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**Opening Extract from...**

# Pereira Maintains

Written by Antonio Tabucchi

Translated from the Italian by Patrick Creagh

With an introduction by Moshin Hamid

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# PEREIRA MAINTAINS

Antonio Tabucchi

Translated from
the Italian by Patrick Creagh

With an Introduction
by Mohsin Hamid



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# INTRODUCTION

# PEREIRA TRANSFORMS

I am sometimes asked to name my favourite books. The list changes, depending on my mood, the year, tricks played by memory. I might mention novels by Nabokov and Calvino and Tolkien on one occasion, by Fitzgerald and Baldwin and E.B. White on another. Camus often features, as do Tolstoy, Borges, Morrison, and Manto. And then I have my wild card, the one I tend to show last and with most pleasure, because it feels like revealing a secret.

*Sostiene Pereira*, I say, by Antonio Tabucchi.

These words are usually greeted with one of two reactions: bewilderment, which is far more common, or otherwise a delighted and conspiratorial grin. It seems to me that *Pereira* is not yet widely read in English, but holds a heroin-like attraction for those few who have tried it.

My own *Pereira* habit began a decade ago, in San Francisco's City Lights bookstore, where an Italian girlfriend suggested I give it a try. San Francisco was the perfect place for my first read: its hills and cable cars and seaside melancholy were reminiscent of *Pereira*'s Lisbon setting; its Italian heritage, from the Ghirardelli Chocolate factory at its heart to the wine valleys surrounding it, evoked *Pereira*'s Italian author; and its associations with sixties progressivism and forties film noir went perfectly with *Pereira*'s politics and pace.

I have always had a thing for slender novels, and I liked the way *Pereira* looked, the way it felt in my hands. I took it back to my hotel, and straight to bed, at that unadventurous age still my preferred place for a read. It lay elegantly on the sheets beside me. I ran my thumb along its fore edge, narrow and sharp against my skin. I lifted it, opened it and plunged in.

That first reading spanned a single afternoon and evening. I made it from cover to cover, pulled along relentlessly.

I was transfixed by *Pereira*'s beauty. In its compression it approached perfection. It swept me off to Lisbon in the thirties, to a 'beauteous summer day, with the sun beaming away and the sea-breeze off the Atlantic kissing the treetops, and a city glittering, literally glittering' beneath a window. I developed a crush on the character of Marta, so briefly sketched, who in her 'straw hat' and 'dress with straps crossing at the back' asks Pereira to dance, a waltz

he performs 'almost in rapture, as if his paunch and all his fat had vanished by magic'.

Despite its economy, *Pereira* was never perfunctory. It conjured out of its small hat a vast and touching sense of the humane. When the eponymous protagonist, an elderly and overweight journalist, confides each day in the photograph of his dead wife, I experienced their relationship as a living thing. When he tells her the young man Rossi is 'about the age of our son if we'd had a son', I understood why Pereira risks paying him for articles he knows cannot be published because of their implicit critique of Portugal's authoritarian regime.

I have never agreed with the claim that art must be kept separate from politics. In *Pereira* I found the definitive rejection of that position. I was captivated by the protagonist's reluctant political awakening, by his final act of rebellion, so quiet and so reckless at the same time. Here was a novel with the courage to be a book about art, a book about politics, and a book about the politics of art – and the skill to achieve emotional resonances that were devastating.

When I returned to New York from San Francisco, I promptly began to recommend *Pereira* to everyone who asked me for the name of a great book to read.

It was not long before I went back to *Pereira* myself. I had just published my first novel earlier that year, and I had begun work on my second. I had consciously chosen to do something different this time, to abandon multiple

narrators, freestyle riffs and essayistic interludes for an approach more restrained, seemingly simple – and brief. I had first encountered *Pereira* primarily as a reader. When I looked at it again, months later, I did so as an apprentice.

I began by trying to understand how *Pereira* managed to achieve so much with so few words. But I was soon asking myself another question. How, with such serious and pressing concerns, did *Pereira* manage to be so difficult to put down? Put differently, how could this most literary of novels also be such a thrilling page-turner?

I found my answers in *Pereira*'s form. *Pereira*'s brevity, it seemed to me, gave the novel a lightness that counterbalanced the weight of its subject matter. Moreover, because it was short it was able to move quickly, or at least was able to give the impression of moving quickly. After all, there was only so much ground for the reader to cover between beginning and end.

