

Beyond Thought

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By Teow Lim Goh

Near to the Wild Heart

By Clarice Lispector, translated by Alison Entrekin
New Directions, 2012.



The Passion According to G.H.

By Clarice Lispector, translated by Idra Novey
New Directions, 2012.

Água Viva

By Clarice Lispector, translated by Stefan Tobler
New Directions, 2012.

The Hour of the Star

By Clarice Lispector, translated by Benjamin Moser
New Directions, 2012.

A Breath of Life

By Clarice Lispector, translated by Johnny Lorenz
New Directions, 2012.

Why This World: A Biography of Clarice Lispector

By Benjamin Moser
Oxford University Press, 2009.

In Brazil, the novelist Clarice Lispector is recognized by her first name. Her face appears on postage stamps, condominiums are named after her, and her books sold in subway stations. Many Brazilian artists regard her as an inspiration. The singer Cazuza reportedly read *Água Viva* 111 times. The filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar compares her to J.M. Coetzee. Despite this reputation, she has been little known in the English speaking world.

The American writer and translator Benjamin Moser first encountered Lispector's *The Hour of the Star* in a college Portuguese class. Intrigued, he devoted his career to bringing her work to a wider English speaking audience. His *Why This World*, which appeared in 2009, is the first major biography of Lispector in English. He also oversaw the retranslations of the five of her books listed above. As he writes, previous translators tended to flatten her unusual syntax and grammar. In these new versions, he aims to "restore the spines to the cactus."

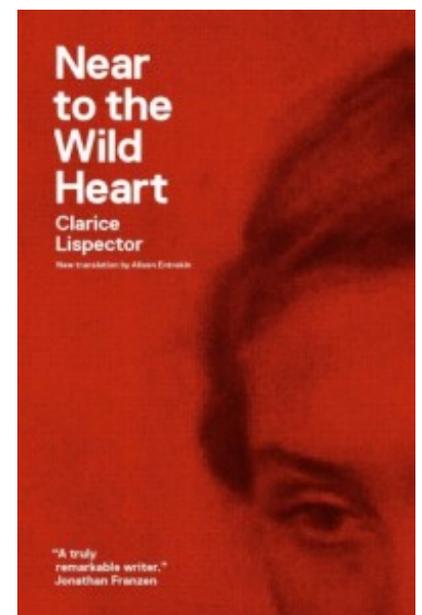
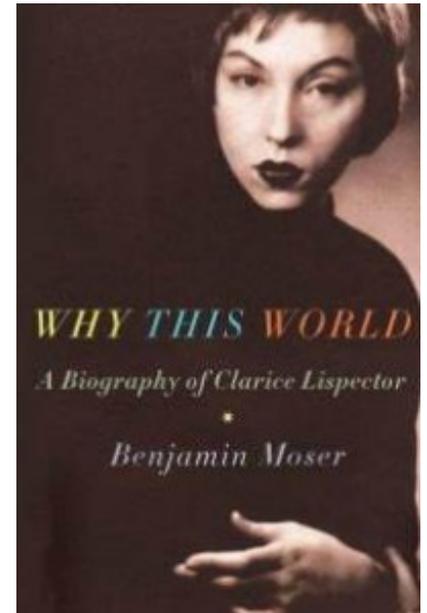
Chaya Pinkhasovna Lispector was born in 1920 to a Jewish family in Podolia, Ukraine. Between the two world wars, the former Russian empire was caught in civil strife. After the monarchy was toppled in the 1917 revolution, the country broke into factions warring for power. Nationalists stirred up longstanding hostilities towards Jews. Mobs broke into Jewish homes, killing the men and raping the women, and taking away all their belongings. In three years, about half a million Jews were murdered or dispossessed.

In *Why This World*, Moser puts together a convincing case that her mother had been raped in the pogroms and contracted syphilis as a result. The folk remedies of the time prescribed pregnancy as an antidote for genital sores and it is likely that Lispector, the youngest of three girls, was conceived to cure her mother. In that she failed and she carried the guilt throughout her life. As a child, she began inventing stories, believing that they could save her mother.

