

POEMS  
POEMAS



Corsino Fortes

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## Introduction

Born and brought up on the Cape Verdean island of São Vicente in 1933, Corsino Fortes undertook his studies in Portugal and spent much of his working life abroad on diplomatic service – notably in Angola and Lisbon.

So while his work is concerned with giving voice to the life of his own country, his perspective is often that of an exile – and the themes of exile and redemptive return recur in his work (see ‘Emigrante’, p. 9). Having published some of his earlier work in the latter issues of *Claridade* (Clarity), a literary review that defined Cape Verdean literary identity from the later 1930s to 1960 (and gave its name to a prominent movement), Fortes published his first full collection, *Pão & Fonema* (Bread & Phoneme), in 1974. And while much of *Pão & Fonema* was written while Fortes was living outside Cape Verde, like so much of his work, it is concerned specifically with his homeland.

Fortes’ use of Cape Verdean Creole – and not just standard Portuguese – in his writing is itself a powerful statement reinforcing the idea of the islands’ distinctive African nature. Among the poems from this first collection to be written partly or fully in Creole are ‘Carta de Bia d’Ideal’ and ‘Konde palmanhã manchê’ (pp. 15 and 27); in the former, Fortes’s friend the poet T. Thio Thiofe (pseudonym of João Varela) is chided for neglecting his Creole to write in Portuguese, the more traditional language of literature – and colonialism.

*Pão & Fonema* was written and published in the dying days of Portuguese rule in Cape Verde (in the wake of decades of intermittent drought and famine); by the following summer the counter-colonial revolutionary struggle would be won and the archipelago declared independent; the post-colonial dawn of ‘Konde palmanhã manchê’ had arrived. Yet these are not obviously political poems as we usually understand that term; they do not deal with the country’s governments, leaders or freedom-fighting heroes, but present the islands almost mythically – as living places imbued with creative,

regenerative forces. Images recur – a pestle, a musical instrument, sun, beach, breasts, bread – physical, inanimate things assigned vital and sometimes epic powers. The poems in this chapbook in particular are significant, in Fortes' words, for the 'telluric and experiential expression' evident in them. By this expression, Fortes seeks to reformulate his re-born country.

The four poems in this volume, and the further six also chosen for translation (selected with the assistance of Stefan Tobler), seek to reflect recurring issues in Fortes' work, as well as a range of style and tone. They are often exclamatory and dramatically musical, offering a particular challenge to the poet tasked with producing an English version, who must seek to recreate this music without sounding, in Sean O'Brien's words, too 'empty and inflated'. It is a challenge made all the more demanding by many of the poems' reliance on recurring images that have no obvious resonance in English; as well, of course, as by the variation between the two languages Fortes employs.

*Pão & Fonema* was followed in 1986 by *Árvore & Tambor* (Tree and Drum), then in 2001 by *Pedras de Sol & Substância* (Stones of Sun and Substance) – Fortes' only three published collections to date. In 'A Cesariana dos três Continentes' (p. 23), from the opening to the latter collection, he returns to the very birth of the archipelago – not its twentieth-century political rebirth, but its first, prehistoric formation, ten 'navels of stone' set in the sea between the continents of Africa, Europe and America; even the islands themselves are fully animate here, and they heave with creative power.

DANIEL HAHN

## EMIGRANTE

Todas as tardes o poente dobra  
o teu polegar sobre a ilha  
E do poente ao polegar  
cresce  
um progresso de pedra morta  
Que a Península  
Ainda bebe  
Pela taça da colónia  
Todo o sangue do teu corpo peregrino

Mas quando a tua voz  
for onda no violão da praia  
E a terra do rosto E o rosto da terra  
Estender-te a palma da mão  
Da oral marítima da ilha  
De pão & pão feita  
Ajunturás a última fome  
à tua fome primeira

Do alto virão  
Rostos-e-proas-da-não-viagem  
Assim erva assim mercúrio  
Arrancar-te as cruces do corpo

O grito das mães leva-te  
agora  
À sétima esquina  
onde a ilha naufraga  
onde a ilha festaja  
A sua dor de filha  
E a tua dor de parturiente