But even though its compactness was unusual, what seemed to me most striking about the form of *Pereira* was its use of the testimonial. The novel is not a traditional third-person narrative in which Pereira is himself merely a character. Nor is it a traditional first-person narrative in which Pereira tells us the story of his 'I'. Instead we have a testimony, with Pereira presumably testifying to an account of his actions transcribed by someone else.

The result is mysterious, menacing, enthralling and mind-bending – all at once. Through the testimonial form,

*Pereira* makes detectives of its readers. We are unsettled and given more to do. An unexpected interpretative space opens up before us, nags at us, seduces us. We feel more like characters than we are used to. And if my experience is anything to go by, we love it.

*Pereira*'s politics grow more pressing by the day, as absolutist ideologies and paranoid states increasingly impact our lives. And the lessons *Pereira* teaches about how fiction works have the power to transform. Certainly they changed this writer. Without *Pereira*, my own second novel would not have been written as it is. For that, and for the pleasure *Pereira* has repeatedly given me, I am deeply grateful.

# PEREIRA MAINTAINS

# ONE

Pereira maintains he met him one summer's day. A fine fresh sunny summer's day and Lisbon was sparkling. It would seem that Pereira was in his office biting his pen, the editor-in-chief was away on holiday while he himself was saddled with getting together the culture page, because the *Lisboa* was now to have a culture page and he had been given the job. But he, Pereira, was meditating on death. On that beauteous summer day, with the sun beaming away and the sea-breeze off the Atlantic kissing the treetops, and a city glittering, literally glittering beneath his window, and a sky of such a blue as never was seen, Pereira maintains, and of a clarity almost painful to the eyes, he started to think about death. Why so? Pereira cannot presume to say. Maybe because when he was little his father owned an undertaker's establishment with the

gloomy name of Pereira La Dolorosa, maybe because his wife had died of consumption some years before, maybe because he was fat and suffered from heart trouble and high blood pressure and the doctor had told him that if he went on like this he wouldn't last long. But the fact is that Pereira began dwelling on death, he maintains. And by chance, purely by chance, he started leafing through a magazine. It was a literary review, though with a section devoted to philosophy. Possibly an avant-garde review, Pereira is not definite on this point, but with a fair share of Catholic contributors. And Pereira was a Catholic, or at least at that moment he felt himself a Catholic, a good Roman Catholic, though there was one thing he could not bring himself to believe in, and that was the resurrection of the body. Of the soul yes, of course, for he was certain he had a soul; but all that flesh of his, the fat enveloping his soul, no, that would not rise again and why should it?, Pereira asked himself. All the blubber he carted around with him day in day out, and the sweat, and the struggle of climbing the stairs, why should all that rise again? No, Pereira didn't fancy it at all, in another life, for all eternity, so he had no wish to believe in the resurrection of the body. And he began to leaf through the magazine, idly, just because he was bored, he maintains, and came across an article headed: 'From a thesis delivered last month at the University of Lisbon we publish this reflection on death. The author is Francesco Monteiro Rossi, who graduated last month from the University of

Lisbon with a First in Philosophy. We here give only an excerpt from his essay, since he may well make further contributions to this publication.'

Pereira maintains that to begin with he read without paying much attention to the article, which was untitled, but then mechanically turned back and copied out a passage. What came over him? Pereira cannot presume to say. Maybe that Catholic-cum-avant-garde magazine got on his nerves, maybe that day he was fed up with Catholicism and the avant-garde in every shape and form, devout Catholic though he was, or maybe again at that particular moment of the particular summer then glittering over Lisbon, with all that bulk of his flesh weighing him down, he detested the idea of the resurrection of the body. But the fact is he set about copying out the article, possibly so as to chuck the magazine away as soon as possible.

He didn't copy all of it, he maintains, only a few lines, which he can document and which read as follows: 'The relationship that most profoundly and universally characterizes our sense of being is that of life with death, because the limits imposed on our existence by death are crucial to the understanding and evaluation of life.' He then picked up the telephone directory and said to himself: Rossi, Rossi, what an unusual name, there can't be more than one Rossi in the telephone book. He dialled a number, he remembers the number well, he maintains, and heard a voice at the other end say hullo. Hullo, said Pereira, this

