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Catullus 101, 48, 81

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c. 101

Many the nations and many the seas I have crossed
to arrive now, o brother, at these pitiful rites
so as to give you these last gifts for the dead
and fruitlessly speak to unanswering ashes,
for uncaring fortune has torn from me you your own self.
Ah, pitiful brother, unduly wrested from me!
But now, as things stand, these gifts that tradition prescribes,
sad gifts that custom demands at these rites—
receive them with a stream of brotherly weeping.
Now and forever, brother, hail and farewell!

c. 48

Your honey-colored eyes, Juventius,
if I were granted leave to kiss them at will,
I'd give them hundreds—no, thousands—of kisses,
nor would I ever appear to be sated,
not even should our harvest of kisses lie thicker
than heads of dry wheat in the fields.

c. 81

Was there no proper fellow, Juventius, in this whole population
pleasing enough to catch your amorous eye,
apart from that washed-out pale statue of yours,
that stranger from the moribund town of Pisaurus
who now fills your heart, whom in preference to us
you dare choose, not knowing what crime you commit?

The Latin poet Gaius Valerius Catullus lived under the late Roman republic in the last century of the pre-Christian world. In his thirty years of life he produced a body of poetry in several forms, generally tied to his immediate surroundings, loves, friendships, and adversarial relations. Over a hundred of his *carmina* are preserved; they have been edited and widely translated countless times over the centuries.

The great love of his life seems to have been a married woman whom he calls Lesbia and to whom he addresses a number of poems. That passion did not stop Catullus from showing an interest in homoerotic relations, especially concerning a young man addressed as Juventius. Two of these pieces are included in my set of three translations. Number 48, for all its light-hearted exaggeration, is a touching lyric, whose suggestion of chromatic reprise (“honey-colored eyes”—“heads of dry wheat”) is embedded in a subtle recognition that pleasures tend to fade in time. Number 81 turns the experience of a lover’s spiteful disappointment into a single question that effaces derision and leaves only heartache. The first poem, no doubt one of the best known of the entire corpus, is a moving tribute to his late brother, to whose grave the poet has made a long voyage.

I chose to translate these three works as much for their captivating poignancy as for their stylistic challenges. My effort in all three versions was to remain as close as possible to the sense, tone, and register of the Latin and at the same time to its poetic structure. I attempted, if not to imitate, then at least to be guided by the rhythmic patterns of the original texts, to incorporate similar phonic echoes and repeated lexical choices, and to avoid any regular rhyming. Catullus does not rhyme, but instead relies on meter to express the poetic principle of regular recurrence. The Latin texts show prosodic variety, but it seemed to me useful to adopt for all lines a somewhat generalized Latinate style in which every English verse would end with a sequence of syllables arranged as *aBaaB(a)*, where *a* marks an unstressed syllable and *B* a stressed one. I wanted the Latin to be discernible, if only as a suggestion, behind a scrim of English, and it seemed to me that, of the various ways to achieve that end, the most telling was to create a rhythm reminiscent of the original. Latin meter is based on the contrast between long syllables and short; I considered the English equivalent, especially in the all-important final segment of each line, i.e., the main site of regular recurrence, to be the contrast between stressed and unstressed syllables.