Que toda a partida É potência na morte  
todo o regresso É infância que soletra

## EMIGRANT

Every evening, sunset crooks  
    its thumb across the island  
And from the sunset to the thumb  
    there grows  
    a path of dead stone  
And this peninsula  
    Still drinks  
All the blood of your wandering body  
From a tenant farmer's cup

But when your voice  
    becomes a chord on the shore's guitar  
And the earth of the face and the face of the earth  
    Extend the palm of the hand  
From the seaward edge of the island  
    A palm made of bread  
You will merge your final hunger  
    with your first

From above there will come  
The faces and prows of not-voyage  
    So that herbal and mercury  
Extract the crosses from your body

The screaming of mothers carries you  
    now

To the seventh corner  
    where the island is shipwrecked  
    where the island celebrates  
Your daughter pain  
The pain of a woman in childbirth

So that all parting is power in death  
    all return a child's learning to spell

Já não esperamos o metabolismo  
Polme de boa fruta fruta de boa polpa  
A terra  
aspira  
teu falo verde

E antes que teu pé  
seja  
árvore na colina

E tua mão  
cante  
lua nova em meu ventre

Vai E planta  
na boca d'Amílcar morto  
Este punhado de agrião  
E solver golo a golo  
uma fonética de frescura  
E com as vírgulas da rua  
com as sílabas de porta em porta  
Varrerás antes da noite  
Os caminhos que vão  
até às escolas nocturnas  
Que toda a partida é alfabeto que nasce  
todo o regresso é nação que soletra

Aguardam-te  
os cães e os leitões  
da casa de Chota  
que no quintal emagrecem de morabeza

Aguardam-te  
os copos E a semântica das tabernas

No longer do we wait for the cycle  
Pulp from good fruit, fruit from good pulp  
The earth  
breathes in  
your green speech

And there before your feet  
should be  
a tree on a hill

And your hand  
should sing  
a new moon in my heart

Go and plant  
in dead Amilcar's mouth  
This fistful of watercress  
And spread from goal to goal  
a fresh phonetics  
And with the commas of the street  
and syllables from door to door  
You will sweep away before the night  
The roads that go  
as far as the night-schools  
For all departure means a growing alphabet  
for all return is a nation's language

They await you  
the dogs and the piglets  
at Chota's house  
grown thin from the warmth of the welcome

They await you  
the cups and semantics of taverns

Aguardem-te  
as alimárias  
amordaçadas de aplauso e cana-de-açúcar

Aguardam-te  
os rostos que explodem  
no sangue das formigas  
novos campos de pastorícia

Mas  
quando o teu corpo  
sangue & lenhite de puro cio

Erguer  
Sobre a seara

A tua dor

E o teu orgasmo  
Quem não soube  
Quem não sabe

Emigrante

Que toda a partida É potência na morte  
E todo o regresso É infância que soletra

They await you  
the beasts  
choking on applause and sugarcane

They await you  
faces that explode  
on the blood of ants  
new pastorals to cultivate

But  
when your body  
of blood and lignite, on heat

Raises  
Over the harvest

Your pain

And your orgasm

Who didn't know

Who doesn't know

Emigrant

That all of parting is power in death

And all return is a child learning to spell

CARTA DE BIA D'IDEAL

19 deste mês  
a barlavento das almas que sabiam

Junzin! até na boca de Soncente  
Bô nome agora ê Vário ô T. Thio Thiofe  
E Corsa de David dzê  
C'ma bô ê um negro negro greco-latino  
Ma! dvera dvera  
As ondas  
já trepam  
os degraus do teu poema  
E quebram no violão da ilha  
Tectos d'Europa  
sob as nossas cabeças

Junzin! há muito  
Que não bebes a água  
Da nossa secura  
Dvera dvera  
Há one driba d'one  
ma cinq'one e um dia

Que pedra ê regode pa sponja dnos coração  
C'ma spiga de sangue na dor dum concha de lête  
Oh dor de cara contente  
dor calode  
dor sentode  
dor lançode —  
ma dor!

