



FILHOS DE IMPÉRIO E PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS
CHILDREN OF EMPIRES AND EUROPEAN POSTMEMORIES
ENFANTS D'EMPIRES ET POSTMÉMOIRES EUROPÉENNES

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TWO MEMORIES OF THE COLONIAL WAR

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Artillery

The man told me about his war. He was mobilized halfway through an leisurely course in Maths and became an officer in the artillery. He calculated targets for the mortar fire. They sent him to a barracks in the forests of Northern Angola. He was the most slovenly officer of the garrison: badly dressed, with his hat awry. It was said of him that he lived in another world - perhaps the abstract world of mathematics, which took up all his attention and distracted him from immediate, worldly things. In the barracks there were giant artillery pieces which fired hundreds of kilometres. They brought him the data, and, poring over the maps and armed with a ruler and a compass, he determined coordinates, speeds, and angles. He was respected because his calculations never missed. He was deep in them every morning.



Then he delivered the firing sheet, had lunch, and at three in the afternoon went to have a nap, with the blessing of the commander. It was then that the firing would begin. The cannons thundered and he slept. Explosions ripped the sky and made the building shake, and he slept. He worked like this throughout the whole deployment of two and a half years. Every now and then he was applauded for the devastation that he enabled the artillery to inflict upon the enemy. One day, an enemy mortar wiped out the room where he worked. Everyone thought that the officer was dead among the rubble. But, moments before, he had left the room to go and piss. He joined the group searching for his corpse. With a coolness that chilled us all he was indignant at the mess the shell had made of his maps and notes. Towards the end of his deployment the commander of the battalion proposed that the infallible geometrician should receive a formal commendation from the regional general. The text was already signed off when one of his calculations led to the destruction of a geodetic landmark made by the Portuguese a hundred years ago and considered a monument of national interest. The commander of the battalion sent a fax to ask whether it had simply been by negligence that this historic monument of geographical science had been destroyed. The general wrote of the heroic achievements of those who had preceded them in the African lands, who had conquered new provinces for Portugal inch by inch. Their antecedents, the battalion commander wrote, had brought "civilization and the Christian religion to races that lived in paganism." This was what the landmark reminded us, and why it mattered. The officer, who had not yet formally received the expected commendation, replied in simple terms to the general: "I hit the co-ordinates in the papers I was given." They commended him. Finally, he told me this: "I always wanted to know about the bombs and the mortars!" I suppose his interest was really the mathematics, the two-dimensional plane of the maps. The consequence of his maps and his maths – the destruction inflicted on the enemy – was indifferent to him. There are people like this: when they survive a bomb or an earthquake, they only worry about shaking the plaster of their clothes. Perhaps they the lucky ones.

Dentures

In the dentist's waiting room, I listened to three old men talk. They were relishing a discussion about their false teeth, slipping their dentures out of their mouths and flaunting them, to make sure they got their points across.

Two of them detailed the ways they lost each tooth, and how each false tooth had emerged in their place. But they noticed that the third man was silent. Finally he said, "in my case, it was a bullet."

He said he had fought in the colonial war and his platoon was ambushed. He and his comrades jumped out of their cars, sprawled on the ground, and engaged the enemy, firing blindly into a copse a hundred yards away. Something hit him in the mouth. It felt like biting on stone, like chewing strange objects. His mouth was filled with blood. He spat out a bullet and several teeth. Seeing his teeth in the dust he was overcome by a burst of rage. He threw caution to the wind and ran, howling, across the open field towards the copse, firing. He had got used to keeping his head in the face of the mutilation and death of his companions, but something in him snapped when he spat out his own bloodied teeth. It was as if to say: "Anything but the teeth! Anyone who fucks with my teeth is done for." His comrades later told him that seeing him charging across that field was like watching an action movie. The enemy must have been pretty surprised, too, because, try as they might, they couldn't seem to hit him.



TWO MEMORIES OF
THE COLONIAL WAR

The other two old men had gradually lost their teeth through decay, over many years. (They never went to the war.) They closed their lips tight, and hid their dentures.

Translated by **Alexandra Reza**

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