

Six Poems

AMIT MAJMUDAR

ABSTRACT

Six original poems explore the classical tradition with an emphasis on the work of Ovid.

Ringling the Changes

Pitr, pater, father, Vater:
Mother tongues are fickle water.
In the bat's wing, hand bones hide.
Shuck a man, an ape's inside.

Leaves roll up as cactus needles.
Beetles shimmer into beetles.
Switch the markings, switch the species.
Metamorphoses are easy:

God to savior, nymph to laurel,
Wolf to dog to wolf, the feral
Cycle (just be patient)
Of shapeshifting civilization.

Dust to dust, but in the dustbin,
Latin festers into Tuscan.
Dragon, lizard, leopard gecko,
Time can warp a fleshly echo

Into something new that's calling
 To a mate and still evolving.
 Thaler, dollar: trade and war
 Made denarius "dinar."

Nothing settles on an acme,
 Every spider once Arachne,
 Seven lusters all Callisto.
 Make a blade of grass your whistle,

Poet, now, while you are breathing.
 Let the letters flicker, reading
 Grief for growth. The graves are gravid,
 Morphing by the grace of Ovid.

Metempsychosis

Hektor, tamer of horses, raises his javelin,
 but it curls at the top and bottom: It's a bow.
 His skin darkens, and his bronze breastplate
 coarsens into an exile's shirt of tree bark. The plain
 of Ilion erupts in a green equatorial fury.
 This is the jungle, and Andromache's husband
 is Prince not of Troy but of Ayodhya: Rama,
 just as in love with his wife. He aches for home
 with a lump in his throat the size of an obol.
 Odysseus knows that feeling. While suitors hassle
 Penelope, their torsos and legs superimpose,
 collapsing like a fanned deck of cards,
 but the arms linger in a surreal spoked wheel,
 but ten heads, cursing, cluster on one neck:
 They are Ravana now, badgering Sita.
 She is the spitting image of the goddess Lakshmi
 seated in a lotus. Those pink petals soften, dissolve, froth
 as white sea foam, and the goddess's black braid

unravels blonde in the Aegean breeze. The goddess who stands up now is laughter-loving Aphrodite, with the winged boy Kama, scratch that, Eros close by, hunting with his toy bow and arrow. This is the *gnosis*, this, the *gyana* poets encoded long ago, call and answer, ohm reechoing aum.

A descendant of the mosquito that tasted Alexander gave me the same fever in the same east, the same fever dream, too, of truths and futures fused: I woke up and asked for a flask of Soma in Homeric Greek, welcomed in Vedic Sanskrit not Varuna but Ouranos. The song I sang is in my blood now, the hymn is in my heme. Ovid taught me metaphor is metamorphosis. Fire is love, a warm body in the bed at night, even if it's just my own in a malarial fever where the known world gives way to unknowable India. The seemingly far apart can be secretly the same, revealed as twinned things when you say their names together: India, Ionia, *egon*, *aham*. Ovid taught me metamorphosis is metaphor. Love is fire. I am writing by its light.

Novus Ordo Seclorum

It's only right we get rid of them all, she said, I mean, consider how those Greeks and Romans you cherish used to lay their unwanted infants on a hill outside the city limits, a burial mound with all its bones having floated to the surface, respectable parents just letting the rain rain and the sun cook a superfluous sixthborn until something dragged it off to a cave, or maybe crunched it and gulped its candycane-brittle femurs on the spot, or maybe it's best to think of it as a sky burial, the vultures taking ten baby fingers and ten baby toes into the sky that belonged to Jove, and when you

remember that this hill was stinking and mewling in the Roman summer heat while Cicero orated and Seneca philosophized and Ovid penned his pretty hexameter tales, you realize it was all for the best, everything that happened, the Huns appalled on the road in, covering their noses and weeping at all these skulls no bigger than apples, the crosseyed Christian fanatics carrying off bricks from the arenas where cows grazed on blood-fertile grass, bricks, too, from the gaudy temple to Janus, like so many ants dismantling the corpse of a wasp, and so yeah, she said, if we're the barbarians now, kicking the statues over, if we're the fanatics of the new faith declaring everyone before us sinners, well, Deus vult

