THE POEMS OF CATULLUS

Translated by
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To whom will I give this sophisticated, abrasively accomplished new collection? To you, Cornelius! You had the habit of making much of my poetic little, when you, the first in Italy, were boldly unfolding all past ages in three volumes, a monument of scholarship & labor! And so it's yours; I hand this slim book over, such as it is—for the sake of its patron may it survive a century or better.

Sparrow, you darling pet of my beloved, which she caresses, presses to her body or teases with the tip of one sly finger until you peck at it in tiny outrage! —for there are times when my desired, shining lady is moved to turn to you for comfort, to find (as I imagine) ease for ardor, solace, a little respite from her sorrow—if I could only play with you as she does, and be relieved of my tormenting passion!

Cry out lamenting, Venuses & Cupids, and mortal men endowed with Love's refinement: the sparrow of my lady lives no longer! Sparrow, the darling pet of my beloved, that was more precious to her than her eyes were; it was her little honey, and it knew her as well as any girl knows her own mother; it would not ever leave my lady's bosom but leapt up, fluttering from yon to hither, chirruping always only to its mistress. It now flits off on its way, goes, gloom-laden down to where—word is—there is no returning. Damn you, damned shades of Orcus that devour all mortal loveliness, for such a lovely sparrow it was you've stolen from my keeping! O hideous deed! O poor little sparrow! It's your great fault that my lady goes weeping, reddening, ruining her eyes from sorrow.
Lesbia, let us live only for loving,
and let us value at a single penny
all the loose flap of senile busybodies!
Suns when they set are capable of rising,
but at the setting of our own brief light
night is one sleep from which we never waken.
Give me a thousand kisses, then a hundred,
another thousand next, another hundred,
a thousand without pause & then a hundred,
until when we have run up our thousands
we will cry bankrupt, hiding our assets
from ourselves & any who would harm us,
knowing the volume of our trade in kisses.

My Lesbia, you ask how many kisses
would be enough to satisfy, to sate me!
—As many as the sandgrains in the desert
near Cyrene, where silphium is gathered,
between the shrine of Jupiter the sultry
& the venerable sepulchre of Battus!
—As many as the stars in the tacit night
that watch as furtive lovers lie embracing:
only to kiss you with that many kisses
would satisfy, could sate your mad Catullus!
A sum to thwart the reckoning of gossips
& baffle the spell-casting tongues of envy.
Wretched Catullus! You have to stop this nonsense, admit that what you see has ended is over!

Once there were days which shone for you with rare brightness, when you would follow wherever your lady led you; the one we once loved as we will love no other; there was no end in those days to our pleasures, when what you wished for was what she also wanted.

Yes, there were days which shone for you with rare brightness. Now she no longer wishes; you mustn’t want it, you’ve got to stop chasing her now—cut your losses, harden your heart & hold out firmly against her.

Goodbye now, lady. Catullus’ heart is hardened, he will not look to you nor call against your wishes—how you’ll regret it when nobody comes calling!

So much for you, bitch—your life is all behind you!

Now who will come to see you, thinking you lovely?

Whom will you love now, and whom will you belong to?

Whom will you kiss? And whose lips will you nibble?

But you, Catullus! You must hold out now, firmly!

Veranius, more dear to me than any 300,000 of my many dear friends, have you returned to your family’s altar, your grateful brothers & your aged mother? You have returned! What a blessing this news is!

I’ll see you safe & sound at home, describing what went on in Spain, the rare tribes & places, as only you can do it—I’ll embrace you,

I’ll press your darling mouth & eyes with kisses!

Among those men who have been blessed by fortune, who is more pleased than I, more beatific?
Aurelius & Furius, true comrades, whether Catullus penetrates to where in outermost India booms the eastern ocean's wonderful thunder; whether he stops with Arabs or Hyrcani, Parthian bowmen or nomadic Sagae; or goes to Egypt, which the Nile so richly dyes, overflowing; even if he should scale the lofty Alps, or summon to mind the mightiness of Caesar viewing the Gallic Rhine, the dreadful Britons at the world's far end — you're both prepared to share in my adventures, and any others which the gods may send me. Back to my girl then, carry her this bitter message, these spare words:

May she have joy & profit from her cocksmen, go down embracing hundreds all together, never with love, but without interruption wringing their balls dry; nor look to my affection as she used to, for she has left it broken, like a flower at the edge of a field after the plowshare brushes it, passing.

