

Two Poems

Catullus and Horace

trans. Christopher Childers

Gaius Valerius Catullus (ca. 84–54 BCE) was born in Verona to equestrian parents but spent his brief adulthood in Rome, where he fell in love with “Lesbia,” the married sister of Caesar’s henchman Publius Clodius Pulcher. From 57–56 he served on the staff of Memmius, governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor, and died in Rome at the age of 30, having produced the slender booklet of poems on which his fame now rests. While in Asia, Catullus visited his brother’s grave in the Troad and wrote this famous elegy.

Quintus Horatius Flaccus (65–8 BCE), the son of a freed slave from Apulia, got off on the wrong foot in the civil wars when, as a student in Athens, he joined Brutus’s army. After Brutus was defeated by Antony and Octavian at Philippi in 42, Horace returned to Rome under amnesty and wrote the books of poetry—the Satires, Epodes, Odes, and Epistles—which establishes him beside Vergil as one of the two greatest Augustan poets.

These pieces were undertaken as part of a translation project I am working on for Penguin Classics (Greek and Latin Lyric from Archilochus to Martial), but there was also a more personal motivation. A couple years ago, the headmaster of the school where I was teaching Horace and Catullus lost his father. The day after the funeral, he was back at school, throwing himself into his work, and speaking unguardedly in chapel about the consolations of community and how we help each other through hard times. I was moved by his openness, and, wanting to write a poem for him, translated these two, which I had long known, as a preliminary study in consolation. Each addresses the limits of language in the face of loss. Catullus’s justly famous elegy opposes the tightness of its couplets with sinuosities of syntax as it exposes the failure of ritual form, its leaky inadequacy as a container for grief. Horace elicits less sympathy as he lectures Vergil, the last person you’d think would need to hear it; but the coldness of his poem is really the coldness of its subject,

its consolation no consolation—which, I think, is the point. What both poems offer is precisely that sense of community in sorrow my headmaster was speaking of. The original poem I had meant to write for him never materialized; in its place, I dedicate these two translations, two years late, to Tad Roach, with sympathy, gratitude, and admiration.

Catullus 101

Multas per gentes et multa per aequora vectus
advenio has miseras, frater, ad inferias,
ut te postremo donarem munere mortis
et mutam nequiquam alloquerer cinerem,
quandoquidem fortuna mihi tete abstulit ipsum,
heu miser indigne frater adempte mihi.
nunc tamen interea haec, prisco quae more parentum
tradita sunt tristi munere ad inferias,
accipe fraterno multum manantia fletu,
atque in perpetuum, frater, ave atque vale.

Conveyed through many nations, many seas,
brother, I've come to your sad obsequies,
to bear you proper rites of burial
and call on ashes mute beyond recall,
since Fortune sundered us from one another—
how far, alas, from your deserts, dear brother!
These sorry gifts, of old inherited,
gifts which our fathers' fathers gave their dead:
take them, soaked where your brother's teardrops fell,
and, brother, for all time, hail and farewell.

Horace Ode 1.24

Quis desiderio sit pudor aut modus
tam cari capitis? Praecepit lugubris
cantus, Melpomene, cui liquidam pater
vocem cum cithara dedit.

Ergo Quintilium perpetuus sopor 5
urget? Cui Pudor et Iustitiae soror,
incorrupta Fides, nudaque Veritas
quando ullum inveniet parem?

Multis ille bonis flebilis occidit,
nulli flebilior quam tibi, Vergili. 10
Tu frustra pius, heu, non ita creditum
poscis Quintilium deos.

Quid si Threicio blandius Orpheo
auditam moderere arboribus fidem,
num vanae redeat sanguis imagini, 15
quam virga semel horrida,

non lenis precibus fata recludere,
nigro compulerit Mercurius gregi?
durum: sed levius fit patientia
quicquid corrigere est nefas. 20

What shame is there in crying? What limit to desire
for one we loved so dearly? Strike up the mourning strain,
Melpomene; your father gave you a voice like rain;
left, in your empty hands, the lyre.

So: Quintilius, then, has gone to his long slumber?
How could the goddess Honor, and holy Justice' twin,
immaculate Devotion, and naked Truth begin
to seek his like among our number?

Many good men have greeted his passing with their weeping,
none more than you, dear Virgil. Alas, your piety
is waste; the gods won't give up one all too fleetingly
trusted to our—but not their—keeping.

What if you played more sweetly than Orpheus could play
the lyre the trees heard and followed everywhere—
could fresh blood ever color that eidolon of air,
once Mercury has led the way

with his grim wand to pastures where flocks of shadows graze—
harsh god, and deaf to open those gates the Fates have sealed?
It hurts; but we must suffer: whatever can't be healed
grows lighter with the dream of days.