The year after Lispector was born, the family fled Ukraine and sought asylum in Brazil. They settled in Recife, a port town in the poor northeastern region of the country, and lived in a house so shabby that Lispector and her sisters thought it would collapse on them. Their father, who was a scholar before the Russian Civil War broke out, struggled to make ends meet doing odd jobs. Their mother continued to deteriorate from her illness. She became paralyzed and died when Lispector was nine. Six years after her death, their father moved the girls to Rio.

At 22, Lispector wrote her first novel *Near to the Wild Heart* while attending law school and working as a journalist in Rio. It appeared in the following year. Despite the small print run of 1,000, it was lauded in Brazilian literary circles. Critics called the book "the greatest debut novel a woman had written in all Brazilian literature" and the author "the rarest literary personality in our world of letters". Sergio Millet wrote, "For the first time, a Brazilian author goes beyond simple approximation in this almost virgin field of literature; for the first time, an author penetrates the depths of the psychological complexity of the modern soul."

Near to the Wild Heart is the story of the amoral Joana. Orphaned at a young age, she is taken in by an aunt. Her aunt catches her stealing and she says, "Yes, I stole because I wanted to. I'll only steal when I want to. There's no harm in that." Terrified, her aunt sends her away to boarding school. As an adult, Joana marries the law student Otávio. He had been engaged to his childhood sweetheart, the content and domestic Lídia, but when he met Joana he was drawn to her mystery and broke off the engagement. Joana balks at the confines of marriage and seeks freedom through introspection:



The certainty that evil is my calling, thought Joana.

What else was that feeling of contained force, ready to burst forth in violence, that longing to apply it with her eyes closed, all of it, with the rash confidence of a wild beast. Wasn't it in evil alone that you could breathe fearlessly, accepting the air and your lungs? Not even pleasure would give me as much pleasure as evil, she thought surprised. She felt a perfect animal inside her, full of contradictions, of selfishness and vitality.

She remembered her husband, who possibly couldn't recognize her in this idea. She tried to remember what Otávio looked like. The minute she sensed he had left the house, however, she transformed, concentrated on herself and, as if she had merely been interrupted by him, continued slowly living the thread of her childhood, forgetting him and moving from room to room profoundly alone. From the quiet neighborhood, from the distant houses, no sounds reached her. And, free, not even she knew what she was thinking.

Her coldness baffles Otávio and, longing for simplicity, he returns to an affair with Lídia. Joana finds out Lídia is pregnant with his child and confronts her, saying, "I'll give you Otávio, not now, but when I want to. I'll have a child and then I'll give Otávio back to you." She has an affair with a stranger. She mentions Lídia's child to Otávio. Ashamed, and startled by her indifference, he lashes out at her, calling her, as her aunt did, a viper. Joana leaves him and finally alone, she finds the strength to embrace her wildness.

Lispector's accomplishment lies in her language, which comes through in these translations. She wrote in Portuguese, the language of her adopted country, where her voice was read as strange and foreign. As Moser writes, "Clarice Lispector's weird word choices, strange syntax, and lack of interest in conventional grammar produce sentences – often fragments of sentences – that veer towards abstraction without ever quite reaching it. Her goal, mystical as well as artistic, was to rearrange conventional language to find meaning – never to discard it completely." With this language, she renders the tumult of her characters' interior monologues.

Ultimately, *Near to the Wild Heart* is a coming of age story. Joana exhibits an overwhelming sense of estrangement from herself. She fails to connect with the people around her, whether her aunt, her husband, her lover, or the other woman. She refuses to be tied down by convention. Instead, she turns inwards for freedom, and in trying to narrate her thoughts, she begins to create a self.

