

SIX POEMS FROM *PASSO D'ADDIO*

Adrian Nathan West

We will die far away. It will be too much  
If I rest my cheek in your palm  
On New Year's Eve; if you contemplate in mine  
The silhouette of another migration.

Of the soul we know  
Rather little. Might it drink from the vessels  
Of the concave, stepless night,  
Will it pose under airy orchards  
Inseminated by stones . . .

O sir and brother! Of us  
Atop a shrine of glass  
A studious crowd will write  
Perhaps, a thousand winters hence:

“Not a single tie conjoined these dead  
In the deserted necropolis.”

Now, with the upended clepsydra  
And posterity, this hot sun  
Rising behind me, painless  
I will return with the birds  
To Bellosguardo: to where I left my throat  
On the green guillotines of fences  
And the hands trembled,  
Endlessly pink, disrobed of flowers.

Quivering amid the bonfire of the olive grove  
Glimmered defunct October, newborn love.  
Mute, I carved my heart  
In the form of unimaginable kites  
(Already close, already ours, already far):  
Lofty coffins, snowy tumults  
Of my young tomorrow, of sun.

Warm it's stayed there, life,  
Time, the airy color of my eyes  
That used to burn with every wind-burst in the depths,  
Live hands, searching me out . . .

It's stayed there, the caress I find  
No more, if not between two dreams, my intellect's  
Infinity in shards. And you, the word,  
Who once transfigured blood into tears.

Not even do I bear a face,  
it's now transfixed into another face  
Like sun stamped on a glass of wine and drained  
In blazing silence . . .

Alone, I return  
There, between two dreams, see the rubicund  
Olive-tree over the water-brimmed vessels and the moon  
Of the long winter. I return to you, who freeze

In my thin tunic of fire.

At times I say: let us try to be joyous  
And it seems to me discretion,  
So mined is the deserted stretch  
To which the wheat was promised.

At times I say: let us try to be grave,  
Let it not be said the blood  
of a fattened calf was spilled for me:  
And again, it seems to me discretion.

But no blame falls to one who surfeits thus  
With hypotheses the desert,  
With imagery the dark night, my soul;  
To such a one, it will be said: you already had your mercy.

Now nothing remains but private vigils  
With the psalmist, with the aged of Colonus;  
Private vigils, chin in hand  
At the bare table: as in childhood  
With the Caliph and Vizier in the streets of Basra.

Nothing remains but to hold out the hand  
Through the long night ahead; and to wean  
Waiting from its consolation,  
The aged breast, bereft of milk.

To finally live those roads  
—labyrinths of bonfires, spices, sighs  
Of shaken emerald blankets—  
With the ashen beggar, crouching

Between the edges of a wound.

Love, today your name  
Has withdrawn from my lips  
Like the final stair from the foot...

Now it is scattered, the water of life,  
And the whole of the staircase  
Is there, again to be begun.

I have bartered you, love, with words.

Black honey that reeks  
In diaphanous glasses  
Under sixteen hundred years of lava —

I will know you by your immortal  
Silence.

From *Quadernetto*

. . . Chartres, but this time  
With your battered statues  
Thrashed by the frore years of our distant sins,  
Chartres bereft of bells  
Bereft of blissful maidens under lindens  
(Now, from pure joy, I longed to die)  
Chartres in chains of crows and tramontanas  
Like a crag in the sea,  
A lone, cruel ray poised to lash  
Your pastor's tear-streaked cheek--  
Down over you rained time and blood, cathedral,  
Like a shell atop your  
Placid stones -- the angel submerged--meridian  
And like the black day, the massive, stationary wheels,  
The empty millstones of your archways  
Above the Eure that flows with mud...

O my green-leaved hyacinth  
On the fumid plain of sorrow.

June 1952 – September 1954<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The poems from *Passo d'addio* were published in 1956; the poem from *Quadernetto* was unpublished in Campo's lifetime. The original texts can be found in *La tigre assenza*, edited by Margherita Pieracci Halwell (Adelphi, 1991).

