

International Writing Program – writing samples
Felipe Franco Munhoz

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The eclipse – Felipe Franco Munhoz

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*Una lettera scritta sopra un viso
di pietra e vapore.*

São Paulo, 2023. Living room of an apartment in Perdizes. On the table (round): in the center: a takeout carton from Arabesco restaurant; at the back, towards the window (open): a soiled plate, cutlery; 90° to the left: a wine bottle (Trapiche, Malbec, 2021, online offer) (half drunk); 90° to the right: a glass (almost empty), a pair of sunglasses (worn, scratched, at hand for the eclipse viewing), an iPhone (off) and a MacBook Air laptop (on) – in front of which sits Joanna (77 but she feels 30), breathing heavily. On one side of the window, there is a mid-century wooden wall clock (the laptop confirmed the eclipse would peak at 16:49); on the other, a sideboard with a box of pills, a checkbook and a photo of a man (her long-dead husband, Paulo, 1944–2009) on top.

Joanna is breathing heavily because she feels: sorry? Because she feels: sorry for having found *love*? Joanna feels: desire, doubts *What will people think?*, *What will Marlene think?*, doubts *What will Rui think?*, desire, doubts *But: if not now, then when?*, fear, guilt *Such an unexpected development*. If only she could send a check by mail. But: bitcoins? The index finger of her left hand commanding a trembling black arrow: searching for the knocked over traffic light, aiming for the yellow *Caution* circle; reaching it, she bats *Tock* {hollow} her finger on the trackpad: making the arrow strike the center of the target. *Back soon*. The arrow stayed where it was, but Safari disappeared – leaving, in its place, the image of a smiling Rui on his fortieth birthday.

This, inserting Rui as her wallpaper, she could manage; but actions she performed naturally on her regular computer, a Dell desktop, were replete with minor obstacles. *How to flirt properly? Damn new machine!* But he promised her that *Some adjustments* were normal and *Relax* she'd soon get used to it, soon forget the old commands. *Where's the tilde?* Turn down the gift? Upset Rui? Never. Joanna touched *Tap* the sleeping surface of the iPhone *The phone was enough, easy to use*, which lit up: revealing the time: 16:41 (on a vertical section of the image [*op. cit.*] of a grinning Rui behind a white cake, *Pineapple and coconut, low sugar to keep me happy*).

On the clock, simultaneously, the hands announced four thirty (in pretentious Roman numerals, but with the four represented by *IIII*). *Ah, eleven minutes slow, now*.

Rui had finally made it as a film producer (a profession that, project by project, had ended up substituting his original dream: to be a director, an artist *:It's tough :People only want American movies :Just Hollywood crap :And on streaming :Originality? :Invention? :Zero backing :Zero cash*); making it, then, was like steering a canoe through

a puddle. And all the bills to pay each month; two kids, wife an unemployed journalist. But he never forgets Joanna.

Tap: 16:42. Early. Joanna pulls the *Arabesco* carton towards her; looks with her milky-blue veiled eyes into the bag; retrieves, from the bag, immaculately clean napkins, which come (complimentary) with the order ‘Hummus’ and ‘Fried Kibbeh’ – the order, an extravagance for Saturday lunchtime: she was happy, after all, she was in love(!). Deserving. Carton in her hands, Joanna leaves the table.

On her way to the laundry room, mingled with less certain ideas and reasonings, Joanna lines up with the following sequence of reflections:

Was it a good idea to order, today, from the Arab restaurant?

What if the delivery guy, today, was Hamas?

Is there Hamas in São Paulo?

Was a two reais tip enough, on the Rappi app?

Does Bill like Arab food?

The trash stinks.

Arabesco carton + Pinati carton.

I’ll take the trash out tomorrow morning.

Was it a good idea to order, yesterday, from the kosher restaurant?

‘Hummus Shawarma’ and ‘Falafel’.

An extravagance for Friday dinnertime.

What if the delivery guy, yesterday, was Hamas? Undercover.

What if he poisoned the food?

Was a two reais tip enough, on the iFood app?

Does Bill like kosher food?

Rui says we should stand up for the Palestinians.

But: what about Marlene?

Marlene posted a red and white warning sign on Instagram.

Marlene announced:

Anyone who doesn’t post in defense of Israel is an antisemite.

I’m not an antisemite.

I don’t want to be an antisemite.

Joanna comes back into the living room, back to the table; sits. Laptop off. Cell phone off. On the clock, bought by her father in 1953, the hands say four thirty-five; the nineteen-fifties: a prosperous decade for the business interests (the property dealings) of the Costa Mello family. *Tap: 16:46.* What went wrong? [*She looks at the photo of Paulo on the sideboard.*] *What did you do, Paulo? How did you blow it all?* If Joanna had gone to college. If she hadn’t obeyed her father, may God rest his soul, if she hadn’t obeyed Paulo, may God rest his soul, if she’d become a lawyer – her life ... ?

