

## Introduction

### Syllables of Light

If there is a place in Portugal where time and space work differently, where things have their own unique rhythm, and where the quality of the light seems to transport the visitor to another realm, then that place is most certainly the Alentejo. Occupying about a third of mainland Portugal, this region, which stretches from the border with Spain all the way to the Atlantic coast, is a place both of wide plains, holm oaks, and cork trees, and of cliffs and white beaches. Although it is a region with deep roots in history—it is brimming with beautiful towns and villages packed with heritage—it is the landscape that really stays in the mind of the visitor. The Alentejo countryside has an elegance in its simplicity. There are no dramatic hills and valleys. Its beauty is uncomplicated: fields overflowing with wildflowers in the spring and whitewashed houses that stud the ochre and azure of the landscape all year round. White, ochre, blue: these are the Alentejo's emblematic colours.

Wisława Szymborska once wrote in a poem that she always liked maps because they lie: the flatness of the page can never convey the truth of a place. Maps of the Alentejo promise something that is far from the reality of the landscape. Poetry can, though, be a kind of map itself, and it seems especially to be the case in poetry written in or about the Alentejo. One could even go so far as to say that here poetry creates the landscape. Poets try to get to the strangeness at the heart of the Alentejo's vast expanses, expanses which seem to symbolize purity and desolation, loneliness and plenitude all at the same time. It is a place that, in Miguel Torga's words, is "an immense sundial/ where man is the gnomon", but it is also a landscape "smothered in the sweat of tragic farmers", as Teixeira de Pascoaes put it. Eugénio de Andrade wrote of its "obstinate whiteness" and Urbano Tavares Rodrigues called it a "desolate kingdom" of reddish earth.