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Summer 2004
Madness & Civilization

Tristia

Christopher Burgess

V.ii

The letter you're reading comes to you from where
the Danube dumps its water in the sea.

If you're healthy, and living *la dolce vita*, then
there is still one bright spot left for poor me.

Doubtless, my darling, you're wondering how I am.
You could guess it if even I kept my mouth shut:

I'm lousy—the short version of all that's in store
for anyone who doesn't make Herr Kaiser's cut.

What's the crowd like here, and how do they act
where I live, you'd like to ask? Although there's
a mixture, some Greeks and some Getes, sadly
the beachfront draws more of the sissified Getes,
and gangs of Sarmatians on horseback, like thugs,
always coming and going in the middle of the road,
not a single one among them but carries a bow,
a quiver, and darts, all yellow with snake poison.

The angry voice, the truculent expression—sure signs
of moodiness—hair and bushy beards completely
uncut, the right hand so quick to give you a gash
or stick you with the knife these hoodlums all have
strapped to their sides. Your poet is living among
them for now, God's sake! grown forgetful of games,
and of love, lover, lost in the things that he sees,
and the things that he hears. Oh, only to live here,
and not die among such people! A shade could leave
this hateful place. You write me, my dear, that my poems
are greeted by crowds in the theaters, my verses
applauded by dancing, but nothing I ever wrote
was made for the stage—you know this yourself—

Tristia

Ovid

V.ii

Quam legis, ex illa tibi uenit epistula terra,
latus ubi aequoreis additur Hister aquis.
Si tibi contingit cum dulci uita salute,
candida fortunae pars manet uria meae.
Scilicet, ut semper, quid agam, carissime, quaeris,
quamuis hoc uel me scire tacente potes.
Sum miser, haec breuis est nostrorum summa malorum,
quisquis et offenso Caesare uiuit, erit.
Turba Tomitanae quae sit regionis et inter
quos habitem mores, discere cura tibi est?
Mixta sit haec quamuis inter Graecosque Getasque,
a male pacatis plus trahit ora Getis.
Sarmaticae maior Geticaeque frequentia gentis
per medias in equis itque reditque uias.
In quibus est nemo, qui non coryton et arcum
telaque uipereo lurida felle gerat.
Vox fera, trux uultus, uerissima Martis imago,
non coma, non ulla barba resecta manu,
dextera non segnis fixo dare uulnera cultro,
quem iunctum lateri barbarus omnis habet.
Uiuit in his heu nunc, lusorum oblitus amorum,
hos uidet, hos uates audit, amice, tuus:
atque utinam uiuat non et moriatur in illis,
absit ab inuisis et tamen umbra locis.
Carmina quod pleno saltari nostra theatro,
uersibus et plaudi scribis, amice, meis,
nil equidem feci (tu scis hoc ipse) theatri,
Musa nec in plausus ambitiosa mea est.
Non tamen ingratum est, quodcumque obliuia nostri



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nor is ambition my Muse. What is praise?

Not that I'm ungrateful that anything thwarts my
oblivion, sticks back in their mouths an exiled name.

At times I still curse them—my books—I admit,
and the Muses who damaged me I still recall.

I devoted myself to them, wholly, so now
I find that without them, I'm nothing. . . AT ALL.

Even now, with my wounds to remind me, I go
looking for the weapons that bloodied me, like a
boat that's been torn up by the Euboian waves
but still dares to run on the waters nearby.

Yet, I do not keep my wakeful nights working for
praise, the future of a name that was better unsaid.

I keep my mind on my writing to cheat sorrow,
trying somehow to put words to all my fears.

What else can I do, alone on this empty beach?
What other work is worth living in pain?

I just stare at this place; it is . . . unlovely. There is
no other place on earth quite this miserable,
and the people here—hardly worth calling them that.
No law scares them, fairness surrenders to force,
justice lies prone, or gets beaten down by an obstinate
blade. They are crueler, more savage, than wolves,
they defray the cold by wearing breeches and skins,
their faces all covered with bristling hair.

In a few there are traces of Greek, it is true, but
made barbaric-sounding by the pitch of the breed,
not one man among them I might be lucky to
address in Latin, no matter how plain the words.

Me, the Roman prophet—you don't know me, Muse,
now that I'm driven to talk like a hillbilly.

I'm ashamed, I admit it: from long desuetude
my own Latin words seem to lose all their force.

I don't doubt but that much in this here little book

impedit et profugi nomen in ora refert.

Quamuis interdum, quae me laesisse recordor,
carmina deuoueo Pieridasque meas,

cum bene deuoui, nequeo tamen esse sine illis
uulneribusque meis tela cruenta sequor,

quaeque modo Euboicis lacerata est fluctibus, audet
Graia Capheream currere puppis aquam.

Nec tamen, ut lauder, uigilo curamque futuri
nominis, utilius quod latuisset, ago.

Detineo studiis animum falloque dolores,
experior curis et dare uerba meis.

Quid potius faciam desertis solus in oris,
quamue malis aliam quaerere coner opem?

