

Four Poems

RACHEL HADAS

ABSTRACT

Two of these poems are closely related to the Ovidian and Virgilian passages cited as epigraphs; one is a general meditation on the Homeric trope of winged words; and one ponders the timeless applicability that links Nonnus, Cavafy, and the present or Zoom moment.

Camilla*Aeneid XI. 541–80*

Beset by enemies, Camilla's father,
a tyrant exiled from his town,
has to cross a roaring rain-swollen stream
without hesitation — arrows are flying —
while cradling his baby daughter in his arms.
So what to do?
He ties the infant tightly to his spear
(I never understood what he used for rope)
and flings it across the water.
Weighted by the cargo of the papoose,
the javelin arcs hissing through the air
and, with its precious burden
intact, sticks in the grass
at the far bank of the stream.
Presto! He swims across and retrieves his daughter.

I love and am unsettled by the way
Camilla's father uses his weapon
as vehicle and transport for his baby,
and sign and symbol. The javelin
that saves her life will never leave her side.
Far from towns, walls, any kind of shelter,
her father brings the motherless girl up in the forest —
wild mares' milk to drink,
a tiger skin for a cloak,
no distaff in her little hand; a slingshot
and later on that spear.
*Throughout the Tuscan cities many mothers
wanted her for their sons.*
But how, under the protection of Diana,
can Camilla not grow up to be a virgin warrior?
She will not live long.

The House of Sleep

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* XI 585–649

That Iris dons her multicolored veil
and slides on the curve of the rainbow down the sky.

That the House of Sleep, her destination,
is muffled in cloud; the sun can never enter.

That nothing breaks the silence there: no cockcrow
or barking dogs or (better guardians) geese;

no human voice, no babbling of brook
or gentle grating of pebbles in the water.

That poppies bloom and flourish there, and Night
extracts their milky juice and sprinkles it over the earth.

That, since hinges creak, there are no doors there,
no concierge, no lobby attendant, no doorman.

That on a soft black-feathered couch raised high,
the god of sleep sprawls, limbs loose in sleep's languor.

That all around him lie recumbent dreams
which can take on various shapes and guises.

That as Iris enters the dark chamber
she flicks away the dream shapes with her hands.

That her rainbow cloak lights up the darkness
but that the god can barely lift his eyes.

That his chin keeps drooping to his chest.
But recognizing her, propped on his elbow,

that he asks the purpose of her visit.
That she replies "O Sleep, thou placid bringer

of rest and peace, respite to weary bodies,
command a dream to take on Ceyx' shape

and thus disguised to convey to Alcyone,
his wife, the truth. This is Juno's order."

That once her message has been given, Iris
flies out of there before she can succumb

to the creeping drowsiness, the stupor
spreading through all her limbs.

That from his thousand children now the Father
chooses Morpheus, who most cleverly

simulates human bodies, faces, outfits,
and voices: ways of speaking turns of phrase.

The specialty of Morpheus is people.
That a secondary son of Sleep

impersonates birds, beasts, serpents;
a third son takes the form of dirt, stones, woods, and water.

That the dreams which put on human shapes
only appear to leaders — rulers, kings —

while the lower orders of dream, facsimiles
of mindless, speechless elements,

wander through the sleep of common folks.
All this I love. I love too that this passage

appeals to several senses one by one.
Sight first of all — the multicolored cloak,

the rainbow curve, the high couch spread in downy black,
the dreams (I think of them as child-sized), sprawled

around their father; Sleep, barely awake,
raised on his elbow, chin hitting his chest;

Iris brushing off the dreams like cobwebs.
Then touch; the feathered softness of that bed;

also the gesture, felt as well as seen,
of getting rid of something that sticks to your hands.

And sound? No sound. No crowing, barking, hissing
of roosters, dogs, or geese. No hinges creak.

The darkness and the silence are conducive
to sleep; I yawn while reading. Radiant iris

can barely stay awake. I also love
that beyond these signals to several senses

lurks the suspicion that when we dream
of loved ones or of anyone — dogs, trees —

what we are seeing is a well-rehearsed
performance by an expert in the field.

Alcyone is so sure she saw her husband,
naked and dripping, standing by her bed,

that she looks for his wet footprints on the floor.
Was it Ceyx? It was just a dream.

But dreams can tell the truth, as Juno ordered.
The truth that Ceyx had drowned:

the dream conveyed this, and Alcyone understood.
The dream was just the medium. We all

have learned a truth through dreams, if we believe them.
What is depicted in that darkened chamber

is the dreams' headquarters where they can rest,
awaiting their assignment, in the quiet,

next to their slumbering father. And beyond
all this I love the understood, uncanny

and universal experience of dreams,
weird and familiar at the same time,

light as air and heavy as a loss
from which we start awake into our lives.