## Commentary

Shelley's remark on "this familiar life, which seems to be / but is not" finds echoes in the poetry of Cristina Campo. Her language—not in the sense of rhetoric, but the parts of speech that form the skeleton of her poetic effects, the millstones and hourglasses, the acts of knowing and weaning—is from but not of the realm of everyday experience, denatured in a way less reminiscent of surrealism or the estrangement of the formalists than of those writers like Bruno Schulz or Kafka who seem to draw for their inspiration on time spent in wholly other worlds. Attempts at analysis—which must begin with annotations, with a fixing of Bellosguardo on the map, a remark on its unusual name and the war between the Tarantians and Lucanians in the fourth century AD, with an explanation of the *passo d'addio* in ballet—are not without relevance, but at best they sharpen the poems' images without bringing the reader closer to their source. Moreover, I am not certain that exactness in the interpretation of art—the exhaustion, explicit or implicit, of the symbolic contents of a given phrase or image—is the ideal ingress to those sensuous registers that are perhaps art's highest award. I think here of certain beautiful imprecisions: when, for example, Edmund White says, "his anger between us, mysterious as the stone the Muslims worship," which is neither precise nor correct, because Muslims do not worship the stone and he has omitted its name, his words, because vague, are more evocative. The same may be said of the fantastical events recounted in the memoirs of pilgrims, wanderers, and explorers Cristina Campo mentions in her letters and essays. That the impenetrability of her imagery—which, I would stress again, it is aesthetically profitable to preserve—is something different from irrationalism or automatic writing is evident in her poems' formal density and in the exquisite scrupulosity of her diction. Her mysteries represent that triumph of intuitive judgment over logical reasoning that Evgenii Feinberg considered the hallmark of art.

A friend said she had known joy, but not happiness, which was durable; in her work there are traces of rapture, but hardly of serenity. Campo was congenitally ill, and her work is invaded by a sense of precariousness; whoever would invoke the inappositely named biographical fallacy to deny the significance of the one fact for the other has little understanding of how and why art is made. That her first book of poetry invokes valediction, and begins with a citation from Eliot's *Little Gidding* ("For last year's words belong to

last year's language / and next year's words await another voice") says almost everything: Campo writes from within disintegration, in a world of reduced but highly evocative physical coordinates the spiritual substance of which comes from elsewhere: "far away," "between two dreams," the "roads... between the edges of a wound." She is not an idealist, contemptuous of the illusoriness of matter, but an expulsee, struggling to reconcile the pull of recollection with an unfathomable beyond that drew her inexorably toward it. Her work is an attempt to address the uncertainty of how to grasp, do honor to, attend to—and it is in this light that her essay "On Attention" must be read—a life torn entirely between these two extremes. She responded not with imagination, which she viewed as inadequate to reality, but with what her biographer, Cristina di Stefano, calls "perseverance beyond hope," a quality she admired in D.H. Lawrence and above all in Simone Weil.

I have not adopted a "strategy" in translating Campo's poems. This is somewhat to my embarrassment, as she was so accomplished a translator herself, of poets as thorny as John Donne, George Herbert, and Emily Dickinson; but the idea of strategy implies the reduction of the text to be translated to a series of hierarchies, in which form prevails over sense, or sense over form, or fidelity over beauty, or graspability over fidelity, and the collapsing of such hierarchies is part of the essence of poetry. If Coleridge is right—and he sometimes is—that poetry is the best words in the best order, then the poem depends thoroughly on the language of its birth, how and why those words or uttered and how and why they are read; and the translator's least bad course of action, to paraphrase Michael Hofmann, is to try and do in one's own language the kinds of thing the author does in hers, humbly enough to recognize that the work is not one's own, nor the frailties of translation an invitation to flights of fancy, but with diligence sufficient to find expressions of suitable vigor.

