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*The Book of Chameleons*

José Eduardo Agualusa

Translated by Daniel Hahn

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by Jeff Bursey

In the opening pages of *The Book of Chameleons*, the narrator is looking out a window of his home. "As it gets late I press my body against the window and look at the sky. I like watching the flames, the racing clouds, and above them, angels--hosts of angels--shaking down the sparks from their hair, flapping their broad fiery wings." He is caught laughing at this sight by Félix Ventura, an albino native of Angola, where this novel is set. The narrator is a tiger gecko from Namibia, which can emit a sound like a laugh. They are not known to be able to see angels in the clouds, or to think poetically. But this gecko, christened Eulálio by Félix Ventura, contains the soul of an unnamed man who has been reincarnated (though that word is never used). He retains the knowledge gained from his former life, and feels affection for his fellow cohabitant who, attracted by that laugh, talks to him.

"I used to think of this house as being a bit like a ship. An old steam ship heaving itself through the heavy river mud. A vast forest, and night all around." Félix spoke quietly, and pointed vaguely at the outlines of his books. "It's full of voices, this ship of mine." Félix Ventura is in the business of supplying pasts that are friendly, powerful, or neutral, to those seeking to erase their former lives after the end of Angola's 27-year civil war. "I create plots for a living," declares Ventura. Genealogy, and book selling, are his trades. A minister of the government visits, and he is presented with a spurious family tree. "This is your paternal grandfather..." Félix Ventura begins, a file open before him, and in front of the narrator's eyes--in a nice blend of wit and image--the minister changes: he removes his coat, and the narrator observes: "He looked even fatter, even shorter [than he did at first], as though God had carelessly sat down on his head." With one item of clothing removed the minister is not who he first appeared--less, in this case--just as Angola used to be a Portuguese colony and now is called a democracy.

Another client who hires Félix Ventura for the same service is a more exacting unidentified war photographer renamed José Buchmann. He believes in verifying his new identity and starts a search for the members of his pseudo family (though there's a twist to this). Also connected to Félix Ventura is Ângela, a black woman not put off by his lack of pigmentation, who takes photographs of light--rainbows, sunsets, and sunrises--and with whom he is in love. The paths of every character intersect, perhaps randomly, perhaps not, for their lives, new and old, albino, white, native, coloniser, and lizard, are not their own, and might never have been theirs to direct. Angola's bloody history has them all in their grip: from a demented man who lives in the sewers of Luanda, the capital city, to the presidential figure who may only be a double of the president, no one's character can be considered solid.

The gecko relates only portions of his own previous life, but seems resigned to his current state:

“It’s been nearly fifteen years that my soul has been trapped in this body, and I’m still not used to it. I lived for almost a century in the skin of a man, and I never managed to feel altogether human either. To this day I’ve known some thirty geckos... Twenty of them grew rice, or built buildings, in vast China, or noisy India or Pakistan, before each awoke from this first nightmare into this other which he or she (it hardly matters much) may find rather less appalling... But I’d gladly exchange the company of all the geckos and lizards for Félix Ventura and his long soliloquies.”

From his vantage point, he can describe what happens within the walls of his home, but rarely ventures out into the terrifying garden. Though this second life may not be ideal, it’s not something he’ll be careless with.

*The Book of Chameleons* won The Independent Foreign Fiction Award in 2007, and is longlisted for the 2008 International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award, along with works by Thomas Pynchon, Isabel Allende, and Alan Cumyn (among others). The narrative voice is assured and attractive, and the nature of the narrator fits smoothly into the themes of the novel. When the gecko dwells on what memory is, how it slips and slides, we can choose to view this as a commentary on Angola’s past, and the past of Angolans as represented by the well-defined set of characters. “Memory is a landscape watched from the window of a moving train. We watch the dawn light break over the acacia trees, the bird pecking at the morning, as though at a fruit... These things happen right before our very eyes, we know them to be real, but they’re so far away we can’t touch them... Maybe we dreamed them?” In an interview for the web journal *Words Without Borders*, Agualusa revealed that “the chameleon is a reincarnation of Borges--all its recollections are related to actual events in Borges’ life.” It’s unimportant if a reader doesn’t notice this--it’s an homage that lies just beneath the surface--for the features that will be most noticeable will be the humour, the lyricism, and the pathos.

The literate gecko scurries over the books Félix Ventura leaves open, surprised that “the Swedes” could recognize the quality of “the Boer writer Cootzee.” He also listens with interest as Félix Ventura describes being at the “launch of a new novel by a writer of the Angolan diaspora. He was an unpleasant sort of character, professionally indignant, who’d built up his whole career abroad, selling our national horrors to European readers. Misery does ever so well in wealthy countries.” Agualusa deserves praise for recasting certain elements of his country’s recent history into a tale, devoid of sentimentality, told by a well-attuned narrator.

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