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*The Broken Ones* by Natércia Pontes is one of the novels featured in the autumn 2021 Portuguese reading group run by And Other Stories.

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## **Os tais caquinhos (The Broken Ones)**

**Natércia Pontes**

**Translated by Rahul Bery**

### GUSHING WAX

So there they were, Neca and Clau, hunched over my huddled, slender body in that clean, ventilated apartment. Each of them armed with a little blue rod with cotton tips. Neca took care of the right ear; Clau, the left. The two of them exchanged knowing glances, gulped and began the clean-up. Cotton bud after cotton bud flew from their small, agile hands into the rubbish bin. Completely absorbed in their work, they made all sorts of faces, with inflamed expressions and flared nostrils, their eyes popping out in sheer fascination and disgust. All the tips were caked in a brown material. (I don't use the word "wax" because I believe it went way beyond that: there's wax, there's old wax and then there's this, the unspeakable, the incomprehensible.) Paying no attention to me, Neca and Clau commented to each other about the utterly filthy state of my ears. "It's impossible! It never ends!" they cried out in shock as they exultantly held up the tips of the cotton buds, encrusted in a dark, gloopy paste. I was coiled up in embarrassment on the stool they had given me to sit still on, dying of shame for never having used a cotton bud in my life. Deaf, deaf as the lid of a margarine tub, although that said I could, in the distance, hear the sea crashing onto the shore. This one time a ball of earwax had rolled out of my ear. I was eating a chicken pasty, with Juniana. We spent our breaktimes in the sports hall, perched on the last row of seats up at the top, bored out of our minds. That was when Juniana howled, frowning her immense forehead and pointing at my ear, as if she'd spotted an intruder: "There's a bug in there!" I put my finger in my ear. Upon inspecting the cavity, I realised that the object in question had hair. It wasn't a bug. It

was wax. A spherical, hairy wax cob. As I touched its strange body I made a very quick decision. I pretended it was an agitated insect. "Eew, Juniana! Gross!" I ran to the toilet. I closed the cubicle door. I counted to thirty. My eyelid twitching, I pulled the chain and returned to class once I'd heard the bell.

#### 402, DEN OF LOOSE TILES

My apartment wasn't clean and ventilated like Neca's. Nor was it aseptic and lavender-scented like the toilet cubicles at school. In our home, cockroaches weren't hunted down and killed. Even if, on a bad day, the odd one did get squashed as the result of an outburst of existential rage by one of the tenants (my family), our house was something of a safe space for those docile, spiny-legged insects. They loved to sleep in mugs, explore the nooks and crannies of our trainers, dive into the dregs of the water jug, march up and down the lengths of our toothbrushes. A sweet smell of cockroach wafted through our lives like incense. There was an unspoken agreement between us and them. I overlooked the insect infestation and in exchange I expected them to show a bare minimum of respect. Not climbing over my face as I slept, for example. Most of the time the cockroaches kept to our agreement and life became more bearable. Often I would forget about them and sleep wrapped in the thin sheet that smelled of grease. But sooner or later, in the kitchen drawer that was full of grimy cutlery, I'd find a loose leg and lives would become indecipherable again, much like our dark apartment where the light in our living room never worked, perhaps because there was no living room. There was, however a heap of cardboard boxes stuffed with crumbling books. Some of the boxes had to occupy the balcony because there wasn't enough space inside. Then it would rain and the boxes would go mushy before drying out in the wind and sun. Within a few years it had become a mouldy scrapheap, full of termites' nests. The thought of opening that glass door with its rusty hinges was so horrifying that we decided never to do it again.

#### UNTIL ZOMA LEFT AND TOOK HUGA AND ARIEL WITH HER

And so it was. We were left behind: me, Berta and Lúcio and the cockroaches. But Lúcio loved the streets and spent as much time as possible on them. He'd stay there until the cock crowed and the sun rose. When he came back, he'd carefully turn the key, check the gas valve and close the sliding windows almost all the way, leaving just a chink open. The wind that came in through that tiny gap lulled our adolescent insomnia with a lifeless, whistled lullaby. When it was time to go to school, Berta and I would gather our scrunched-up uniforms from the heap of dirty clothes lying in the utility room. The intricate paths drawn by the cracks in the tiles in the utility room. The yellow tiles in the utility room, from where we could spy on the neighbourhood through the holes in the latticework. The big house with its wet yard, washed with powerful jets of the hose by the thin servant. The other house, with no enclosure surrounding it and gnarled cat's claw growing up the walls. And the smart condominium, with helicoidal balconies jutting out from it, crammed with potted ferns. Outside, everything seemed to be in order. Inside, the plates were missing, and so were the bed and bath rags. Inside, the paintings were always waiting to be hanged and the pots and pans had dents, black marks, odd lids and loose handles. There was

