the song he was going to play was requested by a woman who was living in a lighthouse. He had dedicated this composition to her because her letter coincided with his abandoning the *Candomblé*, his Afro-Brazilian religion, the toning down of his decadent lifestyle, the re-discovery of strength in age. He did not know, but he suspected, that he was dying. The song was called *Serenata do adeus*, a sonnet of fidelity. He said he admired her courage, her solitude and resilience, living alone in a lighthouse, manning

Fiction: *Stella Maris* by Brian Castro

the beacon not only for the living but for the dead, since the dead were always going to be visiting.

Brian Castro is the author of eleven novels, a volume of essays and a poetic memoir and cookbook, *Macau Days* (with paintings by John Young). His novels include the multi award-winning *Double-Wolf*, *Shanghai Dancing* and *Blindness and Rage*. He was the 2014 winner of the Patrick White Award for Literature and the 2018 Prime Minister's Prize for Poetry.