Ovid at Tomis

I sleep most nights on my back,
 so if I ever wake up as a bug,
 I'll kick the covers off
 and spend the morning churning
 all my yearning legs in vain.
 I've seen upended beetles
 live that freakout, knowing
 somewhere in their copper-wire
 clump of ganglia
 that upside down is how
 dead bugs are always found.
 The six legs tire of the dirt
 and seek their purchase
 on a finer medium,
 Roman dust, mosaic tiles,
 each one a lively iris.
 I want to walk the sky
 and roll some cloudstuff
 into balls instead of dung.
 It doesn't feel like going
 nowhere when your feet believe
 they tread a mound of sun.

That is the last inversion,
the beetle's deathbed
hallucination,
to see the blue bowl
slammed to trap me
as just another surface
welcoming my feelers,
through metaphor
a metamorphosis
to more than this, Black Sea
mare meum, on it
my tristia, my dreams
so many ghost-ship triremes.
Honey gilds the hexametric
hexagons of the hive,
but no libraries hum
here in homely Tomis.
Only roaches here, and termite
runes behind the treebark,
and the beetle's emerald sheen.
Before exile's scab hardens
into a scarab carapace
I switch my habitat
and batten onto Latin,
feeding, breeding,
no longer alone,
through reading, repatriated,
through elegy, reborn:
bile in the liver,
tomorrow in the bone.

Ovid in Exile, Stargazing

Mother of anesthesia, painkiller of men and gods,
 Venus, epic heroin, the stars' drug of choice,
 Mother of roamings, goad of men, voluptuous
 Venus, stoking the stargazer's wanderlust.

Under my microscope, words denature.

Of bodies changed to other forms,
 Of dactyls and hands, of echoes and chiroptera,
 Of vestigial pigtailed and gills in the embryo's neck
 I'm singing, Venus, I'm singing to you,

building you a temple out of pillars,
 I and I and I,
 the loneliest Roman numeral, alias ich, alias du,
 two words toward atonement: ego, *io*, I.

Under my telescope, worlds denature:

No wonder my words fly off into space.
 No wonder I'm losing yet another
 whistling contest with the solar wind.
 Let me morph into water and flow for you.

Drip through these lines, metamorphine, intravenous.
 Your laugh lines are streams, burning
 to vapor; dreams, turning to paper. Ink me
 onto the small of your back. Goddess, spirit me home.

Jannah, Canto XXXIII

Though I was the one who raised the Prophet's veil
to bare what Persian painters never dared to,
I never felt so much the bride as when

he let my vision pierce the event horizon
through to the black blaze that blinded Semele
and made Arjuna join his hands and stammer.

Neither a khwaja nor maulana, I,
neither a Shia nor a Sunni, I,
neither a Chishti nor a Mevlevi:

A kafir born a light year east of Konya
uncovered the face of the Unseen,
the One whose tongue Hafez was said to be,

though had I this man's art, and that man's scope,
my artful words would all dissolve in awe,
lallation, la-ilaha illallah.

What I saw, if see is what I did,
still smarts against my retinas, but when
I focus on it, I just see my blind spot

because I focus on my memory's
unutterable attar, bottling it
in rhymeshorn, footsore, metaphorlorn speech.

The Face I saw was *shyama*, black, the holy
black of starlight packed so dense the ray
collapses backward into it.

Of a piece though broken into eight,
I recognized this as the one Black Stone
that pilgrim stars in their galactic spirals

point to as they circle seven times:
featureless, like the pupil of an eye
panoptic to the sins of Adam's sons,

yet textured, too, iconoclasm packed
into the image. How Krishna's Face
is the Black Stone housing its own shatter

no maharishi or murshid, no pir
or pandit has an inkling of, much less
this kafir poet, though I kissed that face

of stone with lips that thirsted for atonement.
Two faiths I reconciled in my heart,
at one, at last, with what had seemed apart:

the Love that moves the sun and other stars.



Amit Majmudar, *independent scholar*

amajmuda@neomed.edu