

## The Words That Remain

**Stênio Gardel**

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Stênio Gardel's slim novel *The Words That Remain* includes fragments of sentences, memories, and moments, recounted by an aging, illiterate gay man whose struggle for self-acceptance leads him from self-hatred to finding a chosen family.

Raimundo's first love, Cicero, wrote him a letter when they were both seventeen and living in rural Brazil. They planned to escape to the city to live and love each other openly, but Cicero abandoned Raimundo on the day of their escape, leaving the letter instead. Beaten by his father and forced to leave home, Raimundo's next few decades were spent doing manual labor with occasional excursions to have sex with men. In all that time, he never read the letter.

The narrative is not linear, but dips in and out of periods in Raimundo's life with a focus on his time with Cicero, his years working on the trucks, his chosen family late in life, and his present-day life, with time spent learning to read and write. Because the timeline skips around, there is an impermanent and voyeuristic quality, as if looking at a photo album of Raimundo's life while he narrates. The sentences run on, with phrases, pieces of conversations, and clauses piling on top of one another, separated only by commas. This style replicates the fuzziness of memories while conveying highlights in action and conversation. In the end, the years that passed allow Raimundo to arrive at the point where he can read and respond to the letter, though its value has changed.

An LGBTQ+ novel from Brazil, *The Words That Remain* is about the damage that brutality, illiteracy, and widespread homophobia do to self-love and happiness; it also illustrates the resilience of wanting to love and to be loved and accepted by oneself.

MONICA CARTER (January / February 2023)

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