It's sinister, Asinius — your practice of lifting our unprotected napkins while we're all deep in wine & conversation! You're crazy if you think you're being clever: what could be shabbier or less attractive? But don't take my word — go & ask your brother, for Pollio would gladly spend a fortune to keep it quiet; that boy is a master of every grace that's charming & delightful. So either send me back my linen napkin or else expect three hundred savage verses — I'm not upset because it was expensive, but it's a gift which calls to mind a friendship: Veranius & my Fabullus sent it all the way back from Spain for me, a present which I must therefore cherish as I cherish my dear Fabullus & Veraniolus.
I'll screw the pair of you as you prefer it,
oral Aurelius, anal Furius,
who read my verses but misread their author:
you think that I'm effeminate, since they are!
Purity's proper in the godly poet,
but it's unnecessary in his verses,
which really should be saucy & seductive,
even salacious in a girlish manner
and capable of generating passion
not just in boys, but in old men who've noticed
getting a hard-on has been getting harder!
But you, because my poems beg for kisses,
thousands of kisses, you think I'm a fairy!
I'll screw the pair of you as you prefer it.

Varus, you know Suffenus as well as any;
the man is charming, witty, sophisticated—
nevertheless, he's written reams of bad verses.
I'm sure he must have churned out more than ten thousand,
and not just jotted down on scraps of papyrus,
as we do—no, they're copied out on good new rolls
wound up on ivory, with red parchment wrappers,
lead-ruled, smoothed with pumice: what a grand production!
And when you read his stuff, this darling man, our
sophisticated Suffenus seems a perfect
goatsucker, miles away from his urbane brilliance.
Who can explain this? A man brighter than diamonds
or what (if anything) is even more polished,
becomes less clever than the least clever rustic
when he turns to verse. At the same time, he's never
more beatific than when he's busy writing—
pleased and even astounded by his own talent.
Conceited? Yes, but show me a man who isn't:
someone who doesn't seem like Suffenus in something.
A glaring fault? It must be somebody else's:
I carry mine in my backpack & ignore them.
Just yesterday, Licinius, at leisure,
we played around for hours with my tablets
writing erotic verse as we'd agreed to,
each of us taking turns at improvising
line after line in meter after meter,
adjuncts to wine & witty conversation.
And when I left you, I was so on fire
with all your brilliant & ironic humor
that after dinner I was still excited,
and sleep refused to touch my eyes with quiet.
In bed & totally unstrung by passion,
tossing in agony, I prayed for sunrise,
when I could be with you in conversation.
But when my limbs, exhausted by their labor,
lay on the bed in nearly fatal stillness,
I made this poem for you, my beloved,
so you could take the measure of my sorrow.
I beg you to be kind to my petition,
darling, for if you aren't, if you're cruel,
them Nemesis will turn on you in outrage.
Don't rile her up, please—she's a bitch, that goddess.

To me that man seems like a god in heaven,
seems—may I say it?—greater than all gods are,
who sits by you & without interruption
watches you, listens
to your light laughter, which casts such confusion
onto my senses, Lesbia, that when I
gaze at you merely, all of my well-chosen
words are forgotten
as my tongue thickens & a subtle fire
runs through my body while my ears are deafened
by their own ringing & at once my eyes are
covered in darkness!

Leisure, Catullus. More than just a nuisance,
leisure: you riot, overmuch enthusing.
Fabulous cities & their sometime kings have
died of such leisure.
How well these two bad fairies fit together, this queenly couple, Caesar & Mamurra!
—No wonder, for they’re like as two like smutches (one is from Rome, a Formian the other)
sunk in too deeply to be gotten rid of:
a pair of twins with all the same diseases, they lie entangled on one couch to scribble, adulterers both, equally voracious, and with nymphetoleptic dispositions:
how well these two bad fairies fit together!