LETTER FROM BIA D'IDEAL

The 19th of the month  
to windward of the souls that knew me

Junzin! Even to the people San Vicente  
Your name is Vario or T. Thio Thiofe  
And I, Corsa de David, say  
You've become a black black Greco-Latin man  
But really – really  
The waves  
already climb  
the steps of your poem  
And inside the guitar of the island  
The roofs of Europe  
break over our heads

Junzin! A long time now  
Since you drank the waters  
Of our thirst  
It's true – it's true  
Years upon years  
plus five years more, then a day

That the sponge of our hearts has wet the rock  
And a conch of milk holds a thread of blood  
Oh the pain of a cheerful man!  
silent pain  
pain in repose  
pain cast out  
but pain always

C'ma dor de som na viola  
C'ma dor de s'mente na tchon  
C'ma dor de vulcon na coraçon —  
ma hoje!

'M ca ta dzê  
merci  
thank you  
danke schön  
Paquê!

Konde Djosa  
saí porta fora  
c'se caxa d'engraxâ

Tanha morrê na bandera de porta  
C'se fome de maçã travessode na boca

Oh pove de Rua de Craca  
Alimentode  
nesse colde d'pêxe de 16 toston  
Boçes bem ovi  
viola de Patada  
ma  
violão d'Antonzin

Ta rasgâ na sangue de Tanha  
Um silêncio de tantas portas  
Boçes bem oiâ  
mostre de navi  
ma  
vela de navi

The ache of the viola's note  
Ache of the seed in the earth  
Ache of the volcanic heart  
but today

I will not say  
merci  
thank you  
danke schön  
Why?

When Djosa  
went out of the door  
with his shoeshine box

Tanha died by the flag at the gate  
With the apple hunger stuck in her mouth

Oh people of the Rua de Craca  
Fed  
on fish-broth for 16 tostãos  
You all gather to hear  
Patrada's viola  
and  
Antonzin's guitar  
Open in the blood of Tanha  
A silence made of many doors  
You gather to see  
the ship's mast  
and  
the ship's canvas

Rasgode  
    quebrode  
        na oi de Tanha  
        Paquê! Konde Djosa

Abri na morada  
    camim de sol aberte

Tanha plantâ na vente  
    Se boca de maçã mordide

Junzin! 'm tem três cosa  
    marrode n'alma  
Três rios para nunca mais  
    um scrite na mon  
    dôs scrite na boca  
    três scrite na sangue  
ê sol ta quebrâ na rotcha  
    se fome de gema d'ove  
ê vente ta mordê na pedra  
    se grite de farinha bronque  
ê pove ma dede de pove  
    ta screvê na tchon sentença de mon compride  
E long time ago  
    Notcha  
        já dizia  
Ao contrário de Saint-John Perse  
    Que nem sempre  
"O remo rebenta na mão do remador"

Torn  
    breaking  
        in Tanha's eyes  
        Why! When Djosa

Opened in the city  
    the sun's open road

Tanha sowed the wind  
    with the bitten apple in her mouth

Junzin! Three things  
    are bound to my soul  
Three rivers for nevermore  
    first written on the hand  
    then written in the mouth  
    then in the blood  
on the rock the sun breaks  
    the egg of hunger  
the wind grinds the stone  
    with the flour's white cry  
the people and the people's hand  
    write the longhand sentence in the earth  
And a long time ago  
    Notcha  
        was already saying  
Saint-John Perse notwithstanding  
    That it is not always true  
"That the oar will break in the oarsman's hand"

Mantenha da Bibia  
Bena  
Garda  
Vavaia  
E tod'esse pove de Rua de Crava  
Everybody

Greetings from Bibia  
Bena  
Garda  
Vavaia  
And all the people of the Rua da Crava  
Everybody