Marlene’s daughter lives with her family in Tel Aviv.

Marlene’s daughter’s son: called up to fight in the war.

Rui doesn’t live in Gaza.

Rui doesn’t live in Tel Aviv.

Rui’s kids: called up to fight? No.

(*Thank God.*)

? ... Worth it, though. Rui. Bill too, now. William. A certain anxiousness, however, came over Joanna: she was happy and in love(!) in a time of suffering, conflict, chaos. Maybe she should give Marlene a call? A WhatsApp message, perhaps. But what to write? *Tap*: 16:47. Ask if she's okay *You weren't at water aerobics on Thursday*. No: Marlene definitely knows Joanna has seen her *stories* about Israel. Marlene knows Joanna knows Marlene's grandson is a soldier.

To write, in the message, *Sorry, my dear?* Sorry for having found *love* in this moment of devastation for the planet? *Love*, now? Bill despises WhatsApp. An old soul. How lucky Joanna is. But she has the right, doesn't she? On her own since 2009, since Paulo's – sudden – heart attack. Sudden. Ambulance. Funeral service. Burial. Mourning. Loneliness. Sudden. Infinite. And for two months Joanna has been another Joanna. *Rejuvenated, even.*

But the Joanna Joanna deludes herself about is dissipated by the sound of an alarm – her cell phone lights up: 16:48. [*She looks at the box of pills on the cabinet.*] Despite the fact she'd been waiting for the alarm, not its usual time, the sound made her jump, just a little, and, having switched it off, run through her daily medication: for her blood pressure, for her cholesterol, her insulin injection.

Twelve minutes, by the clock, to the eclipse.

The idea of the almost fulfilled eclipse brought, click, Alain Delon and Monica Vitti – Delon so effervescent in the office-marketplace-boxing ring of the stock exchange and Vitti in slow takes, click, transporting her to the peculiar rhythm, to the silence, to the noise, to the set of her favorite movie, a fictional Rome?, and to the archaeological sites of memory *Was it at the Cine Bijou?*, of adventurous circumstances: a teenager: a teenager loose in the center of São Paulo, a fictional São Paulo?, no husband or son, back then, no military dictatorship. Rui likes *The Eclipse*, but prefers *The Night*; though really he likes Almodóvar best of all (Joanna likes Almodóvar too, but finds him sometimes obscene, improper; sometimes, though, she laughs at what she considers obscene, improper).

Eleven, by the clock.

Joanna puts on her sunglasses (Ray-Bans, a gift from her father when she turned sixteen) and goes to the window. The sky. All she can see is a thick web of gray clouds-gray clouds-gray clouds. No annular solar spectacle, no eclipse. No ring of fire. *Nothing*. Useless window. She turns Paulo's photo face down. She goes back to the table and, in a single gulp, downs the rest of the wine (Doctor Chico permitted one-two, two-and-a-half glasses); she sits.

Tock {hollow}: the laptop lights up: a scenic view and *Saturday, 14 October / 16:50 / Joanna Costa Mello Alves / Touch ID* her right index finger or *Enter Password* or the passcode: 1-9-6-2 –

1962, the Antonioni film, *Was it at the Cine Bijou?*
and, 1962, her Ray-Bans *It was quite a party*,
1962, her first cigarette *Was it at the Morocco?*,

and 1962, her first cocktail *Was it at the Riviera?*,
 1962, her first kiss *At the Galeria Metr pole*
 and, 1962, the future: immense: a precious
 architecture, with door upon door, but doors which,
 one after another, closed. Closed. Disappeared?
 Gaps? Craters?

Ruins?

Send a cheque in the mail? That won't work. Joanna's checkbook – dusty-sticky on the sideboard – the checkbook makes her feel sad – the checkbook physical, the checkbook palpable. Once, printed on every page, the five stars, *****, favored clients only. Then, all of a sudden, an empty space more telling than the stars, blatant. And to sign it *Joanna Costa Mello Alves*: a wasted gesture.

Alves. Get rid of the *Alves*? Joanna Costa Mello – once again?

Paulo's pension was paid in every month: automatic payments went out, online offers, the butcher on Tuesdays, the produce store on Wednesdays, an occasional *Extravagance* order; each month, fifteen to twenty reais to spare. Small change. And, with a few missteps, the Caixa Bank savings account has survived, since the estate was settled. Fifty thousand. Will Bill notice the *Alves* and throw a fit? *Get rid of it?* Bill is jealous, Bill had warned her. How to get rid of it? At the registry office? Joanna reopens Safari

and on her bank's website *Huh*

and the arrow searching for the knocked-over traffic light

and the green circle-*Matte?-Moss?-Huh?*,

and *Is that better? Or worse?* the tab (2 unread): *joanna.cos-* in

Yahoo – the screen *Huh* strange, dull, completely darkened.

