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On a Fool's Mission in a Dying Colonial World

By LARRY ROHTER

THE LAND AT THE END OF THE WORLD

By António Lobo Antunes

Translated by Margaret Jull Costa

222 pages. W. W. Norton & Company. \$26.95.

Combat experiences are like Tolstoy's unhappy families: no two are alike, which may be why they often make for great novels, as Tolstoy also knew. The cause need not even be noble, since a hopeless situation and senseless violence can actually fortify a work of fiction. Certainly that is the case with António Lobo Antunes's "Land at the End of the World," set in Angola in the early 1970s, as Portugal's ludicrous effort to preserve its African empire was meandering to an inglorious end.

The unnamed narrator is a young doctor wrenched from a comfortable life in Lisbon and forced to spend 27 months on the front lines treating his hapless fellow soldiers. He resents that they have been made "agents of a provincial form of fascism that was corroding and eating away at itself with the slow acid of its own sad, parochial stupidity." But mostly he is sickened by the mutilated bodies delivered to his care, and fearful the same may happen to him. Though there are flashes of humor, almost always mordant, this is not "M*A*S*H" but something far darker and more absurd.

"The Land at the End of the World," newly translated by Margaret Jull Costa, was originally published in 1979, four years after Portugal's withdrawal from Africa and the final collapse of America's intervention in Vietnam. At that time it was interpreted as a comment on the inherent futility of those recent Western adventures in the third world. But read at more than 30 years' remove from those events much of this account of what Mr. Lobo Antunes's narrator calls a "painful apprenticeship in dying" would no doubt make sense to survivors of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.

"What have they done to us," the narrator asks in one of his typically long and torrential sentences, "sitting here waiting in this landlocked place,

imprisoned by three rows of barbed wire in a land that doesn't belong to us, dying of malaria and bullets, whose whistling trajectory sounds like a nylon thread vibrating, fed by unreliable supply lines whose arrival or not is dependent on frequent accidents en route, on ambushes and land mines, fighting an invisible enemy, fighting the endless days that never pass, fighting homesickness, indignation, and remorse, fighting the dark nights as thick and opaque as a mourning veil.”

Back home in Lisbon, his marriage yet another casualty of the war, the traumatized doctor finds no solace. “Rootless, I float between two continents, both of which spurn me,” he says. “I have no place anywhere, I went too far away for too long to ever belong here again, to these autumns of rain and Sunday Masses, these long winters as dull as blown light bulbs.”

Even sex cannot provide relief, or a distraction, since he is capable only of collecting women “the way you might find odd bits of change in the pocket of a winter coat.” The narrator’s story unfolds over the course of a long, drunken night in which he successfully, but only half-heartedly, seduces a woman he has just met in a bar, who has the “aseptic, competent dandruff-free air of an executive secretary.” He knows this erotic escapade will end like all his others: with “the damp defeat of two exhausted bodies on the mattress” after an act of coitus that has all “the limp joy of two strands of spaghetti entwining.”

Like Anton Chekhov, [William Carlos Williams](#) and Moacyr Scliar, Mr. Lobo Antunes belongs to that select group of [writers who are also doctors](#) — a psychiatrist, to be more precise, who himself served in a field hospital in Angola. But the novelist-doctor he probably most resembles is Louis-Ferdinand Céline, whose [“Journey to the End of the Night”](#) is also a grotesque reflection on the horror of war and the failure of European imperialism in Africa. Mr. Lobo Antunes has even told of how, as a teenager, he experienced such “bedazzlement” from reading Céline’s “Death on the Installment Plan” that he wrote a letter to that misanthropic Frenchman, who, to his credit, responded with, he recalled, “immense tenderness.”

The original version of Mr. Lobo Antunes’s novel had a suitably Céline-like scatological title, which refers to the anatomy of Judas and is a common Portuguese-language slang expression meaning something like “the back of beyond.” Ms. Jull Costa has had to find a less pungent substitute, as did an earlier translation, published in 1983, that was called [“South of Nowhere.”](#) But once the story begins, her rendering of the novelist’s language and style

is simply splendid. He has created a memorably unhinged narrator, and she manages to capture, perfectly and faithfully, the bitter, hallucinatory and increasingly desperate tone of his monologue.

Perhaps because of his training as a psychiatrist, [Mr. Lobo Antunes](#) is also an unusually observant writer, which in turn seems to have bestowed on him a particular gift for coining unusual but apt similes. Rain clouds in the tropics are “as heavy as udders,” an exhausted soldier slings his rifle “over his shoulder as if it were a useless fishing rod,” a skinny schoolmarm in a bereft colonial outpost has “collarbones as prominent as [Brezhnev’s eyebrows](#),” and basic training finds the narrator “side by side with a fat recruit as wobbly as a crème caramel on a plate.”

Ms. Jull Costa begins her introduction to the novel by noting that Mr. Lobo Antunes is “generally considered to be Portugal’s greatest living writer.” She was writing a few weeks after the death last year of the Nobel laureate [José Saramago](#), whose work she also has translated, but even during Saramago’s lifetime many readers and critics preferred Mr. Lobo Antunes, who certainly is the more subtle and sardonic of the two. Where the doctrinaire Saramago saw simple blacks and whites (communism and atheism good, fascism and Catholicism bad), Mr. Lobo Antunes is an equal-opportunity skeptic, firing darts at all kinds of targets, including his narrator.

Since the publication of “The Land at the End of the World” Mr. Lobo Antunes, now 68, has gone on to write more than a score of other novels and win many literary prizes. Often, as in [“The Inquisitors’ Manual”](#) and “The Return of the Caravels,” his subject has again been Portugal’s troubled history, in particular the scars left by colonialism. But it was “The Land at the End of the World” that first enabled him to open that floodgate, and, as this fine translation shows, it continues to stack up against the best of his later, more mature and experimental work.



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