a layer of fat covering the surfaces of the few pieces of furniture we owned. I found the lack of a sofa deeply embarrassing. I remember opening the fridge and being greeted by a blast of cold sulphur. A gone-off yoghurt. A tray of ham – the edges of each slice curled up and blackened, white dots of mould growing like specks of foam on the pink flesh, little clusters of cotton. That was when there was any food. Most of the time we had nothing to eat, and Berta and I would have to go and ask the neighbours for eggs. We'd return from school exhausted, call Lúcio and ask for lunch. We're hungry, Dad. He'd sigh and send a taxi for us. Silent and starving, we'd climb into the back seats, the driver also quiet as the muffled sound of the taxi radio continued uninterrupted and the sad islands in the sunlit avenues flew past the window. Finally, we reached our destination: an air-conditioned restaurant, populated with round tables topped with white twill towels. We'd look around and find Lúcio sitting right at the back, head down in concentration and writing in his notebook. Next to him, a glass of perspiring draught beer and in the middle of the table an empty plate which had just moments ago been home to a portion of sliced sausage. He'd look up over the rim of the glass with his feline eyes and ask us what we wanted. With his big hands he'd slide over the leather-covered menu and say: choose. I always ordered the shrimp au gratin in pineapple. The more sober Berta went with the Osvaldo Aranha steak. A jug of coconut water to drink. And for dessert, unanimously, two soft, airy chocolate mousses. Generally, these lunches were washed down in silence. On the odd occasion I would interrupt with a school-related anecdote or two. But despite the black holes and the low temperatures – our cold legs, the hairs standing up on our arms – we were united by a strong link, a primal sense of family, a gelatinous shared understanding protecting us like a placenta. We were together. We were together. Those feline eyes watching us, scrutinising each of our inner journeys, guessing our next steps. We'd travel back in the same taxi, expelling moussey belches. That would be the only meal of the day, unless we asked the neighbours for some eggs.

## EGGS

The afternoons were long and dull. Quite often we'd just sleep. The TV on, the fan's filthy blades blowing onto our faces. As night fell Berta and I would wake up in foul moods, our throats parched. We drank water from the filter, which tasted of rust. I'd be so lethargic that Berta would go out and I'd just lie there, my shins pressed against the wall. The dirty soles of my feet leaving marks, little grey "S"s. Between them, the Salvador Dalí posters. A massive cricket. A melting clock. An elephant with enormous, skinny legs. Ants, more ants, a whole swarm of ants. Though static in the painting I was still able to follow their movements. I'd stay like that for a long time. The TV on. Legs raised until my feet were sleepy and blue. The phone ringing would rouse me from my trance. It was situated in the kitchen, since there wasn't really a living room, just a sign on the door prohibiting entry (the keys were kept in Lúcio's tempting pocket) and, at the opening to the corridor, a barred dam that made getting through impossible. The "bars" were actually empty metal bookshelves acting as a see-through rampart. From the corridor, we could glimpse the mountain of books, the reams of paper, the textbooks, pots full of unsharpened pencils, dried-out pens, hole punchers, staplers, paperclip boxes stuffed with rusty cartridges, shoeboxes full of random objects, compasses, rulers of various sizes and colours, scissors still in their packaging

and a fine layer of dust and rust covering everything with a grey sheen.

#### TRENCH MADE OF MOTH-EATEN SHEETS

I remember the first time I felt rage. I despised all of those objects once I understood what they meant. I planned to kick them to pieces. I planned to claw at the bars and pummel them and make my hands as filthy as a prisoner's. I planned to throw buckets of soapy water on all the books and papers and all those disgusting objects. I planned to open the frosted glass door which led out onto the balcony and throw the boxes of books from it, from a height of four floors. I pictured it all in my dark room and cried thick, salty tears. I went quiet. An exhausted Lúcio arrived, slowly rotating the key in the lock. He checked the gas valve in the kitchen, reached the corridor and began the ritual of almost closing all the windows but leaving a tiny chink open. He entered my dark room to see a shrivelled corn cob lying beneath a flimsy sheet: I was pretending to sleep, and my body was hot with rage. I was sweating under there, and my tears and my hormones combined into a thick soup. Then, just like that, I fell into a deep sleep. Lúcio left my room and continued towards his own. He checked the two light switches in the corridor multiple times. The lights blinked intermittently and their clicking invaded my sleep and became mixed in with my turmoil, my torment. Lúcio walked to the foot of the bed, which was covered in books and thick folders and plastic sheets and empty boxes and inner soles and postcards and odd shoelaces and diaries and invites and portraits and rolls of newspapers and shoehorns and calendars and mementos from birthday parties. All torturously arranged and adrift, yet somehow forming an almost harmonious line, like a file of ants. There was a little space left where Lúcio could sleep. In my muffled torment I dreamt of tiny goblin claws advancing underneath the bed. The slender, knobbly fingers, with little sharp black nails were hunting me down. I shrunk into the corner of the mattress, up against the cold wall. Boils grew on the sheet, and when I burst them with frenzied swipes white, fluffy butterflies emerged. Delicate metallic spiders scaled the walls and fused into Salvador Dalí's deserts and cliffs. Rona's spirit crossed its legs next to me, puffing out fat clouds of smoke and conversing in a guttural, incomprehensible tongue, never pausing so that I could intervene or express my point of view. Rona was an older friend who never looked you in the eye. One day she revealed that she could see a spirit accompanying us (me, Berta and Lúcio). A spirit that smelled of sulphur, wore black and had probably escaped from a soap opera casting. Rona was right; a heavy breath sighed out a deep, sustained note. Our house was awful.

