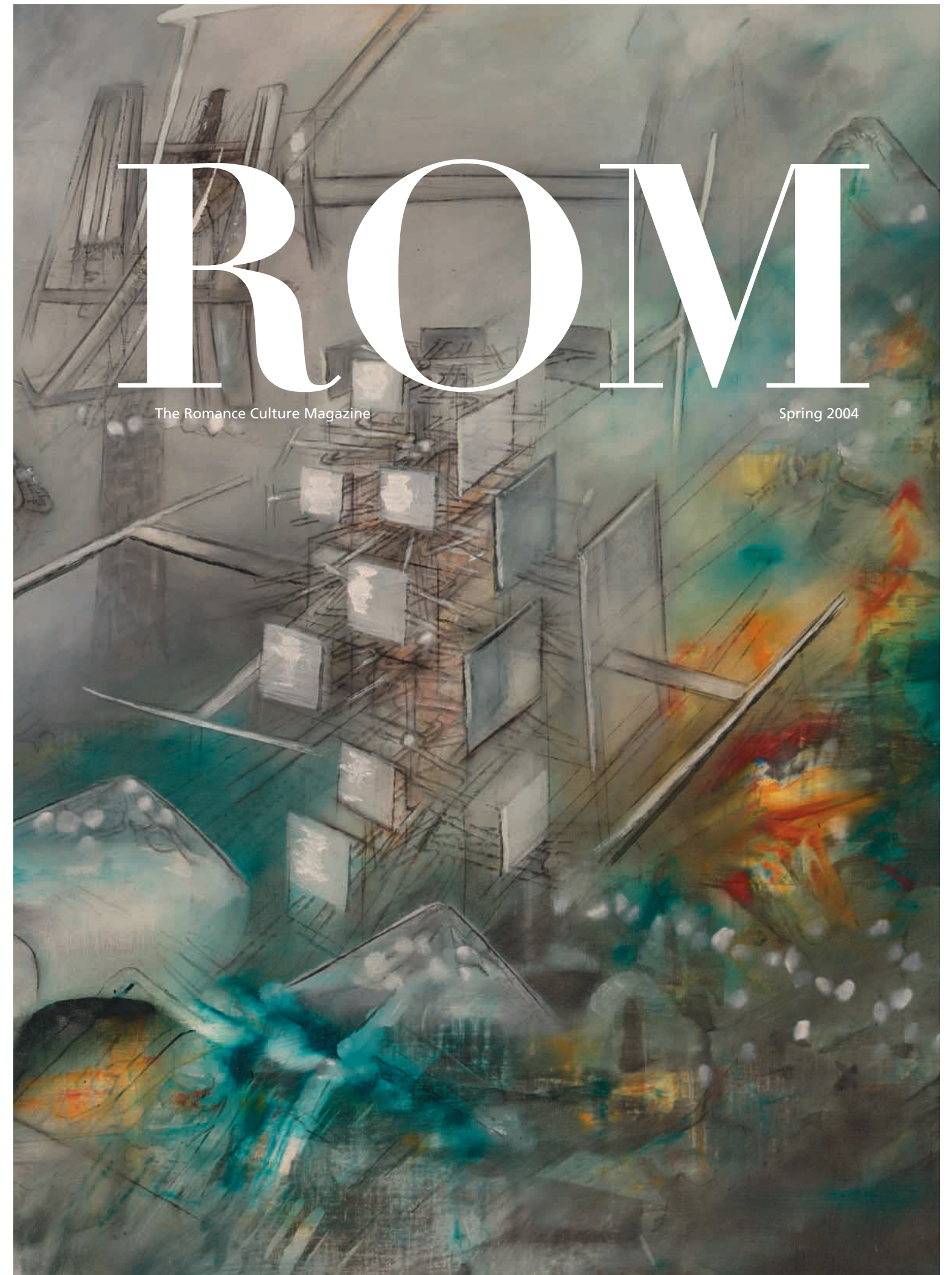


Publication: The Romance Cultures Magazine
Issue: Spring 2004
Trim: 8x11in
Selection: Cover, pages 6-7, 20-21



Poem: Diego Rotalde (Peru)

Y te veo

Y te veo, como a cuadro, y no te puedo abrazar
Porque en ti reconozco la belleza,
Y la belleza es mi peor debilidad.
Y no me conoces, y me pudro.
Y me siento como carne hueca,
Y toco suelo, me doy cuenta,
Que aquí no hay mas que un mudo
Que calla bajo el yugo de un alma que revienta.

Poem: Antonio Luciano Tosta (Brazil)

A Ladeira

Na Ladeira da Gamboa,
Correm meus olhos disparados.
Criança, confundo silêncio e medo.
É a vida que se esconde
Até o encontro já marcado.