Siue locum specto, locus est inamabilis, et quo
esse nihil toto tristius orbe potest,

siue homines, uix sunt homines hoc nomine digni,
quamque lupi, saeuae plus feritatis habent.

Non metuunt leges, sed cedit uiribus aequum,
uictaque pugnaci iura sub ense iacent.

Pellibus et laxis arcent mala frigora braxis,
oraeque sunt longis horrida tecta comis.

In paucis remanent Graecae uestigia linguae,
haec quoque iam Getico barbara facta sono.

unus in hoc nemo est populo, qui forte Latine
quaelibet e medio reddere uerba queat.

Ille ego Romanus uates (ignoscite, Musae)
Sarmatico cogor plurima more loqui.

En pudet et fateor, iam desuetudine longa
uix subeunt ipsi uerba Latina mihi.

Nec dubito quin sint et in hoc non pauca libello
barbara: non hominis culpa, sed ista loci.

Ne tamen Ausoniae perdam commercia linguae,
et fiat patrio uox mea muta sono,

ipse loquor mecum desuetaque uerba retracto,



THE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA

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is barbarian-talk—it's not my fault, it's this place.

I'm so afraid of losing the tongue of my trade, that
I might go deaf to the tint of my own native voice,
that I talk to myself, haul up difficult words,
repeat all the sinister sounds of my art.

This is how I drag my mind out of my days,
and distract myself from mulling over grief.

With poetry I try to forget where I am;
If it's the only reward I can get for my care,
it's enough.

et studii repeto signa sinistra mei.

Sic animum tempusque traho, sic meque reduco
a contemplatu summoueoque mali.

Carminibus quaero miserarum obliuia rerum:
praemia si studio consequar ista, sat est.

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III.iii

In case you're wondering why the letter in
your hand is not in mine, I haven't been
myself: sick in the extreme, in
an unrecognizable world, unsure of myself,
or if I'll be well, what heart do you think
I have left, lying like this, among
Sarmatians, Getes? I can't stand their sky, can't take
the water. . . even the countryside. . .
so bleak.
No room seems right, no food good enough
when you're sick, no doctor around
to lie to you, wash away gloom,
no comfort, no way to cheat slow, tedious
hours with gossip, no confidants near.
Exhausted, cranky, I lie at the edge
of the world. Whatever seems missing seeps in,
everything . . . more than everything. . .
you, the best half of my heart
in your hands. I talk to you, no one else.
Without you there's no night, no day.
Feverish, they say I talked strangely.
It must've been just your honeydew name
on my lips if my tongue let me down,
stuck in my mouth, not even a trickle
to pry it loose. But let someone say you
were coming, source of my strength,
I'd spring up and look.
So, it's in doubt if I'll live. Perhaps you
while the time with earthy jokes, forgetful
of me. No, I didn't mean that,
I swear. It's so plain, darling, to me—to both
of us—not a moment goes by without
a sprinkling of your tears.
So, if my time is up, years I had coming,

III.iii

Haec mea si casu miraris epistula quare
alterius digitis scripta sit, aeger eram.
Aeger in extremis ignoti partibus orbis,
incertusque meae paene salutis eram.
Quem mihi nunc animum dira regione iacenti
inter Sauromatas esse Getasque putes?
Nec caelum patior, nec aquis adsueuimus istis,
terraque nescioquo non placet ipsa modo.
Non domus apta satis, non hic cibus utilis aegro,
nullus, Apollinea qui leuet arte malum,
non qui soletur, non qui labentia tarde
tempora narrando fallat, amicus adest.
Lassus in extremis iaceo populisque locisque,
et subit adfecto nunc mihi, quicquid abest.
Omnia cum subeant, uincis tamen omnia, coniunx,
et plus in nostro pectore parte tenes.
Te loquor absentem, te uox mea nominat unam;
nulla uenit sine te nox mihi, nulla dies.
Quin etiam sic me dicunt aliena locutum,
ut foret amenti nomen in ore tuum.
Si iam deficiam, subpressaue lingua palato
uix instillato restituenda mero,
nuntiet huc aliquis dominam uenisse, resurgam,
spesque tui nobis causa uigoris erit.
Ergo ego sum dubius uitae, tu forsitan istic
iucundum nostri nescia tempus agis?
Non agis, adfirmo. Liquet hoc, carissima, nobis,
tempus agi sine me non nisi triste tibi.
Si tamen inpleuit mea sors, quos debuit, annos,
et mihi uiuendi tam cito finis adest,
quantum erat, o magni, morituro parcere, diui,
ut saltem patria contumularer humo?
Vel poena in tempus mortis dilata fuisset,
uel praecepisset mors properata fugam.

