

'Once you Experience Love ...'

Camões

Translated by

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1

When fortune was disposed to give some
hope of future satisfaction,
the agreeable pleasures of invention
made me write of the likely outcome.

Love, however, fearing what I wrote
would be artless in its candour,
made of my talents a nightmare
to keep its shams inviolate.

You, then, whom love compels to be subject
to various yearnings! When you read
in a brief book such varied cases,

that are plain truths, without defect
once you experience love, I'm persuaded
you'll know what I'm on about in my verses.

2

I'll sing of love in a manner so svelte,
with theme and style perfectly matched,

two thousand amorous parts of speech
will make hearts feel what they never felt.
I'll do it so love confers life,
painting its thousand delicate mysteries,
its blank rages, its heart-felt sighs,
it foolhardy courage, its remote grief.

But in writing of the highborn disdain
of your tender and fastidious eyes,
I'm content to play the lesser part.

For to sing of your face, a composition
in itself sublime and marvellous,
I lack knowledge, Lady, and wit and art.

4

So much of my life is equivocal,
I shiver with cold in the hot season;
I weep and together laugh without reason,
I embrace the world and clasp a bubble.

My impulses mutually contradict,
from my soul comes fire, from my eyes a fountain;
at times I hope, at times am uncertain,
at times I vary, at times I perfect.

Being earthbound, I soar to heaven,
an hour is a thousand years, and my genius
in a thousand years is to miss my hour.

If someone asks why I am so driven,
I reply I don't know. But I surmise
it's because, my lady, I am in your power.

37

Resolute and strong, buoyed by these breakers
I went wherever my luck ordained,

since, buoyed by the tears that rained
 for me from those bright eyes, I could embark.
 I had reached the end of my setting
 out, with every obstacle foreclosed,
 when rivers of love interposed
 to obstruct the finality of my parting.

I proceeded in that desperate state
 in which death, inevitable and glorious,
 makes the defeated already obdurate.

In what shape or unfamiliar guise
 could furious death then intimidate
 one delivered to him, bound and helpless?

43

As when an adroit, exhausted mariner
 swimming from some dreadful shipwreck
 in mountainous seas, has saved his neck
 though only to speak of it makes him shudder:

and he swears even if he sees the ocean
 no longer heaving but placid and secure
 he will venture out on it no more
 unless profiting hugely for his pains:

in the same state, Lady, am I who withdrew
 to free myself from your face's torment,
 vowing never again to be lost:

but my heart, where you were never absent,
 for the simple dividend of seeing you,
 steers me back to that dangerous coast.

53

If I have merited such an ordeal
 as my wage for bearing such adversity,

practise on me your cruelty, Lady,
 having this heart at your disposal.
 Experiment on it, if such is your fancy,
 the whole gamut of your disfavour,
 so I sustain in this life's warfare
 even greater anguish and constancy.

But against your eyes, what could avail?
 All that surrenders is by force,
 but I shielded myself with my heart,

for in such a hard and bitter struggle
 it is good that, being defenceless,
 my defence is to fling myself on the dart.

63

Perceiving she was taken, the lovely Procris,
 wife of Cephalus, consented to the rape;
 she fled from her husband to the mountain top
 but I don't know whether from design or disgrace.

Because he, as it happened, being horn mad
 out of blind love and violent lust,
 followed in her footsteps like one lost,
 having already pardoned the guilty jade.

Oppressed by such studied deception,
 he flung himself at the cruel nymph's
 feet, begging forgiveness, begging for life.

Oh the power of misplaced passion!
 that for the crime of which he was victim
 he asked pardon from her who had tricked him.

64

My heart had always set such store
 on its independence, it was unprepared

for a love so unlawful, so daring,
 a torment I never felt before.
 But the eyes manifested in such fashion
 as others I had seen in dreams,
 while reason, scared of what seemed,
 fled, leaving the field to passion.

'Oh chaste Hippolytus, loved illegally
 By Phaedra, your own stepmother,
 who had no acquaintance with honour.

Love has avenged your virtue through me;
 but so fully avenged is this other
 crime, it now repents of what was done.'

65

Wounded, and with no apparent remedy,
 by Achilles who had been dipped in water
 so nothing iron could inflict a cut,
 the strong and brave Telephus trembled.

He sought prescription, to be cured,
 from Apollo's oracle at Delphi.
 "Be wounded again," came the reply,
 "by the same Achilles," and so was restored.

Obviously, lady, my fate's diagnosis
 is that, pierced by your loveliness, the pill's
 to see you and adore you as at first.

But such is your beauty, my prognosis
 is that of a patient swollen with dropsy:
 the more I drink in, the greater my thirst.

69

Daliana took bitter revenge against
 the scorn of the shepherd she so much loved

by marrying cowman Gil, to reprove
 such crass error and faithless disdain.
 Her dependable trust, her self-possession,
 her fresh face modelled on roses,
 withered as her unhappiness
 wrought its cruel alteration.