Minha avó, minha varanda,
Espera-me no pé da escada
Pra passar a tarde.
Eu, sua vida, ela, saudade.

Sentamos pra prosa
E abraços.
Passa o medo, a tarde,
O dia, as palavras.



Diana Greenwold, *Untitled*, photograph. Courtesy of the artist

Story: Katherine Vaz (United States)

My Hunt for King Sebastião

Ah, quando quererás, voltando,
Fazer minha esperança amor?
Da névoa e da saudade quando?
Quando, meu Sonho e meu Senhor?

[When will it be your will, returning
Here, to make, of my hope, love?
Ah, when, out of this mist and yearning?
When, Dream in me and Lord above?]

– Fernando Pessoa, ‘Third’
from the cycle “The Warnings,”
Mensagem. Jonathan Griffin, translator.

My girlfriend was a beautiful liar. I should say “is.” I figure Cecilia is still inventing her answers off in the fog, or wherever it is that people go when we stop seeing them. She’d say things like, for instance, money wasn’t important to her, but she sulked when I decided not to go to law school. Then she made it worse by saying that she wasn’t bothered by anything except a headache. I asked her once to look at me, will you, and tell me one thing that’s completely true. She had me craving plain facts, even tough ones. Not big truths, just facts to get me through the day.

Getting through his days was all my father wanted to do, and I could see why. My mother was another liar. One morning I dropped by the house, and she was smiling in a weird way. I gave her a few chances to tell me what was wrong, but she didn’t let me in on anything. One week later, she left my father for another man. Whenever she and I spoke after that on the phone, it wasn’t for long. I was stunned that this was the woman who raised me, and I didn’t know the first thing about her. She wouldn’t explain why she went, even when I practically begged her to.

My father didn’t have much of a clue about my mother either. Anyway that was how it seemed at the time. My excuse was that I lived twenty miles away and came by for short visits only a few times a week. I had graduated from college three years before, and I admit that I was floating, waiting for what I was and what I should do to appear to me. Like Cecilia, my father was disappointed (probably my mother was too) that I seemed content with paralegal work. It was a job. A lot of paperwork, a hunt after details, but I didn’t have to get up in front of a judge and defend someone I knew was guilty, which my father has often had to do.

My father was a quiet man, well-groomed, and he stayed like that after my mother ran off, except that he entered a deeper kind of silence, where someone goes after a revelation. He seemed grayer at the edges, but that could have been age. I started coming over several nights a week to make dinner for him and turned into the docile

child he never had, grilling meat and fixing salads that he never ate. At first I let him eat and drink some wine and not say much. If you’re taught that action is accomplishment and accomplishment is emotion, then lack of action or speech gets to be how men take sorrow out of events. It’s not lying; it’s mourning peacefully. My father screaming and crying – that wasn’t who he was.

Instead, he told me, one night at the dinner table, a funny story about another lawyer in his Portuguese society, the I.D.E.S., or Irmandade do Divino Espírito Santo, the Brotherhood of the Holy Ghost. This lawyer kept records about the money he was embezzling from his firm, and I’ll leave it to you to suggest why this jerk stored these papers in a safe in his house. When his partners uncovered his tracks, he set fire to his home, his entire home – I’m not kidding – to destroy the trail. As if the walls were breathing what the truth was, and he had to get rid of the walls, and the Holy Ghost was mad and sending down tongues of fire. The one thing that survived the flames was his fire-proof safe. It stood in the scorched field, with the evidence inside needed to send him to prison. That’s true guilt at work. Also proof that nothing can stay hidden forever.

We laughed. Dad told the story again, and we laughed again, although a little less. Rachmaninoff played in the background. Some people say that he has an easy, loud grandness, for unrefined tastes. But my father loved the largeness of the chords, and so did I, especially after I read that Rachmaninoff dreamt one night that he was trapped inside his coffin, and he was going wild trying to get out, and his music drew its strength from that. It could’ve been the arsonist proclaiming, “Discover me!” and Rachmaninoff’s “Release me!” that made me blurt, “Dad, you should do things. You know” and I paused, not wanting to say “get on with your life.” If a person is alive, that’s exactly what he’s doing. We put a time limit on grief and want the person to be frantic for our sakes. Action being accomplishment being emotion.

He put down his knife and fork, and dabbed his lips with the linen napkin I’d set out. No folded paper towels for us, no sir, we were draining the cup of merriment. “What should I do, do you think, Dean?”

“I don’t know, Dad.” I didn’t.

“I haven’t missed a day of work.”

“Then tell me about one of your cases” I said. My father has worn a tie to the dinner table since I can remember, and this grace brought unfailingly to what requires none was finally beginning to break my heart.

He sighed. “Let’s see.” His mind wandered off, trying to edit his days into something that I might find interesting.

“Never mind, Dad” I said.

