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Lidia Jorge

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LÍDIA JORGE, born in the Algarve in 1946, spent her young adulthood in Africa during the Colonial Wars and later contributed an original perspective in her novel *A Costa dos Murmúrios* (1988) by having a narrator who is the wife of an Army Officer. She had already established herself as willing to mine painful national episodes; her first novel, *O Dia do Prodígios* (1980) dealt with Salazar's dictatorship. Jorge's allegory of a shut-off country permanently waiting for a transforming force received acclaim for its courage but also for its innovations in form.

Cited by Saramago as “. . . one of the most important voices in new Portuguese literature,” Jorge has been translated into German, Spanish, French, Dutch, Italian, and English. Her short stories, essays, plays, and novels have received numerous awards; *Vale da Paixão* (1998) was awarded four national literary prizes, including the *Prémio de Ficção do P.E.N. Clube*, and was published in 2001 by Harcourt Brace in the USA as *The Painter of Birds*.

Jorge creates effortless time shifts—a childhood moment might dissolve, in the same paragraph, into a recollection of young adulthood—to show how deeply we long for a constancy of memory and how much it costs us, finally, to face that memories often exist precisely because the world seldom provides much constancy. She often shifts voice, too—first to third and back again—to contrast the subjective and objective coming to terms with such longing over time.

Walter Dias has a daughter by Maria Ema, but he abandons her after the girl's birth to pursue his peripatetic fate (an impulse emblematic of Portugal, from the age of exploration and imperialism to the current drive toward emigration). Maria Ema marries Custódio, Walter's brother, who instructs the young girl to refer to Walter as “uncle.” Francisco is the patriarch and Adelina the sister on the moribund rural estate. The girl has only two memories of her persona-non-grata father sneaking up the stairs to visit her. She has one photograph of herself as an infant with him and Maria Ema, and she keeps the birds he paints on his letters from his world travels.

This excerpt shows how a real-life posing before a mirror turns into a living photograph, blurring itself with the faded “real” photograph, with the brief mirror “photo” finally the truer reminder of how fleeting heart's desire will always be.