

ARDEN BENDLER BROWNING

Escape, 2020
Acrylic on panel, 48 x 60 in.



COURTESY BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

JOÃO MELO The Trek

—Translated from the Portuguese
by Cliff E. Landers

Ventura Chiteculo was becoming concerned. His wife, Verónica João, and the two children were falling too far behind. He was several meters ahead of them, with a pack on his back, where he carried some of his own and his family's clothing that he had managed to grab, in his left hand a sack with water and three or four cans of food and in his right the indispensable AK-47. Ahead of him the refugees stretched out in a line that seemed endless. From time to time he looked back to confirm that Verónica and their two children were still there and hadn't allowed themselves to be overcome by fatigue. But the distance between them never stopped growing, which started to worry him.

His wife had their younger son on her back, secured by a cloth strip. The other boy she led by one hand, while in her free hand—she alternated left and right as they walked—she carried a large plastic bag with cans of food: sardines, tuna, and (miracle of miracles) even two cans of beans ready to eat. The older boy didn't much care for cold beans, but there was nothing she could do. The leader had said it was forbidden to light fires, especially at night, to avoid drawing the attention of the enemy.

They had been on the Trek for seven days. At great cost they had succeeded in breaking through the rebels' implacable encirclement and joining another group that had also been forced to abandon the city. Most of them were police and military men, but there were also numerous civilians, especially young people accused of ignoring the cultural traditions of the region, namely not speaking the local language correctly, which meant they must be from Luanda. Oddly, young women were few. From what was rumored, the rebel commanders were hunting them down in the streets to make them their wives.

The city's resistance had been heroic. Ventura Chiteculo remembered every deed, every action, every small gesture on the part of the defenders in the face of the rebels' overwhelming numerical superiority and, mainly, their fury. The defenders appeared more numerous than they actually were, for they multiplied through the streets and alleyways of the city in their effort to delay as long as possible the attackers' advance. Suddenly, all those engaged in the defense of the city became equals, without the differences that might have divided, or at least separated, them in the past. Background, age, appearance, disposition, or

individual expectations—all of it suddenly seemed ridiculous and pointless.

Even the mutilated took part in the battles. Those who had received a wheelchair from the government or some NGO went from neighborhood to neighborhood carrying messages between the various groups of defenders or transporting weapons and even food and drink. The others reinforced the groups trying to defend their districts from enemy attack. Many of them lacked even crutches and had to move in small leaps, grotesque but profoundly human, and, balancing on the only leg they had, as the battles waged on, their expression became increasingly firm, resolute, and desperate. Ventura Chiteculo would never forget the gaze of those mutilated men, or their impressive marksmanship.

The defenders weekly realized it would be impossible to prevent the city from falling to the rebels. Already, battles were being fought practically house to house. Any reinforcements from outside the city were absolutely inconceivable, as the government troops had been forced to retreat hundreds of kilometers from their perimeter. The rebels occupied every nearby locality and controlled all the entrances to the city.

The only thing left was to flee. The order was transmitted to all the groups, with precise instructions: wait for nightfall, take the minimum amount of personal baggage (don't forget food and water, of course, the AK-47, and any remaining ammunition), organize small bands that should leave in different directions and would later regroup at the predetermined rendezvous point, from which they would begin the Trek to the coast.

When all the groups met at the rendezvous point, the refugees became aware of how many they were. It would be a difficult march, but they were resolute, already thinking about returning to liberate the city. To do so, they would first have to make their way to areas controlled by the government. The information they had managed to gather about the rebels' strength would surely be useful for the counteroffensive. Many of them, like Ventura Chiteculo, wanted only to find a safe haven for their family and then go back to the battlefield.