#### THE VISIT

One hot afternoon a grasshopper escaped from the poster stuck to the bedroom wall. It had a fleshy abdomen and it was enormous, as big as a hen. It shone light green and its eyes were opaque and expressionless, as if it was wearing sunglasses. Its carcass was divided into oleaginous segments and its head resembled a green helmet. Two toothy claws hung down from its mouth, eclipsed by its obtuse camel face. The long, rugged antennae trembled subtly, the only sign of it being alive. Its spiny legs, with thick spines on the tips, were divided into six parts. The four front legs were shorter

while the two back ones were enormous, robust, its long and chubby thighs becoming knees that resembled some kind of bold moth. Its entire body, a sausage-shaped cartridge, was covered in a delicate layer of ultra-fine hairs. The wings, drawn in and clipped like a brocade, a portion of fabric, were motionless. Was it really alive? I stood completely still by the door, like Dali's grasshopper, ants and cliffs. The furniture in our room was arranged in an absurd and illogical way, the beds placed diagonally, the desks turned towards one another, the wardrobe obstructing the window, blocking the light. The grasshopper and I stood stock still like a photograph of a danse macabre, a mating ritual so feeble that it could well have been the involuntary result of a St Vitus's dance. The dance continued for a good while, until I spotted a glimmer in its wise gaze. Then I realised that it hated me. The cricket, formerly still, dead, apathetic – though its presence had filled the whole apartment – began to move slowly, flexing its back legs, rubbing one against the other and emitting a metallic sound. The front leg moved in perfect harmony with the next one, and the next, and the next, like a staple gun. For some reason it left the statue pose in front of my wardrobe, grew agitated and scuttled away from that tomblike silence. It turned towards me, puffed up its wings and began chirping. I couldn't stay in the house, my ears were on fire and itching like mad and a thick trail of wax and blood was dripping from the cavities. I reached the stairs and walked down all four floors, panting like a rabbit being pursued by a dog.

#### SOFA UPON SOFA, AND NOT A SINGLE PLACE TO SIT

Berta and I were always at each other's necks. Over the years a dynamite stick made of rage, hormones, humidity, heat, logistical helplessness, filth, incomprehension towards life, dusty cutlery and loose cockroach legs encrusted in a dried-up soap bar, had been slowly burning away beneath us. But in spite of everything we held on to our dreams: we incessantly sketched pictures of cosy bedrooms and pretended we lived in the ideal habitat of a clean, looked-after and respected adolescent, one who was worthy of soft duvets, mood lighting, clean dressers, with all the drawers in perfect working order of course, nice clothes, sheer curtains, a heart-shaped corkboard fastened to the wall and covered with photos from memorable birthday parties; beneath it a chest full of diaries stuffed with cuttings from *Capricho* magazine, to which we would have annual subscription, one that was never rubbed in the other's face whenever there was a minor argument about our dreams or all the insect legs imaginable (located in one's ear canals, for example). I think the biggest shock was the day that Lúcio said it was important to be hungry. After school, when Berta and I arrived home to find no sofa to stretch out our legs on or toss our books onto, our cravings for a nice big plate of rice, minced meat and beans would cause us to boil over. We'd fantasise about a big, foaming jar of pineapple juice. Immerse ourselves in the inconceivable possibility of savouring a small cube of avocado ice cream after lunch, generously covered in a broth of condensed milk. But there was only an incessant dripping, which left a stain on the ceiling paintwork, and a margarine tub containing an old onion. There were also questions that needed answering regarding Berta's clothes, which were visibly nicer and more interesting and in a better state than mine. In the meantime, I was in the habit of pilfering them, staining them and losing them, which left Berta continually annoyed with me. Once, after not having

eaten lunch yet again and having called Lúcio only to be given the sage advice that, yes, it was very important to be hungry, Berta was huffing and puffing because she couldn't find her denim skirt. Used to lying, used to defying her with irony and scorn, I lied. She exploded into a never-before-seen rage and, with twinkling cricket eyes that bubbled over with a glorious certainty, roared at me: you know nothing, you know nothing. She opened the broken drawers and furiously pulled out all my clothes, grimy knickers and stray bits of ribbon and odd socks and tattered bikinis, then grabbed the whole pile of clothes and, like a busy longshoreman, threw each item out of the window, down four floors. Still not satisfied, she located all of my raggedy shoes and threw them out the window as well. I remember watching my yellow trainers trace a perfect parabola in the air before they landed in the vacant lot opposite. Down in the communal courtyard our friends from the building and the neighbours who gave us eggs were dodging the heels and sandals, howling ferally under the shower of rags falling onto their heads: "Don't stop! Don't stop! Don't stop!"

*The above extract was translated by Rahul Bery*

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