

extract from ***The Book of Chameleons***, by José Eduardo Agualusa

Arcadia Books, 2006

Translated from the Portuguese by Daniel Hahn

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*It is quite some pages into The Book of Chameleons before you realise the narrator - rather charming, witty as he is - is a lizard/ A very articulate, and very friendly lizard and unusually perceptive.*

### **A Little Night-Time God**

I was born in this house, and grew up here. I've never left. 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. The sight is always the same. But every evening I come here and I enjoy it, and I'm moved by it, as if seeing it for the very first time. Last week Félix Ventura arrived earlier than usual and surprised me in the act of laughing at a massive cloud - out there in the tempestuous blue - that was dashing about in circles, like a dog trying to put out the fire in his tail,

'I don't believe it - are you laughing?'

The creature's amazement annoyed me. I was afraid - but I didn't move, not a muscle. The albino took off his dark glasses, put them away in the inside pocket of his jacket, took the jacket off -slowly, sadly - and hung it carefully on the back of a chair. He chose a vinyl record and put it on the deck of the old player. *Acalanto para um Rio*, 'Lullaby for a River', by Dora, the Cicada, a Brazilian singer who I imagine must have had some sort of reputation in the seventies. I'm assuming this because of the record sleeve, which shows a beautiful black woman in a bikini, with big butterfly wings fixed to her back. 'Dora, the Cicada - *Acalanto para um Rio* - today's smash hit.' Her voice burns in the air. These past weeks this has been the soundtrack to our evenings. I know the words by heart ...

Félix waited until the light faded, and the final notes from the piano faded too; then he turned one of the sofas, almost soundlessly, till it was facing the window. At last he sat down. he stretched out his legs, with a sigh ...

'*Pópilas!*' he exclaimed. 'So I see Your Lowness is laughing?! That's quite a novelty ...'

As I looked at him, he seemed worn out. he brought his face close to mine and I could see the bloodshot eyes. His breath swamped my whole body. Acidic, and warm.

'You've really got terrible skin, you know that? We must be related ...'

I'd been expecting something like that. If I'd been able to speak I would have answered him back. But my vocal abilities extend only to laughing. All the same I did try to aim a sort of fierce guffaw at his face, a sound that might succeed in alarming him. to get him away from me - but all I managed was a sort of flimsy gurgling.