The highest-ranking officer was put in charge of the refugee column. He was from the north or the east, no one knew for certain, for he had a nondescript appearance, but

he soon proved to be a born leader. He quickly organized the refugees, decided on the routes to follow, as well as alternatives in case they were detected by the enemy, and provided the necessary instructions, never failing to encourage them and bolster their spirits to face the Trek. Three instructions were critical: not to cross open areas by day, to limit going to the river and other sources of water, and never to light fires at night.

In the first days, the enormous column stayed united. But later it began to break up into smaller groups, though each still comprising a sizable number of people. The leader had to appoint a few men to head each group, indicating the point where they would reunite once they had crossed the mountains awaiting them and were near the coast. The women and children went in small groups, protected by armed men in front and back. The leader had said that the children were a priority, because they constituted “the nation's future.” When the refugees stopped to eat, he stipulated, the children must be served first.

Ventura Chiteculo was at the front of the line with his wife and their two children. A cousin of his, a man of absolute confidence, protected the far end of the group. As head of the group, it fell to Ventura Chiteculo to choose the path, in accordance with the leader's instructions. Fortunately, he was familiar with the region, having been born and raised there. His wife was from Kuando Kubango, farther south, near the Namibian border. They had met during a mission he had carried out at the time of the last war. His older son had been born in the same region as his mother. When the previous war ended, he was demobilized and decided to return to his own territory with his wife, who was pregnant; his younger son had been born there, like him. They were happy, believing the war was finally over, but soon learned they were mistaken.

These memories had accompanied Ventura Chiteculo since the Trek began, making him more concerned and attentive. He felt an extraordinary weight on his shoulders, one that, although he questioned whether he could bear it until the end, led him to execute as well as possible what he felt to be his duty as a man, a father, and a former soldier. So he chose the paths very carefully and, when he had doubts, consulted his comrades, almost all of them ex-combatants like him. He traversed open areas only at night and never approached the countless rivers that cut through the region.

Gave everyone orders to conserve to the maximum the water in their backpacks. One night, while they rested at the foothill of a mountain, he even threatened an old woman who tried to light a fire to ward off the cold. But he did so only to demonstrate authority and prevent losing control of the situation.

During the march, from time to time he would look back to see if all was well with his family. It pained him to see his wife with their two sons and an enormous bundle of clothing and food, but he himself was also loaded down, and he couldn't let go of the AK-47. Ventura Chiteculo loved that tall, strong, serene woman, who had won him with her joy and her decisive air when they'd met five years earlier. But no, in these circumstances, she seemed unhappy, fragile, and more and more bowed not only under the weight of the son she carried on her back but also the burden of that stupid and treacherous war.

Whenever they stopped for a brief rest, he took advantage of the chance to check up on his wife and children, intending to see firsthand how they were bearing up and to instill a bit of the strength and courage of a man accustomed to warfare. He must set the example. Truthfully, though, that was becoming ever more difficult. Several times he feared allowing himself to break down in front of the woman he loved and their two sons, who surely would not understand what was going on around them. What memories would they have when they grew up? This question grieved his heart even more.

The Trek was going more slowly for the group whose safety was in his hands. For reasons of security, he had taken a few detours after hearing gunfire in the distance, suspecting that other groups might have been surprised by the enemy and forced to confront him, something he preferred to avoid even at the cost of extending the march. Because, in addition to the scarcity of guns, and above all, the ammunition at their disposal, they were transporting many women and children, among them his wife, Verónica João, and their two sons.

Beginning on the fourth day, Ventura Chiteculo was becoming increasingly worried, for his wife and children were falling behind. He couldn't stop, because owing to the detours made to throw the enemy off the scent, his group must certainly be last. His anxiety rose as the distance between him and his family grew. A series of thoughts, each

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more confused than the last, was taking control of his mind. He began to be divided between the need to conduct the band of refugees to the predetermined destination and the desire to abandon his comrades and stay with his wife and sons, to search for safer paths or else hide somewhere until the nightmare had passed. To maintain his calm, he tried to remember his earlier life, in an attempt to discover how he had come to where he was, lost in the mountains, but he sensed his head emptying itself of any references. More and more powerless, Ventura Chiteculo felt himself a mere puppet of fate.