The same year *Near to the Wild Heart* appeared, Lispector married her fellow law student Maury Gurgel Valente, who was about to enter the diplomatic service. For 16 years, she followed him to postings in Naples, Bern, and Washington, with interludes in Rio. As the wife of a diplomat, she did not have to hold down a job. Presumably, it gave her time to work on her art. But she struggled with anxiety and depression. She was homesick. The stories she wrote during this time failed to live up to the promise of her debut. She felt isolated from the literary world that had once embraced her.

She also had to entertain luminaries and their wives. By most accounts, she was an excellent hostess, but inwardly she chafed at the pretensions of high society. In the terms of her debut novel, she played Lídia while hiding her inner Joana, which she found draining. She complained to her friend Lucio Cardoso that when she talked to the diplomats and their wives about art, she had to hold back her opinions in favor of the simplistic and sentimental. On some level, she knew that her questions were inappropriate in a milieu where appearances mattered more than substance. In 1959, frustrated with the decline of her literary career, she left Gurgel Valente and returned to Rio with their two sons.

Her return to Brazil was not easy. Though she received alimony from Gurgel Valente, she went back to journalism and raised two children, one with schizophrenia, on her own. She struggled to hold herself together. In one account, she held a dinner party and forgot to serve the food. On the other hand, she no longer had to feign interest in social niceties, which freed her to focus on her art. Though she withdrew socially, she also reconnected with her friends in the Rio literary scene, who gave her the support and opportunities she needed to make her best work.

In 1964, Lispector published *The Passion According to G.H.*, which she later described as the book that “best corresponded to my demands as a writer.” G.H. is a dilettante sculptress identified only by the initials on her luggage. The day after her maid quits, she enters the servant’s room, expecting to find a mess. Instead she finds a scrupulously white space, except for a crude charcoal drawing on the wall, and realizes that the maid must have hated her. A cockroach crawls out from under the wardrobe. In a fit of rage and fear, she slams the door on it. As she watches the insect die, she experiences a breakdown and a mystical crisis.

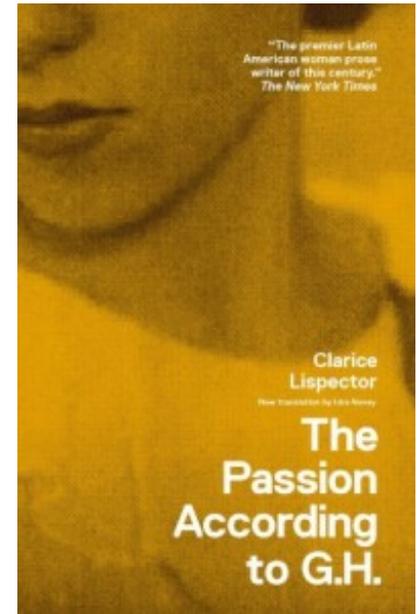
If *Near to the Wild Heart* is about the creation of a woman, *The Passion According to G.H.* describes her undoing. Socially, G.H.’s position is precarious. She grew up poor but made the right investments to live comfortably. As an artist, she occupies “a region that is socially between women and men.” When she sees that the maid had judged her, she feels unmasked. Her sense of self already unsettled, she identifies with the white matter oozing out the dying roach:

Hold my hand, because I feel that I’m going. I’m going once again towards the most divine primary life, I’m going towards a hell of a raw life. Don’t let me see because I’m close to seeing the nucleus of life – and, through the cockroach that even now I’m seeing again, through this specimen of calm living horror, I’m afraid that in this nucleus I’ll no longer know what hope is.

As the pus seeps out of the insect, millimeter by millimeter, G.H. faces her own mortality. Roaches represent a primordial world; “they had witnessed the formation of the great deposits of oil and coal in the world, and there they were during the great advance and then during the great retreat of the glaciers.” G.H. longs for a communion with a higher power, a God unattached to organized religion, and she returns to her human self only when she puts the cockroach in her mouth, uniting herself with its essence and surrendering to the unknown.