What Applies

In the evenings we meet on the sea front ...

— Cavafy, "Exiles"

*Not only what lasts, but what
applies over time also.*

— Carl Phillips, "What Myth Is"

In a sea front café, or over Zoom,
or sometimes in somebody's living room,
these scheduled weekly meetings, to discuss
Nonnus or Ovid or Herodotus,
start with text and end there. In between
we get to scrutinize the passing scene.
What is past and passing and to come ...
Uncanny, the way myth and headlines rhyme.
Take the transgender tangles of our time:
Ovid foresaw them. Wait — shouldn't the name
of the *Metamorphoses* now be
Tales of Transitioning? As we revise,
we clearly see: myth lasts and myth applies.
Dramas erupt each night before our eyes:
war, earthquake, floods and fires and tyranny.
Is there some pattern? The great tapestry
of poetry, mythology, and fable
spread out as we sit around the table
consoles us with its familiarity
and equally appalls. The cruelty
and arrogance of arbitrary power
tempt us to spot a victim in each flower,
squirrel, pigeon, statue — all might be transformed
people whom some vengeful god has harmed.
How should we readers parse these texts, as we
straddle between myth and history?
Some changes that we read of feel so true -
I've been transformed by time, and so have you.

Both stale and startling, like each morning's news,
Memory is the mother of the Muse.
When Nonnus' Dionysus pursues
the nymph Nicaea, I cannot unsee
Harvey Weinstein leering out at me.
Achilles strangles a young warrior
(*Metamorphoses* XII, 144),
and Eric Garner and George Floyd and more
meet on the border between text and air
and breathe again in legend everywhere.
Myth makes us open up our jaded eyes.
It's true; it's now; it lasts and it applies.
Hope doesn't always rhyme with history.
We search for meaning in the mystery
and what we find are correspondences
in a new key, as each detail replays
and manifests in unexpected ways
in a sea front café, or over Zoom,
or even in somebody's living room.

Winged Words

Trying to speak means flailing with
gestures half-sculpted out of need,
eloquent in the way of myth —
monumental, hard to read.
How does anything get said?
A nascent, feebly struggling thought,
hard to collect and to recover,
contrives to spit its substance out.
Words are the wings that lift us over.

Garbling a recollected tongue,
swamped in simultaneity,
late-come words go down among
syllables learned by the age of three.
Look light kitty love you me —
For every flight from the teeth's gate,
as Homer has it, others are
prisoners, crying "Let us out,
out of the dumbness, away from here!"

See me, poised and ready for
writing the words that cluster round.
My moving pen is an open door
releasing syllable into sound.
Sprung from slumber by my hand,
a few words fly. By some stern law
of choice or chance the empty air
fills -with what I scarcely know.
Writing it down might make it clear.

Words are flighty. But once set down,
utterances give form to life,
celebrate pleasure, focus pain.
Every writer wields a knife
sharp with danger. Nothing's safe.

When offered up to clarity,
memory acquires mysterious power.
With each I dotted and each crossed t,
intimate histories appear.

Is it for love of you I read
your sentences as points of pain,
or does attention always breed
phantoms of meaning like a stain?
Show me that page you wrote again.
Now I sense an undertow
drawing you far away from here.
What you felt and saw and knew
crosses the paper like a scar.

A child is curled in his mother's arm.
The lamplit page or hammock's sway
create a zone immune exempt from harm,
devoted to one kind of play.
Dream all night and read all day.
Tell it again, the precious tale
of what we lose, seek, reacquire.
Sunset again. The sky goes pale.
A great page flickers with words of fire.

Eye usurps mind and mouth. Exclusion
of idle chat holds death at bay.
Silence allows no clear conclusion
except she has no more to say.
Today's no different from yesterday.
Read her the news or improvise,
when you can bear to read no more,
some speech that needs no lips or eyes.
Conversation is metaphor.

The lips are locked. What else is left?
I can no longer read the gaze.
Pity for a life bereft

of power to tell, amuse, amaze ...
Reduced to stillness, year-long days
pass in a fog of who can tell?
I'd say the password's Nevermore.
Other conclusions loom as well.
What was language ever for?

All we have done, all we will do —
helplessly we write and read,
opening the veins of what we knew.
Even when pain is understood
the mildest scribble may draw blood.
Why does the dark authority
of written language reassure?
This learned self is more than me.
Our words are bodies. We write on air.

Words are the wings that lift us over
out of this limbo, away from here.
Writing it down might make it clear.
Intimate histories appear,
cross the paper like a scar.
A great page flickers with words of fire.
Conversation is metaphor.
What was language ever for?
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Rachel Hadas

poet, essayist, retired academic