His wife and children were falling farther and farther behind. His cousin, who was protecting the rear guard of the refugee column, assisted by two open-faced adolescents, had already spoken to him twice, to let him know that Verónica and the boys could not hold out any longer. What to do? Wouldn't it be better to abandon her, who was steadily weakening, and try to save the boys? Maybe a couple of the young men, who seemed to still have some reserve of strength, could carry them on their backs . . . Ventura Chiteculo didn't answer, but his cousin saw the risk he was taking if he repeated the absurd question. He returned to his position.

They came to the end of the seventh day. They found a safe grotto where they settled the women, the children, and the elderly. The men kept watch outside. Luckily, there was a source of fresh water in the grotto, which allowed them to refill their bottles and canteens. Food, though in short supply, was not a problem. Ventura Chiteculo was the only man who stayed in the grotto, beside his wife and sons. Seeing their frighteningly weak condition, he tried to say something that made sense, but none of them reacted. The children no longer had any tears. His wife limited herself to resting her head on his chest and going to sleep.

The next morning, Ventura Chiteculo gathered the entire group in front of the grotto, except his family, who remained inside. It was essential to continue. In one or two days more they would be past the mountains, and then it would only be necessary to elude the enemy for two days and two nights until they made it to the government-controlled areas. There they would be safe. The women and children, along with the elderly, would become the responsibility of the social assistance agency. But immediately upon arrival, the men should join the armed forces, as troops were needed for the counteroffensive. The enemy must not be allowed to occupy their city indefinitely.

Ventura Chiteculo, however, could go no farther. He would stay right there with his wife and children, who lacked the strength to talk. For them, the Trek was over. The group had no cause for concern, as comrade Adão Tchandja, his cousin, would be the new leader. It would be no problem, for he too had military experience. Just two recommendations: First, from that moment on, they would have to move more quickly to make up for lost time. Second, when they reached the rendezvous point they must explain, not only to the leader of the column but to everyone, the sole and true reason for the decision he had made the night before, a night during which he had been unable to sleep: love. It must be explained with total clarity so as not to leave a trace of doubt, whether genuinely incredulous or maliciously perverse.

His cousin tried to protest, but Ventura Chiteculo cut him off. It was an order, and as Comrade Tchandja knew perfectly well, among them, military men, orders were not to be questioned. By the same token, everyone knew that when it came to love, the reasons were profoundly inexplicable. Even more so in time of cholera.

The group was already two or three kilometers away when they heard, first, three gunshots and, after a seemingly endless interval, a fourth and final shot. The four shots were muffled, but the final one—according to what was told when they arrived at the rendezvous point where the other refugees were waiting—seemed also to be especially desperate.

João Melo, born in 1955 in Luanda, Angola, is an author, journalist, and communication consultant. He is a founder of the Angolan Writers' Association and of the Angolan Academy of Literature and Social Sciences. Currently, he splits his time between Luanda; Lisbon, Portugal; and Houston, Texas. His works include poetry, short stories, articles, and essays and have been published in Angola, Portugal, Brazil, Italy, and Cuba. A number of his writings have been translated into English, French, German, Arabic, and Chinese. He was awarded the 2009 Angolan National Prize for Culture and Arts in the literature category.

Clifford E. Landers has translated Brazilian Portuguese novels by Rubem Fonseca, Jorge Amado, João Ubaldo Ribeiro, Jô Soares, Chico Buarque, Marcos Rey, Paulo Coelho, and José de Alencar, and shorter fiction by Lima Barreto, Rachel de Queiroz, Osman Lins, and Moacyr Scliar. He received the Mário Ferreira Award in 1999 and a translation grant from the National Endowment for the Arts in 2004. A professor emeritus at New Jersey City University, he now lives in Naples, Florida.

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