

opening excerpt from *Todos os Nomes* (All the Names) by José Saramago, translated from Portuguese to English by Margaret Jull Costa, c. 1997

*Above the door frame is a long narrow plaque of enamelled metal. The black letters set against a white background say Central Registry of Births, Marriages and Deaths. Here and there the enamel is cracked and chipped. The door is an old door, the most recent layer of brown paint is beginning to peel, and the exposed grain of the wood is reminiscent of a striped pelt. There are five windows along the façade. As soon as you cross the threshold, you notice the smell of old paper. It's true that not a day passes without new pieces of paper entering the Registry, papers referring to individuals of the male sex and of the female sex who continue to be born in the outside world, but the smell never changes, in the first place, because the fate of all paper, from the moment it leaves the factory, is to begin to grow old, in the second place, because on the older pieces of paper, but often on the new paper too, not a day passes without someone inscribing it with the causes of death and the respective places and dates, each contributing its own particular smells, not always offensive to the olfactory mucous membrane, a case in point being the aromatic effluvia which, from time to time, waft lightly through the Central Registry, and which the more discriminating noses identify as a perfume that is half rose and half chrysanthemum.*