



## BALLAD OF DOGS' BEACH

Dossier of a Crime.

By José Cardoso Pires.

Translated by Mary Fitton.

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By Anthony Hyde

**D**ICTATORS, even the "great" ones, always strike us as grotesque, deformed: frozen in catatonic postures, ludicrously costumed, babbling codified pathology. Think of Stalin, or even Mikhail Gorbachev. This October, fulfilling the requirements of ritual, he will climb atop a mummy's tomb and cheerfully watch his instruments of death roll across Red Square. Surely, only the credulous — or the victims — can take such people seriously.

All deformity, of course, attracts us, exciting a quick glance of ghoulish interest — but usually only one. When we look at dictatorship, what we see is much too horrible, so we look the other way, averting our eyes from Augusto Pinochet's Chile or General Jaruzelski's Poland. Such willful ignorance makes keeping secrets easy. You can almost give them away. In the first pages of this strange novel about Salazar's Portugal, and on the very last, there are symbolic references to a travel poster many people will have seen. A stunning landscape. Blue skies. The shining sea. "PORTUGAL, EUROPE'S BEST-KEPT SECRET. FLY TAP." In "Ballad

of Dogs' Beach," written more than 10 years after Salazar's death, José Cardoso Pires lets this secret out of the bag for good.

His method is an oblique, elliptical narration of a police investigation into a minor political crime — which actually happened. In early 1960 the body of Major Luis Dantas Castro, who escaped from a military jail where he'd been imprisoned after an abortive coup, is discovered, in several pieces, on a deserted beach. Who killed him? The police investigation, with the Portuguese secret service moving obscurely in the background, uncovers a political, sexual and moral falling-out among the major's fellow conspirators, and concludes with a grisly reconstruction of the crime.

A political novel — but not the sort you might expect. The major and his band are not heroic rebels, and Mr. Pires scarcely troubles to indicate their politics or ideals. He's concerned, instead, with more fundamental questions. What is it like to live in a country where every bar has its police informer dozing in a corner? What is it like to make love on a sunny afternoon and then watch, on the television news, as the riot dogs of the police are awarded medals by the head of state? His concern, in short, is what it's like to breathe that particular moral and political air.

Crucial to this intention is the book's fussy, sardonic style and obsessive imagery, in which the ordinary world ceaselessly disintegrates into the grotesque, the morbid, the scatological. The central image is the major's corpse itself, decaying "and thick with flies." This is the *homo politicus* of Portugal, and everything oozes from it or multiplies within it: "The world, altogether, was one great corpse, glistening with the flies." This language, vividly conveyed in Mary Fitton's

translation, coagulates into two especially fine creations. The first is Lisbon, depicted here as a sinister mausoleum, its great facades preserved from "the golden epoch of tuberculosis," and the second is Elias Santana, the investigating detective. His nickname is Graveyard — for that's where he sends people. Surrounded by the sepia portraits of dead relatives, he lives in a "domestic morgue" with his single confidant, Reptile, a lizard for which he is constantly collecting beetles, flies and bugs. Oddly, he emerges as sympathetic. But not romanticized. Indeed, he has been breathing the totalitarian air too long: suffering from the flu, he chokes and wheezes through the book. Worse, as his investigation proceeds, he's pruriently drawn to Mena, the major's mistress — the word is actually appropriate here — and in a gruesome, onanistic dream he sees the sordid details of her corruption, which have led, finally, to the murder of her lover.

**A**LL this works well enough — perhaps too well. As in novels about boredom that send the reader to sleep, Mr. Pires so successfully creates the opacity, the murk, of this totalitarian atmosphere that sometimes his story is lost within the fog, and his narrative bogs down in a mire. Still, "Ballad of Dogs' Beach" won the highest literary prize Portugal has to offer, and I can well see why. It's a fine, original novel, a genuine curiosity for North American readers, written with dogged integrity and a ruthless, forensic eye. When I put it down, I felt mildly depressed — until I reminded myself that Salazar was dead and I was alive. And then it occurred to me that Mr. Pires and thousands of his countrymen must still awake each morning and feel the need for just this reassurance. □

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