## A CESARIANA DOS TRÊS CONTINENTES

Antes

da moeda do corpo Ao capital da alma

Antes da luz

no mar da memória

E da pedra & vento na erosão do rosto

Éramos no verão da terra

A semente sem primavera

Éramos a exclamação

Do lon na lunjura

Dando

Pernas aos montes E braços às montanhas

Dando face & sentido

Às dunas do mar alto

Que respiram

as coxas

os seios

o sexo de Sahel

Lembro-me de ti! na África do teu ventre

Interrogando-se

sobre o istmo + a

proa do nosso destino

Quando pólos e penínsulas de maremoto

Rasgaram & rasgavam

No vórtice da vida! na fractura da terra

A cesariana dos três continentes

THE CAESAREAN OF THREE CONTINENTS

Before

the body was coin and the soul *Kapital*

Before the light

on the remembered sea

And the erosion of the face by stone and wind

We lived inside the summer of the earth

The seed that had no spring

We were the exclamation

Of the 'di' in distance

We gave

Legs to the hills and arms to the mountains

Gave a face and a meaning

To the dunes of the high seas

That breathe out

the thighs

the breasts

the sex of the Sahel

I remember you! In Africa your womb

Enquiring of yourself

about the isthmus + the

prow of our destiny

When poles, peninsulas and tidal waves

Tore and tore

In the vortex of life! In the fracture of earth

The Caesarean of the three continents



We became navels of stone  
    revolving  
Between the skin and bone of the seasons  
We became island and island  
    beyond the wind  
    in the evasive archipelago

Thus it was pronounced  
    Before & after the 1st day + the  
Erosion of the chronicle  
    in the mouth of the Written Stone

## KONDE PALMANHÃ MANCHÊ

Ó Konde  
Ó Konde palmanhã manchê  
Konde note ftcha ftchode  
E palmanhã manchê  
C'pê plantode na tchon  
E terra na coraçon  
Konde sangue rasgâ na corpe  
Arve de broçe aberte  
E smente gritâ na rotcha  
Tambor de boca verde  
E daquel som  
Ma quell sangue soldode  
Nascê boca  
    boca centrode  
    boca rasgode  
Na roda de sol

Ó Konde palmanhã manchê  
Sem dsuspère pundrode  
Na bandêra de porta  
Sem lanterna cindide  
Na robe de burre  
Pa naufroge de navi  
Sem navi quebrode  
Na boca de pove  
E mar bem olte! brobe!  
    dsusperode  
Ben quebrâ na Praia Grande  
Sês broçe gorde de pecode  
E mar bem  
Na se luxe  
E na se grandêza!  
Se mostre

## WHEN MORNING BREAKS

Oh when  
Oh when the morning breaks  
And the night becomes more night  
When the morning breaks  
With its feet on the ground  
And the earth in its heart  
When blood flows from the body  
Like a tree with open arms  
And the seed shouts from the rock  
Like a green-mouthed drum  
And from that sound  
That warrior's blood  
Mouths are born  
    centred mouths  
    torn mouths  
In the wheel of the sun

Oh when the morning breaks  
Without hanging its despair  
On the flag of the door  
Without lighting torches  
On the donkeys' tails  
To bring wrecks  
Without shipwrecks  
On the people's tongues  
Then the desperate sea – very high –  
    Bravo!  
Will come to break on Praia Grande  
On its fat sinful arms  
And the sea will come  
In its luxury  
In its grandeur  
Showing its mast

De mar erguide na pêto  
Se mapa bronque  
Desenhode n'alma  
Bem bidê na colônia dnha boca  
Tod'aquel negoce dnha sangue ultramarine

Ó Konde palmanhã manchê  
E Criste bem dsê morada  
El bem ta bem  
Pa broçe direita de Monte Cara  
C'se cobe d'ensexada  
Ma se calçon drill  
C'se pê na tchon  
Ma se dede quebrode  
Bem sentâ  
Na pedra radonde dnôs fogon  
Sem tchuva na mon  
Sem fraqueza na sangue  
E sem corve na coraçon

Ó Konde  
Ó Konde palmanhã manchê

On the heart's rough seas  
Its white map  
Drawn on the soul  
Will come to drink in my colonized tongue  
All the history of my ultramarine blood

Oh when the morning breaks  
And Christ descends from his dwelling  
And comes  
To the right arm of Monte Cara  
With the handle of his hoe  
And his drill shorts  
Barefoot  
With a split finger  
And sits down  
At our round cooking-stone  
With no rain in his hand  
No weakness in his blood  
No crow in his heart

Oh when  
Oh when the morning breaks