is the *Lisboa* speaking. And the voice said: yes? Well, said Pereira, he maintains, the *Lisboa* is a Lisbon newspaper founded a few months ago, I don't know whether you have seen it, we are non-political and independent but we believe in the soul, that is to say we have Roman Catholic tendencies, and I would like to speak to Mr Monteiro Rossi. At the other end, Pereira maintains, there was a moment's silence, and then the voice said that it was Monteiro Rossi speaking and that he didn't give a great deal of thought to the soul. Pereira in turn was silent for a moment or two, for to him it seemed strange, he maintains, that a person who had penned such profound reflections on death should not give much thought to the soul. He therefore assumed there must be some misunderstanding, and at once his mind flew to that resurrection of the body which was a fixation of his, and he said he had read an article on death by Monteiro Rossi, adding that he too, Pereira, did not believe in the resurrection of the body, if that was what Monteiro Rossi had in mind. In a word, Pereira got flustered, and he was angry, mainly with himself, he maintains, at having gone to all this trouble of ringing up a stranger and speaking of delicate and indeed intimate matters such as the soul and the resurrection of the body. Pereira could have cursed himself, he maintains, and at first even thought of hanging up, but then for some reason he summoned the strength to continue and said his name was Pereira, Dr Pereira, that he edited the culture page of the *Lisboa*, and that

admittedly for the time being the *Lisboa* was an evening paper, and therefore not in the same league as other newspapers of the capital, but he was sure it would sooner or later make its mark, and it was true that just now the *Lisboa* devoted most of its space to society news, but in a word they had now decided to publish a culture page to come out on Saturdays, and the editorial staff was not yet complete so he needed an outside contributor to do a regular feature.

Pereira maintains that Monteiro Rossi muttered he would come to the office that very day, adding that the work interested him, that any work interested him, because yes, the fact was he badly needed work, now that he'd finished at university and had to earn his own living, but Pereira had the foresight to say no, not in the office for the moment, perhaps it was best to make an appointment to meet somewhere in town. He said this, he maintains, because he had no wish to invite a stranger to that dismal little room in Rua Rodrigo da Fonseca, with the wheeze of its asthmatic fan and the eternal smell of frying spread abroad by the caretaker, a harridan who cast everyone suspicious looks and did nothing but fry fry fry. Nor did he want a stranger to know that the culture staff of the *Lisboa* consisted solely of himself, Pereira, one man sweating with heat and discomfort in that squalid cubbyhole, and in a word, Pereira maintains, he asked if they could meet in town and he, Monteiro Rossi, said: This evening, in Praça da Alegria, there's an open-air dance

with guitars and singing, I've been invited to sing a Neapolitan song, I'm half Italian you know, though I don't speak Neapolitan, but anyway the owner of the café has reserved an outside table for me, there'll be a card on it marked Monteiro Rossi, so what about meeting there? Pereira said yes, then hung up and wiped his brow, he maintains, and just then he had the brilliant idea of publishing a short feature entitled 'Anniversaries'. He thought he'd start it the very next Saturday, so almost unthinkingly, perhaps because he had Italy in mind, he wrote the title 'Two Years Ago Died Luigi Pirandello'. Then underneath he wrote the subtitle: 'In Lisbon the great dramatist first staged his *Sogno (ma forse no)*'.

It was the twenty-fifth of July Nineteen Hundred and Thirty-Eight, and Lisbon was glittering in the azure purity of an Atlantic breeze, Pereira maintains.

# TWO

In the afternoon the weather changed, Pereira maintains. The sea-breeze suddenly lulled, in from the Atlantic rolled a dense bank of haze, and the city was soon enveloped in a shroud of heat. Before leaving his office Pereira consulted the thermometer, bought at his own expense and hanging on the back of the door. It showed thirty-eight degrees. Pereira switched off the fan, he passed the caretaker on the stairs, she said good evening Dr Pereira, once more he inhaled the stench of frying hovering on the staircase and at last emerged into the open. Directly across the road stood the public market of the neighbourhood, with two trucks of the Guarda Nacional Republicana parked outside. Pereira knew that all the markets were in a state of unrest because the day before, in Alentejo, the police had killed a carter who supplied the markets,

because he was a Socialist. This explained why the Guarda Nacional were stationed outside the market gates. But the *Lisboa* hadn't had the courage to print the news, or rather the assistant editor hadn't, because the editor-in-chief was on holiday at Buçaco, enjoying the cool air and the waters, and who could be expected to have the courage to print news of that sort, that a Socialist carter had been shot down on his wagon in Alentejo and had drenched all his melons with his blood? No one, because the country was gagged, it had no choice, and meanwhile people were dying and the police had things all their own way. Pereira broke out in sweat, he was thinking of death again. And he thought: this City reeks of death, the whole of Europe reeks of death.