Lispector’s work is often described as philosophical, though she depends less on the logic of argument than the associations of images and emotions. She conveys G.H.’s crisis by discussing, among other things, the desert, which she likens to her soul, and salt, which is the taste of intimacy. She is less concerned with plot and setting and writes instead from the body. She rarely depicts sex, but her language is erotic, which is to say, it stems from a primeval impulse. As G.H. says, “Because a world fully alive has the power of a Hell.”

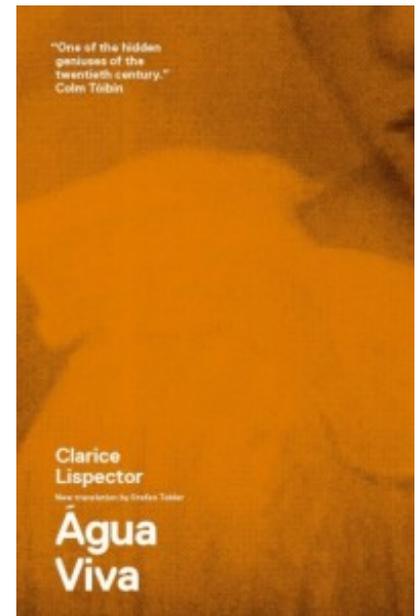
For most of her life, Lispector depended on sleeping pills. In 1966, she took one and fell asleep with a lit cigarette in her hand. Her apartment caught fire and she tried to save her papers with her hands. She survived, but the right side of her body was badly burned. Her right hand, her writing hand, was almost amputated. She underwent skin graft operations and was hospitalized for months. With physical therapy, she regained limited mobility of her hand. She could use a typewriter, albeit in pain.



Lispector was also known for her beauty. In photographs from her time on the diplomatic circuit, she is tall and striking, her bearing regal, her elegance understated. The translator Gregory Rabassa famously quipped that she looked like Marlene Dietrich and wrote like Virginia Woolf. When she returned to Rio, her makeup became, according to her friends, “scandalous.” After the fire, her body disfigured, she retreated further from social contact. She hid her right hand during interviews and had an esthetician apply ‘permanent’ makeup every day. For the rest of her life, she lived in pain.

In the 1973 *Água Viva*, Lispector does away with plot and setting altogether. It is instead an accretion of fragments, in turns diaristic and aphoristic, that read like scribbles in a notebook. The narrator, unnamed this time, is a painter who is trying to write. “When you come to read me, you will ask why I don’t keep to painting and my exhibitions, since I write so rough and disorderly,” she says. “It’s because now I feel the need for words – and what I’m writing is new to me because until now my true word has never been touched.”

These fragments trace the narrator’s thoughts, a pastiche of banalities and epiphanies, as she goes about her days. She contemplates the way music vibrates in the body. She gazes at the moon. She returns to painting and gets up to answer the phone. As she writes, she struggles with doubts about the legitimacy of her work and fears of failure:



I'm writing you this facsimile of a book, the book of someone who doesn't know how to write; but that's because in the lightest realm of speaking I almost don't know how to speak. Particularly speaking to you in writing, I who got used to being the audience, however distracted, of my voice. When I paint I respect the material I use, I respect its primordial fate. So when I write you I respect the syllables.

She also writes:

There is so much to say that I don't know how to say. The words are lacking. But I refuse to invent new ones: those that already exist must say what can be said and what is forbidden. And I can sense whatever is forbidden. If I have the strength. Beyond thought there are no words: it is itself. My painting has no words: it is beyond thought.

Though *Água Viva* is a work of fiction, it feels autobiographical, as if these thoughts were Lispector’s own. She used passages from her journals and newspaper columns in drafts of the book, which she had titled *Beyond Thought* and later *Loud Object*. She sent an early version to her publisher, only to retract it, claiming that she had not yet dried it out. In the revisions, she took out the material details of her experience.