With both index fingers, in a single breath, Joanna types:

Dear Bill, How are you ? Sorry for my bad English,always. Im sending fifty thousand reais,it is all I have saved in bank . This is all I can send for the marriage, ok Thanks you for promising to pay back in the month of November. I will need because my son cant discover this and the fifty-thousand reais are all I have. I love you it is a very Blessing to found you in life. Im dreaming about how you look personally. You are so handsome,my miracle ! When you did arranged the marriage and determined the day exact of the Church, I will tell Rui . February, ok February is much good for Rui because his kids are going to be at school vacation. Im sure Rui will make the American visa to me and buy plane tickets and himself and his family are going to travel with me from Sao Paulo Sao (I dont know how put accent Sao here in this fancy little computer) to Austin to our marriage. It will be a party ! A breakdown party! It will be of Hollywood! (Do you agree on a cake diet) You will like Rui .He is a good boy . And his sons,my grandsons, are good , are the most beautiful of the world. his wife is nice . I want to invite my friend Marlene too,but she only is thinking about her grandson who is a soldier for Israel. Do you have a side by the way? Lets hope the war is finished until February!Im sending now the money.

I will follow the instructions to transform in crypto coins. And send,ok
Tell me if gone right. Did have the eclipse in Texas?Only clouds from
my window. Do you like Antonionis Leclisse?Kisses, Joanna Costa
Mello

*Caetano Veloso: Michelangelo Antonioni starts to play – at the end of
the song, blackout.*

Parentheses – Felipe Franco Munhoz

The text is part of the book *Lanternas ao nirvana* (Record, 2022).

Translated by Alison Entrekin

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São Paulo penumbra. Two neighbouring buildings are separated by a gap of approximately three metres. She and He appear, on an indeterminate floor, in windows that face one another. With the main lights off in both living rooms, little can be seen of the interiors. She has her eyes closed.

----- *approximately three metres* -----

She [*opening her eyes*] No.

He *No?*

She For lots of reasons. No. And that's not what I said, together.

He *Lots?* Here comes the countdown of reasons; so, attention. One?

She [*laughter?*] Linguistic. For example. Define the word *Relationship* – define *Relacionamento*.

He picks up: dictionary.

He *Relacionamento*, let's see; relationship. R, r-e, r-e-l – according to this dictionary, the one at hand, first definition: *the act or result of relating, that is, relacionar(-se)*. With the reflexive pronoun in parentheses; a detail which underscores its relevance. Relevance, first definition, *relation to the matter at hand, et cetera, practical applicability, et cetera*, in the current scenario.

He puts away: dictionary.

She Detail: the reflexive pronoun in parentheses?

He In the current scenario – which isolates everything, and everyone, between parentheses. Bodies and time.

She In other words: one window across, reason; the command of reason, one window across.

She Close the window. Your *And: the end*, though, never. The end of a hypothesis?

She Every second? Every second – in parentheses? Or, when you say *time*, do you mean all time?

She [*aside?*] Some.

She [*aside?*] Some.

She Straight from the needle to wireless headphones, via bluetooth.

He You said *No*, but I can, at the click of a finger, close the window. *And: the end. Can't I?*

He Strange. When, in the last four weeks, have you lost your reason?

He *'Round About Midnight*, Miles Davis, released on 4 March 1957. The parentheses, so to speak, in the track *'Round Midnight* – separating the half that's like copulation, except in a confessional, from the half that, then, goes out into some nightlife street

with neon signs
and sighs and invitations,

before,
perhaps frustrated?, sliding to the conclusion that mercilessly melts the nightlife street, melts the melody, melts the whole quintet – is sixteen seconds and eighty-three milliseconds long. I timed it. From the brusque pause, while Miles puts the brakes on his D, through the five attacks, Laa-Laa-LaaaaLaa-Laa, sharps, to the knockout in C sharp, piercing: sixteen seconds and eighty-three milliseconds. The parentheses that contain the greatest tempest of sensations ever, beatings and kisses and bombs of different intensities, pressures, textures. Tiny gestures, in this interval, tiny human manoeuvres, are perceptibly emphasized: lungs, muscles, tendons. The vinyl record turns three thousand four hundred and fifty-six degrees. I counted.

Counterpoints? I can't, I can't anymore;
and I'm not sure if—

She One adapts to the old life, right?
Since – when? – Plato? Since?, before
even? And, suddenly, I'm afraid, I figure
the elastic's so stretched, so stretched it's
worn out, exhausted, it's snapped. And
I've suddenly lost my certainty: I'm not
so sure we have the right.