“The Portuguese sailed around the world and opened the route to the East, Dean:” he said, cutting his steak into

Diana Greenwold, *Untitled*, photograph. Courtesy of the artist

happenings, and atavistic dramas of an unknown past and identity. California is further linked to the Azores through the elements of water, air, and wind. Fog and wind on the beach symbolize mystery and transcendence, as well as the fatal fanaticism of those who eternally wait; when the wind blows in, it becomes King Sebastião, as described in Fernando Pessoa's verses:

When will it be your will, returning here, to
make, of my hope, love?

Ah, when, out of this mist and yearning?

When, my Dream and Lord above?

At the same time, the common sea air fortifies intellect and rightness, the law, profession of the narrator's father. Near the sea, modern and primitive interact: the elements can be read, yet history is opaque.

Why would a California Portuguese youth hunt for King Sebastião, the monarch who disappeared in North Africa over four centuries ago? Dean Borges, who observes and questions life like a philosopher at the comfortable, self-assured, and sometimes sarcastic distance of youth, is biding his time, searching for "the one thing that's completely true." Borges is a kind of modern American Sebastianist who awaits, searches for, and comes face to face with his own ghosts. First, there are the living ghosts from his life in California, a girlfriend Cecilia, who is "off in the fog," and a mother who without a word leaves his father for another man. Jaime Borges, that "princely and ghostly immigrant," who wears a tie to dinner even when dining alone, is composed and silent, as someone who has received a revelation. The absences are both real and symbolic: the women who are not ever returning and the silence that expresses an intense latency. In California, Dean senses that "we are waiting for ourselves to show up." He finds it impossible to read the faces of those around him, and the strangeness of knowing is what compels his story. He takes a paralegal job in order to avoid the compromises with the truth that he sees his father make as a lawyer, and waits for fate to intervene in the form of an unexpected first voyage back to the Azores, unaware that this is the "grand event" that he later ponders and desires.

Dean is to travel to the Azores as an arbiter in a land dispute and to sponsor a Mass for the family dead. His father is heir to a small parcel of land kept by Tia Mafalda, recently deceased. Now, the Borges, Pereiras, and Almeida, all armed with deeds and ribbons, demand a decision bequeathing the land to one of them. Dean assumes this "minor errand" to save his father the trouble, while unaware of what he will represent to the Azorean relations, the son of an immigrant considered successful and wealthy, one whose accomplishments in America convey the status and difference of those who sailed away for good, and one about whose past a great deal is known.

At the same time, Dean is symbolically part of the air, as the flags that fly over houses of emigrants representing the countries to which they have gone, "dreams waving in the breeze." On arrival at Lages, Tio David's hug at the airport fatefully enmeshes him in rituals and behavior contrasting with all he had known in America, now governed by strangeness and fate. Dean's characteristic "flights of fancy," natural to a young narrator, capture the magical realism of his perceptions of all that is different from America: on the ride back from the airport, Tio David is speeding around blind curves, and Dean thinks that he has the power to pass through solid objects, just as it seems that an oncoming car passes directly through his Buick. In addition to magic, there is also a sensuous, erotic dimension to his arrival, introduced in perhaps a bizarre counterpoint to the myth of the Amazon women, an anecdote about a stout brand of women, mad at the world, who when exiting the aircraft maneuver their massive chests so as to breast aside deferential young men.

The first Azorean ritual is a banquet with silver, china, and crystal, at which the novice visitor eats and drinks everything in sight in a mutual ceremony of communion and cannibalization. The pleasure and eroticism of ritual incorporation and belonging is expressed in the mountain of whipped cream and strawberries, called "Himalaya." The universality of physical belonging is enhanced through a stranger form of communion: Tio David leaves to meet his girlfriend, to whose house his wife has had a special mattress delivered only the day before, because of his bad back. The second ritual is encountered on a drive around the island. Tio David takes Dean to an old lava flow to see a particularly interesting abyss, in which Dean reads a symbol of apocalypse and inescapable death. He immediately considers it a magnificent and holy spot, because of the churning white water below and the jellyfish "bobbing up and down, slowly, opening and closing, like souls coming out of the depths" (28). Furthermore, its holiness is tied to its fateful condemnation: no one could hope to survive either the churning water or the stinging jellyfish. The image of souls from the depths evokes both absence and perdition, as in the shipwrecks of the maritime voyages that produced tragic narratives of suffering and loss. The abyss is the spot that calls sailors and narrators to their doom.

In town, it is the day of the festival of Our Lady of the Stars of Heaven, for which there will be a running of the bulls in the Praça da República, the third ritual. The American ingenue positions himself on some steps at the side of the square, where he is progressively horrified at being drawn into the blood and bravery of the charges. A bull tosses men into the air; another rams a tree whose branches are full of clutching children. A man who