It was hybrid flower in barren soil,
 sweet fruit plucked by a coarse hand,
 while her memories of the one disloyal,

turned green meadow to arid highland,
 as love feigned and vows broken
 left planet-struck the loveliest woman.

71

— “How come you, Portia, to be so wounded?
 Was it willingly? Or through innocence?”

— “It was love, making the experiment
 if it could bear to spill my blood.”

— “And is your blood not determined
 to resist your own destruction?”

— “It accustoms me to resignation
 since death’s terrors are no constraint.”

— “So why do you now eat hot coals
 if you are accustomed to iron?” “To suffer
 belongs with death. So love ordains.”

— “And the pain of iron is impalpable?”

— “Yes. The pain you live with is a cipher,
 and I don’t want any death without pain.”

79

Apollo, Laetona’s enlightened son,
 who gladdens human hearts each daybreak,

killed the python, the dreadful snake
 that so terrified Tessalia's population.
 He shot with his bow, and was wounded in turn
 By the arrow tipped with glistening gold;
 So, on the beaches of Tessalia, spell-bound
 By the nymph Peneia, he was overcome.

Nothing availed him, for all his misery,
 neither knowledge, persistence, nor respect
 for the fact of his being exalted and sovereign.

If such a one, even through treachery
 could not win her love, what should I expect
 from her who is herself more than human?

85

In vile prisons I was once fettered
 as shameful punishment for my sins;
 even now I drag along the irons
 that death, to my chagrin, has since shattered.

I sacrificed my life as my warning
 that love demands more than lambs or heifers;
 I saw wretchedness, I saw exile and grief.
 It strikes me now all this was ordained.

I satisfied myself with little, keeping
 before me the ambiguous happiness
 of seeing what a thing it was to be happy.

But by my star, as I only now realise,
 unreasoning death and dubious hazard
 made enjoyment for me a risk to avoid.

90

A shift of the eyes, gentle and piteous
 without seeing; a gentle, honest smile,

as if forced; a sweet gesture, but bashful,
doubting any personal happiness;
an outcaste, shy and barely audible,
a grave and demure serenity,
whose pure goodwill was the fitting
and gracious evidence of her soul;

a timorous daring; a gentleness;
a blameless fear; a tranquil manner:
a prolonged, unquestioning agony:

this was the unearthly loveliness
of my Circe, and the magic poison
that could metamorphose my fancy.

91

Beautiful eyes that for our present epoch
are the surest sign of paradise,
if you wish to see what power you possess
look at me who are your handiwork.

You will see how existing robs me
of that very laughter you brought to life;
you will see I want no more of love
for as time advances, so do my troubles.

And if you care to look inside this heart,
there you will see, as in a clear glass,
your own self, too, angelic and serene.

But I warn you, Lady, my image apart,
you won't like seeing your own likeness
taking such pleasure in all my pain.

100

When prolonged reflection on my grief
dulls my eyes in sleep, I discern

in vivid dreams that dear person
 who was for so long the dream of my life.
 There in the empty landscape, straining
 my pupils at the shimmering vistas,
 I pursue her. And she then appears
 remoter than ever, and more driven.

"Don't avoid me, gentle shade," I cry out
 while, my eyes brimming with tender shame
 like one who speaks what cannot be,

she turns aside. "Dina-", I shout,
 and before I have added "-mene," I falter
 as even that brief illusion's denied me.

124

While Phoebus was lighting up the mountains
 of Heaven with his radiant clarity,
 to relieve the boredom of her chastity
 Diana was killing time in hunting.

Then Venus who was descending secretly
 to fetter the desire of Anchises,
 seeing Diana so undisguised
 addressed her half-jokingly:

'You come with your nets to the thick wood
 to ensnare the fast-running deer,
 but my own nets capture the mind.'

'Better,' the chaste goddess replied,
 to take the nimble deer in my snare
 than be caught in one by your husband.'

127

I no longer feel disillusioned, lady,
 over how you always treated my love,

nor at seeing the satisfaction I deserved
withheld after so many years' fidelity.
I lament only the anguish, only the distress
at seeing, lady, for whom you exchanged me;
but such as he is, you have merely avenged me
for your ingratitude, your artifice.

Revenge achieves redoubled glory
in according guilt to the culpable
when the vindicated has a just suit.

But reviewing my all too easy victory
over your ill-treatment and denial,
I wish it were not so much to your hurt.

131

That black, terminal day I was born,
let it be expunged from the almanac;
may it never return or, if venturing back,
let it suffer the same eclipse as the sun.

Let the sky darken, and the sun run wild,
let signs herald the world's end,
let the air rain blood, monsters portend,
the mother be stranger to her own child.

Let astonished people, their hearts aghast
in their ignorance, their faces dazed,
reckon the world already lost.