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all that's left to live for. . . gone, how
hard would it have been—O, for such gods—
to spare me just long enough to be dumped in
the dirt of my own home? Or, the penalty
put off until it was time? Or,
a quick death to shorten my trip? A solid
man so recently, I was ready to give up
my daylight. Easy, but not.
Dying an outcast, that's me, so far away,
the unknown shore—the place itself
seems hard, harder than fate—
unable to cave in, in my own bed, when
it's time, at the end, no tears to fall from
your face, to give my soul. . . it's little moment.
I won't give out orders, or quake when some
kind hand comes to close my trembling
eyes. But without a funeral, my head
without a proper stone, lying unconsolated,
hidden in that strange place. Won't you be
shaken, wholeheartedly dear, when you hear,
and beat your pavid breast with your fists? Won't
you stretch out your arms, frustrated,
toward the wastes? Call out in vain
the wretch your lover's name? You might scratch
your cheeks some, but don't tear your hair;
it won't be the first time
I'm taken from you. When I lost my home, it was
then you must see, they unearthed me. . .
the first time was harder for me.
Now, if you can do it (but you can't, can you,
dear)? be happy to think that my miseries
cease, and are ended for me
by my death. For this you have power. Diminish
your sorrow by bearing it bravely—
you got used to it so long ago.

Integer hanc potui nuper bene reddere lucem;
exul ut occiderem, nunc mihi uita data est.
Tam procul ignotis igitur moriemur in oris,
et fient ipso tristia fata loco;
nec mea consueto languescent corpora lecto,
depositum nec me qui fleat, ullus erit;
nec dominae lacrimis in nostra cadentibus ora
accedent animae tempora parua meae;
nec mandata dabo, nec cum clamore supremo
labentes oculos condet amica manus;
sed sine funeribus caput hoc, sine honore sepulcri
indeploratum barbara terra teget.
Ecquid, ubi audieris, tota turbabere mente,
et feries pauida pectora fida manu?
Ecquid, in has frustra tendens tua brachia partes,
clamabis miseri nomen inane uiri?
Parce tamen lacerare genas, nec scinde capillos:
non tibi nunc primum, lux mea, raptus ero.
Cum patriam amisi, tunc me periisse putato:
et prior et grauior mors fuit illa mihi.
Nunc, si forte potes (sed non potes, optima coniunx)
finitis gaude tot mihi morte malis.
Quod potes, extenua forti mala corde ferendo,
ad quae iampridem non rude pectus habes.
Atque utinam pereant animae cum corpore nostrae,
effugiatque auidos pars mihi nulla rogos.
Nam si morte carens uacua uolat altus in aura
spiritus, et Samii sunt rata dicta senis,
inter Sarmaticas Romana uagabitur umbras,
perque feros Manes hospita semper erit.
Ossa tamen facito parua referantur in urna:
sic ego non etiam mortuus exul ero.
Non uetat hoc quisquam: fratrem Thebana peremptum
supposuit tumulo rege uetante soror.
Atque ea cum foliis et amomi puluere misce,



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If only the soul could elapse inque suburbano condita pone solo;
with the flesh, so no part of me quosque legat uersus oculo properante uiator,
could escape, from flame . . . grandibus in tituli marmore caede notis:
If my spirit, never dying, soars free "hic ego qui iaceo tenerorum lusor amorum
in an emptied-out sky ingenio perii Naso poeta meo;
(if it's true what Pythagoras says) at tibi qui transis ne sit graue quisquis amasti
I will wander, a Roman, dicere 'Nasonis molliter ossa cubent' "
with Sarmatian shades, hoc satis in titulo est. Etenim maiora libelli
forever, guest of fierce ghosts. et diuturna magis sunt monimenta mihi,
My bones. . . make sure they come back in a pretty quos ego confido, quamuis nocuere, daturos
jar, so I won't be unfashionable dead. Who would nomen et auctori tempora longa suo.
begrudge you that? Think of Tu tamen extincto feralia munera semper
Antigone, who gave her brother a little deque tuis lacrimis umida sarta dato.
grave, to hell with the king. And make sure Quamuis in cineres corpus mutauerit ignis
to mix with my dust some dry leaves and sentiet officium maesta fauilla pium.
cardamom, and lay me not far from the way, Scribere plura libet: sed uox mihi fessa loquendo
a lonely place, outside the city. So dictandi uires siccaque lingua negat.
any hurrying traveler can read Accipe supremo dictum mihi forsitan ore,
with his own eyes, cut this in large letters in stone: quod, tibi qui mittit, non habet ipse, "uale".

I who lie here, tutor
of such tender loves,
Naso, a poet, laid to waste
by his own wit;
You, who have loved,
don't let it oppress

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you, just say as you pass,
"but softly may Naso's bones lie."

This is enough, for inscription. My books,
if you ask me, will serve as stronger
than monuments, longer to last.
It's them I have confidence in, no matter
how much they've hurt me, they'll give their
inventor a long-living name.

Remember, each February, feast of the dead.

Give to the dead, and bring flowers, perhaps
a bit damp from your tears;
however much the fires have changed
my body to ash, dismal embers still feel
the traces of tenderness.

I wish I could write more. My voice is worn out
from dictation, my tongue lacks the moisture
to speak. Accept what may be the last words
from my mouth—words no more
true of the one who would send them—
fare well.