She Do you keep a stopwatch, as
well as the high-and-mighty dictionary,
at hand?

He picks up: stopwatch.

She Nothing.

She Sixteen seconds and eighty –
what? – milliseconds.

She Ready.

She and He swallow silences for sixteen seconds and eighty-three milliseconds. From São Paulo, sparse traffic can be heard: the drone can be heard; except for the dry, sterile thunder, that rumbles up, and a siren passing in the distance.

He puts away: stopwatch.

She I can hear it.

She No, it hasn't. It's deafening,
recorded, buried in the scratch on the
record of the vestiges of post-
modernity; vestiges that are beginning,
for that matter, moment by moment,
every second?, to grow cold. What's

He You want to?

He The right to adapt and readapt
The Republic, The Symposium, for
centuries – to the vestiges of post-
modernity?

He Nothing that has been at hand
in the last few weeks can have
ceased to be.

He At the most, it's, it'll be, one –
small – flat away.

He Eighty-three.

He There. Hear the siren?

He But?: it's gone.

left: icy grooves. And also: the needle
prancing-antsy-pantsy-pa-per-perhaps—

She Perhaps the worst thing: to lose
one's certainty.

He picks up: dictionary.

He Perhaps frustrated?

He [*laughter?*] OK, High-and-
Mighty, let's see. C – first
definition, *the quality of being
reliably true, et cetera, the
conviction that something is the
case, et cetera.*

He puts away: dictionary.

She [*laughter?*] To lose *the
conviction that something is the case*
– along with reason, to boot. Chaos.
What's left?

He Not even time, for bodies.
Distinct parentheses. When I say
time, isolating, it's the time that has
strayed from the time that in history
goes on. There's an interval –
suspended: partitioned from both
the previous half and the later half.
For us, what's left is nothing.

She Shadows.

Silence.

She stretches her arm out of the window.

*He stretches his arm out of the window.
They don't touch.*

She But it would be imprudent, unsafe,
at any rate.

He Almost?

He Why? If we're each
individually in isolation. Home
office. Home office. Seven weeks.
Home office. Free from the
incubation—

She Mail: big risk. Deliveries: ditto, big
risk. The hallway, ditto, to the rubbish.
When did you last take the rubbish out?

He Today.

She So then, thirteen days.

He Always: today.

She So then, thirteen days, always.
Thirteen days with the potential for the
horror to manifest.

He How to resolve my pent up –
infinite – curiosity about your
smell?, about your skin?, or your
taste? How to satiate it?

She My smell: big risk. My skin,
ditto: big risk. My taste?

He Magna risk?

She *** [*incomprehensible*]

He Magna risk?

She picks up: torch.

She Would you, by any chance, besides
your dictionary and stopwatch, have a
torch at hand?, or, at the most, one –
small – flat away?

He Of course.

He picks up: torch.

She My turn?

He closes his eyes. She positions the beam of light against her own hand: the shadow of her hand is projected into the neighbouring flat; the shadow of her hand wanders over his face and body. Is there Pleasure? She sighs. Torch: She turns it off and puts it away. And closes her eyes. It's his turn. He positions the beam of light against his own hand: the shadow of his hand is projected into the neighbouring flat; the shadow of his hand wanders over her face and body. Is there Pleasure? He sighs.

He I love you.

She [*with her eyes closed*] *I love you –*
is only the idea of love. Love. Can one
really achieve it? Illusion. Because, at
the end of the day, I have understood:
when the elastic has snapped, we no
longer have the right to occupy that
space – which we've dominated and
destroyed, readapted to *The Republic*,
The Symposium, outside of parentheses.
What's left are icy grooves; we remain,
here, dot dot dot?, trapped in cracks.

He But: the relationship.

She [*with her eyes closed*] Melancholic
game – sex? – of shadows, at best.
Love?

He But–

She [*with her eyes closed*] Love? What
do we know about each other, really?

He Outlines? Snippets?

She [*with her eyes closed*] Is it enough,
the surface? Little can be seen of the
interior.

Torch: He turns it off and puts it away.

He Do you believe, really, that –
together – we’re just a hypothesis?

----- *approximately three metres* -----

She [*opening her eyes*] No.

Miles Davis: 'Round midnight starts to play in looping (between 2'41" and 2'58": the parentheses of sixteen seconds and eighty-three milliseconds). During the excerpt, dry, sterile thunder rumbles, mixing with the quintet; in addition to a siren passing in the distance. With each repetition, however, the siren resounds with increasing persistence and intensity, closer and closer, until it becomes, mercilessly, the caustic mass of continuous, violent, deafening sound, from which no one will emerge alive.