

Peer Review

An ode to Brazilian novelist *Clarice Lispector*, by award-winning author (and avid fan) David Keenan.



Clarice Lispector, the Ukrainian-born Brazilian novelist and short-story writer, arrived fully formed. Her debut novel, the astonishing *Near to the Wild Heart*, was published in 1943 when she was only 23 years old.

The book cribs its title from James Joyce and, like Joyce, Lispector believed in the possibility of epiphany through language—that it is possible to enter into a profound form of communion with it, a sort of deeper knowing.

A Breath of Life, published posthumously and never completed in her lifetime, is the oddest book ever written about the act of writing, about how writing actually *feels* when you are inside it, as well as the responsibilities and complexes that it evokes. For me, writing has always been akin to a state of possession, and Lispector captures that feeling of being overwhelmed by your own creation.

All Lispector books feel like one story, unfolding, and a form of open-heart autobiography. For example, in *The Passion According to*

G.H., a Brazilian sculptor crushes a cockroach in a cupboard door and experiences a full-blown spiritual crisis: “We are creatures that must plunge into the depth in order to breathe there, as the fish plunges into the water in order to breathe, except my depths are in the air of the night.”

As such, describing the plot of a Lispector novel can be pointless and of no interest: *The Besieged City*, for example, published for the first time in English translation this year, is the story of a young woman who sounds the topography of a city by seeing it and becoming it, through animals, through a geometry of streets, through relationships of soul.

But the magic of her novels is there in the way the language unfolds, and in the presence of Lispector. It’s there in every haunted phrase, every bit of uncanny grammar, in its fluctuating tense, in its unparalleled ability to access the now, as if the moment, truly, was a word-besieged outpost and we were somehow, against all odds, breaking through.



ÁGUA VIVA

by David Keenan

Água Viva, published in 1973, is Clarice Lispector’s holy book, and euphorically so. The book is an incantatory monologue that reads the ordinary and the divine in the same terms in order to come face-to-face with the immanence of God. In *Água Viva*, Lispector uses language upon language to render language null. She has found her element, which was always watery, and flowing, and dangerous in its ability to penetrate everywhere. *Água Viva* is a full-on assault on the present, and so timeless in its range.

A timely history of the alarm clock.

KATIE CALAUTTI

Object Matters

It’s no surprise that civilizations across the globe have relied on tricks and gadgets to rise and shine. If there’s one constant that has vexed people through the centuries, it’s how hard it is to wake up.

Back in the fourth century B.C., Plato used a modified clepsydra—water clock—to wake himself and his students for dawn lectures. In 245 B.C., Ctesibius of Alexandria upgraded the clepsydra into a mechanical version that whistled at a specific time. Then in the eighth century A.D., Chinese engineer Yi Xing rang a decidedly poetic note with his planet, star and time-measuring water wheel clock, which boasted gears that set off puppet shows and gongs.

Ordinary people relied on more rudimentary methods of awakening. In early Christian and Islamic societies, religious bells and chimes in town squares were used to rouse the populace for prayer. During the Industrial Revolution, factories sounded whistles to wake employees who lived within walking distance. For the rest, a new niche profession emerged: knocker-uppers.

Wielding anything from hammers to peashooters to long poles, these entrepreneurs were hired to bang on workers’ doors and windows until they got out of bed.

American Levi Hutchins invented his own personal mechanical alarm clock in 1787. His gear-fitted pine box served one unyielding function—to wake him at 4 o’clock every morning. Almost a century later, in 1876, the Seth Thomas Clock Company patented the first fully customizable wind-up version. From there, the alarm clock was sent into mass production, with innovations like travel clocks and radio alarms paving the way for more modern models through the mid-20th century.

Since the advent of the snooze button in the early 1950s, digital clocks and now smartphones have become the alarm of choice. But analog versions have left an indelible mark: As an homage to the snooze feature, which was standardized at nine minutes based on the limitations of mechanical clocks’ gear workings, digital and phone app snoozes still default to a nine-minute setting.