“I write because I do not know myself,” she repeats throughout *Água Viva*. This unknowable, inaccessible self lies at the root of her artistic vision. Critics, including Moser, tend to attribute it to the trauma and dislocation of her origins. In *Água Viva*, more so than in her earlier books, she appears to have cultivated her eccentric style in order to overcome this silence.

A recluse by nature, Lispector gave few interviews and seldom spoke in public. In one instance, as Idra Novey recounts in the translator’s afterword to *The Passion According to G.H.*, she stared at an interviewer and said nothing until the woman fled the apartment. In part because of her foreign name, rumors about her identity

abounded. In some versions, she is a European writing under a pseudonym; in others, she is a man and a diplomat. Her 16-year absence from Brazil did not help either, though just before she left for Gurgel Valente's first posting, she wrote in a letter to a critic, "PS. The name is really my own."

She carried with her so much anxiety that she could not focus on people outside of herself. When she left her husband and returned to Rio, she called her friends and a lover in the middle of the night to assuage her loneliness. In the 1960s, she met Elizabeth Bishop, who wanted to translate some of her short stories for the *New Yorker*, but the plan fell through when Lispector stopped returning Bishop's calls. A psychoanalyst she saw for six years terminated their professional relationship as he felt drained by their sessions.

As her health deteriorated after the fire she became increasingly dependent on others. Addicted to tranquilizers, she often arrived at theaters and parties asleep in the taxicab. In 1970, as she was writing *Água Viva*, she met the former nun Olga Borelli, who became her assistant and confidante. Borelli was the first person who edited her work; in fact, she helped structure *Água Viva*. But Borelli's help was more than just literary. She became a mother figure and caretaker, holding Lispector's hand when the writer died in 1977.

The Hour of the Star appeared two months before Lispector's death from ovarian cancer. It is a story within a story; Rodrigo S.M., an aging upper class writer, works on the tale of Macabéa, a poor typist from the slums of Rio. Macabéa is abject. She does not know what to think or feel. She falls in love with the callous Olímpico, who humiliates her and leaves her for a wealthier woman. Lispector intertwines this story with Rodrigo's efforts to write it, narrating his thoughts as he struggles to create a character.

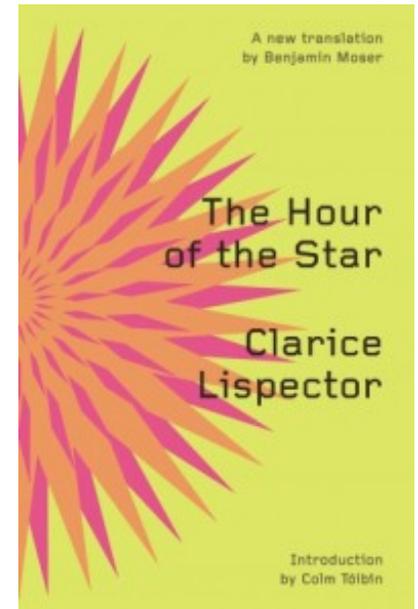
"Because on a street in Rio de Janeiro I glimpsed in the air the feeling of perdition on the face of a northeastern girl. Not to mention that as a boy I grew up in the northeast," Rodrigo says. Macabéa is his alter ego, as he is Lispector's. Though Macabéa's circumstances are unlike his, his identification with her is extreme. She is a part of him, and in writing her story, he tries to convey the thoughts he finds difficult to say. And when he puts down the work for three days, exhausted, he loses his bearings. "For the last three days, alone, without characters, I depersonalize myself and take myself off as if taking off clothes."

In *Near to the Wild Heart*, Lispector portrays introspection as an antidote to a restrictive society as well as a search for ecstasy. In the last work she published during her life, she comes up against the limits of her earlier beliefs. For Rodrigo, a thinly veiled Lispector, writing arises from pain. It is arduous, but without it, he lives in agony. "I am absolutely tired of literature; only muteness keeps me company," he says, most likely a reflection of Lispector's state of mind in her last days. "If I still write it's because I have nothing better to do in the world while I wait for death."