Lesbia, Caelius—yes, our darling, yes, Lesbia, the Lesbia Catullus once loved uniquely, more than any other!
—now on streetcorners & in wretched alleys she shucks the offspring of greathearted Remus.

Rufus, stop asking why none of the young women ever wish to turn out a delicate thigh in your service, not even when offered a bribe of almost transparent robes, or some cunning bit of expensive glitter.
Your chances are spoiled by a wicked rumor which claims you keep a foulsmelling goat penned up in your armpits!
The women all fear it. No wonder—it’s really an awful beast which no pretty girl would have for a bedmate. So either get rid of this wretched plague on our noses or else stop asking us why the women go running.
You used to say that you wished to know only Catullus, Lesbia, and wouldn't take even Jove before me! I didn't regard you just as my mistress then: I cherished you as a father does his sons or his daughters' husbands. Now that I know you, I burn for you even more fiercely, though I regard you as almost utterly worthless. How can that be, you ask? It's because such cruelty forces lust to assume the shrunken place of affection.

To such a state have I been brought by your mischief, my Lesbia, and so completely ruined by my devotion, that I couldn't think kindly of you if you did the best only, nor cease to love, even if you should do—everything.

If any pleasure can come to a man through recalling decent behavior in his relations with others, not breaking his word, and never, in any agreement, deceiving men by abusing vows sworn to heaven, then countless joys will await you in old age, Catullus, as a reward for this unrequited passion! For all of those things which a man could possibly say or do have all been said & done by you already, and none of them counted for anything, thanks to her vileness! Then why endure your self-torment any longer? Why not abandon this wretched affair altogether, spare yourself pain the gods don't intend you to suffer! It's hard to break off with someone you've loved such a long time: it's hard, but you have to do it, somehow or other. Your only chance is to get out from under this sickness, no matter whether or not you think you're able. O gods, if pity is yours, or if ever to any who lay near death you offered the gift of your mercy, look on my suffering; if my life seems to you decent, then tear from within me this devouring cancer, this heavy dullness wasting the joints of my body, completely driving every joy from my spirit! Now I no longer ask that she love me as I love her, or—even less likely—that she give up the others: all that I ask for is health, an end to this foul sickness! O gods, grant me this in exchange for my worship.
Lesbia hurls abuse at me in front of her husband: 
that fatuous person finds it highly amusing! 
Nothing gets through to you, jackass—for silence would signal 
that she’d been cured of me, but her barking & bitching 
show that not only haven’t I not been forgotten, 
but that this burns her: and so she rants & rages.

I hate & love. And if you should ask how I can do both, 
I couldn’t say; but I feel it, and it shivers me.

No other woman can truthfully say she was cherished 
as much as Lesbia was when I was her lover. 
Never, in any such bond, was fidelity greater 
than mine, in my love for you, ever discovered.

Lesbia never avoids a good chance to abuse me 
in public, yet I’ll be damned if she doesn’t love me! 
How can I tell? Because I’m exactly the same: I malign her 
always—yet I’ll be damned if I don’t really love her!

Driven across many nations, across many oceans, 
I am here, my brother, for this final parting, 
to offer at last those gifts which the dead are given 
and to speak in vain to your unspeaking ashes, 
since bitter fortune forbids you to hear me or answer, 
O my wretched brother, so abruptly taken! 
But now I must celebrate grief with funeral tributes 
offered the dead in the ancient way of the fathers; 
accept these presents, wet with my brotherly tears, and 
now & forever, my brother, hail & farewell.

If ever something which someone with no expectation 
desired should happen, we are rightly delighted! 
And so this news is delightful—it’s dearer than gold is: 
you have returned to me, Lesbia, my desired! 
Desired, yet never expected—but you have come back 
to me! A holiday, a day of celebration! 
What living man is luckier than I am? Or able 
to say that anything could possibly be better?