He went along to the Café Orquídea, only a few steps down the road just past the kosher butcher, and sat down at a table inside, where at least there were electric fans. Outside it was quite impossible because of the heat. He ordered a lemonade, went to the gents to rinse his face and hands, ordered a cigar and an evening paper, and Manuel the waiter brought him the *Lisboa* of all things. He hadn't seen the proofs that day, so he leafed through it as if it were any other paper. The first page announced: 'World's Most Luxurious Yacht Sailed Today from New York.' Pereira stared at the headline for a long time and then looked at the photograph. It showed a group of people in straw hats and shirtsleeves opening bottles of champagne. Pereira broke out in sweat, he maintains, and his

thoughts turned again to the resurrection of the body. If I rise from the dead, he thought, will I be stuck with these people in straw hats? He really imagined himself being stuck with those yacht people in some unspecified harbour in eternity. And eternity appeared to him as an insufferable place shrouded in muggy haze, with people speaking English and proposing toasts and exclaiming: Chin chin! Pereira ordered another lemonade. He wondered whether he should go home and have a cool bath or go and call on his priest friend, Don António of the church of the Mercês, who had been his confessor some years before when his wife died, and to whom he paid a monthly visit. He thought the best thing was to go and see Don António, perhaps it would do him good.

So he went. Pereira maintains that on that occasion he forgot to pay his bill. He got to his feet in a daze, his thoughts elsewhere, and simply walked out, leaving his newspaper on the table along with his hat, maybe because it was so hot he didn't want to wear it anyway, or else because he was like that, objects didn't mean much to him.

Pereira found Father Antonio a perfect wreck, he maintains. He had great bags under his eyes and looked as if he hadn't slept for a week. Pereira asked him what was the matter and Father António said: What, haven't you heard?, they've murdered a carter on his own cart in Alentejo, and there are workers on strike, here in the city and all over the country, are you living in another world,

and you working on a newspaper?, look here, Pereira, for goodness' sake go and find out what's happening around you.

Pereira maintains that he was upset by this brief exchange and the way in which he had been sent packing. He asked himself: Am I living in another world? And he was struck by the odd notion that perhaps he was not alive at all, it was as if he were dead. Ever since his wife's death he had been living as if he were dead. Or rather, he did nothing but think of death, of the resurrection of the body which he didn't believe in and nonsense of that sort, and perhaps his life was merely a remnant and a pretence. And he felt done in, he maintains. He managed to drag himself to the nearest tram stop and board a tram that took him as far as Terreiro do Paço. Through the window he watched Lisbon gliding slowly by, his Lisbon: the Avenida da Liberdade with its fine buildings, then the English-style Praça do Rossio, and at Terreiro do Paço he got out and took another tram up the hill towards the Castle. He left it when it reached the Cathedral because he lived close by, in Rua da Saudade. He made heavy weather of it up the steep ramp to where he lived. There he rang the bell for the caretaker because he couldn't be bothered to hunt for the key of the street door, and she, who was also his daily, came to open it. Dr Pereira, said she, I've fried you a chop for supper. Pereira thanked her and toiled up the stairs, took the key from under the doormat where he

always kept it, and let himself in. In the hallway he paused in front of the bookcase, on which stood a photograph of his wife. He had taken that photo himself, in Nineteen Twenty-Seven, during a trip to Madrid, and looming in the background was the vast bulk of the Escorial. Sorry if I'm a bit late, said Pereira.

Pereira maintains that for some time past he had been in the habit of talking to this photo of his wife. He told it what he had done during the day, confided his thoughts to it, asked it for advice. It seems that I'm living in another world, said Pereira to the photograph, even Father António told me so, the problem is that all I do is think about death, it seems to me that the whole world is dead or on the point of death. And then Pereira thought about the child they hadn't had. He had longed for one, but he couldn't ask so much of that frail suffering woman who spent sleepless nights and long stretches in the sanatorium. And this grieved him. For if he'd had a son, a grown-up son to sit at table with and talk to, he would not have needed to talk to that picture taken on a trip so long ago he could scarcely remember it. And he said: Well, never mind, which was how he always took leave of his wife's photograph. Then he went into the kitchen, sat down at the table and took the cover off the pan with the fried chop in it. The chop was cold, but he couldn't be bothered to heat it up. He always ate it as it was, as the caretaker had left it for him: cold. He made quick work of it, went to the bathroom, washed under his arms, put on a

clean shirt, a black tie and a dab of the Spanish scent remaining in a flask he had bought in Madrid in Nineteen Twenty-Seven. Then he put on a grey jacket and left the flat to make his way to Praça da Alegria. It was already nine o'clock, Pereira maintains.