O timid creatures, don't be amazed
this day brought forth the most accursed
wretch on whom mankind ever gazed!

158

Death, what are you taking?—Daylight.
What hour did you take it?—At dawn.

Do you know what you're taking?—I'm unconcerned.
 Then who made you do it?—The Creator.
 Who's enjoying the body?—The cold earth.
 What became of its Light?—Benighted.
 What does Portugal say?—Stop, it's not right,
 Dona Maria was beyond my desert.

Did you kill whom you saw?—She was dead.
 What does bare Love proclaim?—She dares not.
 Who made her stay silent?—My caprice.

What's left at the court?—Hopeless regret.
 What's there left to remark?—A void.
 It remains only to bewail her grace.

Song IX

Under a parched and barren mountain,
 treeless, unfarmed, utterly bare,
 the most tedious place in all nature
 where no birds drift, nor animals make their lair,
 without one flowing river or simple fountain,
 nor a palm frond's sweet whispering,
 and named in the current vernacular
 Arabia Felix, or by inversion, unhappy,
 somewhere nature
 has located in a gulf
 where an arm of the sea shoals off
 Abbasiya from Arabia the Bitter,
 where Berenice was founded by Ptolemy,
 and a place the sun blazes
 on so ferociously it vanishes;

here looms the cape, where Africa's
 coastline continuing from the south
 stops. It is named Aromata, though
 under the turning heavens of the world's youth,
 Aromata was named in the lingua franca

of the inhabitants Cape Guardafu.
Here, where the sea loves to break through
tumultuously the channel to this gulf,
I took myself and there met
my fortune in the wild,
and here in this corner of the world
so hostile and unbearably remote,
I asked brief life for a brief
respite, since the token
of remaining would be a life broken.

Here I whiled away wretched days,
wretched, unwilling, utterly solitary,
toilsome, full of grief and resentment,
and suffering as my adversaries
not only a life of hot suns and cold seas,
with burning winds, harsh and pestilent,
but my fancies, the apt instrument
to seduce me from my true nature,
and I saw, too, reviving
to my chagrin, the memory
of the brief and superseded glory
I knew among mankind when I was alive,
reminding me of my untold
hours of happiness in the world.
Here was I, wasting away time and life,
and raised on the wings of such fancies
to so great a height I plunged down
(and think how light a descent that was!)
from daydreams and illusory relief
to despair of one day being reborn.
Here my imagination was suborned
by fits of sudden weeping, and sighs
that outdid the winds.
Here, my afflicted soul
was again imprisoned in corporeal
form, ambushed by pain, chagrined,

and rudderless, exposed to the arrows
of imperious fortune,
proud, implacable, and importuning.

I had no place to lay myself down,
nor any remaining hope where my head
might lean a little by way of repose.
All was pain to me, a thing to be endured,
not just that it seemed so, but was ordained
in destiny's never gentle decrees.
Oh that I could tame these thundering seas!
These winds, with their truculent voice
that seem a law unto themselves!
But severe heaven and the stars,
along with endlessly ferocious fate, amuse
themselves with my perpetual fevers,
exercising their malignant noise
against this flesh and bone,
this vile earthworm, and so puny.

If only I could banish by such labours
the certain knowledge that sooner or later
I'd recall those eyes I once had sight of;
and if this sad voice, bursting out,
should reach to those angelic ears
of her for whose smile I once lived;
and now, as the memory revives,
turning over in my feverish brain
times now extinct
of me sweet trespasses,
of the gentle pain and madness
endured and longed for on her account
who (long afterwards) had shown
some touch of pity
for all her former asperity.

If I could know this, it would lend
comfort to the time I am still allowed;
to know this would allay my suffering.
Oh lady, lady, you are so endowed
that even here, on this remote strand,
you sustain me, in my sweet feigning.
With you, simply by imagining,
I soar above the toil and pain
and as thoughts of you revive
I can summon up courage
in the face of death's grim visage,
and my conjoined hopes are kept alive,
making my countenance more serene
as the torments metamorphose
to sweet and happy memories.

So secured, I remain here questioning
the amorous winds that sigh for you
from that region where you are, Lady,
ad the migrating birds, if they had sight of you,
what your habits are, what you are doing,
where, when, with whom, what time of day?
Here, my wearisome days make way
for a new spirit, ready to conquer
fortune and toil,
if only to observe you,
if only to find and serve you
as time promises me all will be whole;
Yet ardent desire, that never suffers
delay, against good sense
opens the wounds of fresh disturbance.

So I live; and if someone should ask you,
Song, how I exist,
you can reply it is because I exist.

Landeg White's translation of *The Lusíads* (Oxford World's Classics, 1997) won the Teixeira Gomes prize. He has been commissioned by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation to undertake a complete translation of Camões' lyrical poems. E-mail: landeg@oninet.pt