And he sends Macabéa to her death. She visits Madame Carlota, a psychic who foresees great wealth and love in her future. For the first time, she sees what she does not have and a desire rises from within her. As she leaves the psychic, a Mercedes runs her down. A young man who resembles the love Carlota had envisioned for her comes out of the car and she dies under his gaze. In her death, Rodrigo sees his own:

Macabéa killed me.

She is finally free of herself and of us. Don't be afraid, death is an instant, it passes like that, I know because I just died with the girl. Pray forgive me this death. Because I couldn't help it, you accept anything because you've kissed the wall. But then all of a sudden I feel my last grimace of revolt and howl: the slaughter of doves!!! Living is a luxury.



For Lispector, living is a luxury. Writing is life.

At the same time Lispector worked on *The Hour of the Star*, she began writing *A Breath of Life*. It was incomplete when she died and Borelli structured the heap of fragments she left behind into the book. Like in the tale of Rodrigo and Macabéa, in *A Breath of Life* an unnamed male author enters into a dialogue with his creation, the character Angela Pralini. And like in *Água Viva*, the conversation between the Author and Angela consists of aphorisms and observations.

Like Rodrigo, the Author is a stand in for Lispector. So is Angela, who Lispector gives attributes from her own life, such as the titles of books she had written. Angela, the Author says, is “the woman I invented because I needed a facsimile of a dialogue,” which is to say, they are two sides of Lispector, or perhaps a split personality. The Author is aware that Angela is his creation, that it is he who breathes life into her; she no longer exists when she disappears from his consciousness.

The Author is afraid to write:

It's so dangerous. Anyone who's tried, knows. The danger of stirring up hidden things – and the world is not on the surface, it's hidden in its roots submerged in the depths of the sea. In order to write I must place myself in the void. In this void is where I exist intuitively. But it's a terribly dangerous void: it's where I wring out blood.

For the Author, writing is located in the body. It is visceral. It is a matter of life and blood. Writing exhausts him, but he fights the impulse to give up. To stop writing is to create Angela's death, and in her death he sees his own. Angela knows that she is a character, dependent on the Author for her existence, and she struggles to stave off her death.

The author and his creation are indissoluble. The book ceases when the Author looks away from Angela:

As for me I'm also withdrawing from me. If the voice of God manifests itself in silence, I too silence myself. Farewell.

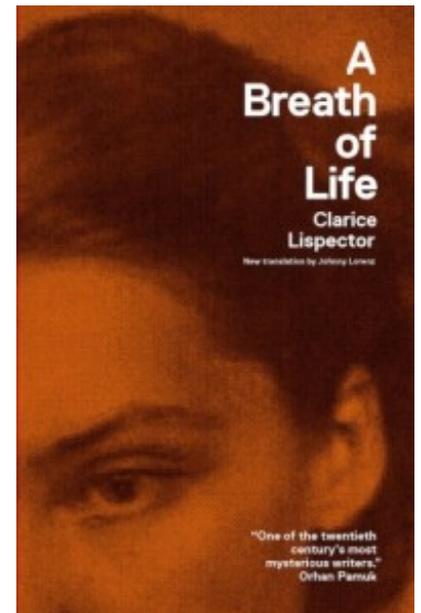
I pull back my gaze my camera and Angela starts getting small, small, smaller – until I lose sight of her.

And now I must interrupt myself because Angela interrupted life by going into the earth. But not the earth in which one is buried but the earth in which one is revived. With abundant rain in the forests and the whisper of the winds.

As for me, I am. Yes.

“I... I... no. I cannot end.”

I think that...



Lispector dictated *A Breath of Life* to Borelli up until the morning before she died. The notes she left behind still smelled of her lipstick. In her final act, art becomes life. Her words live on in our consciousness, leaving us with the question: why and for whom do we make art?

Teow Lim Goh's writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Rumpus*, *Full Stop*, *The Common*, and *The Philadelphia Review of Books*, among other publications. She lives in Boulder, Colorado.