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The Debt and Other Poems

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The Debt and Other Poems

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

by

Kevin Corbett
Grand Valley State University
Bachelor of Arts in English Secondary Education, 2008

May 2016
University of Arkansas

This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

Professor Geoffrey Brock
Thesis Director

Professor Michael Heffernan
Committee Member

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Abstract

A selection of poems, translations, and imitations written from 2009-2015.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge all my colleagues and teachers who have helped me throughout my years at this institution.

I would also like to acknowledge a certain request that was made of me regarding some of the contents of this thesis: on the section of this book called “Trionfi” the best of my knowledge, the pictures on the trumps of Tarot cards were merely allegorical from their origin in the Renaissance until the late 18th Century, when many began to interpret them in an occult manner. While I have drawn on some common allegorical meanings that might overlap with occult interpretations of the cards, this in no way represents an advocacy on my part of their use in divination. While this sort of warning may seem quaint to the modern ear, it was suggested, perhaps required even, by one whose advice my conscience obliges me to follow regardless.

Some of the

Dedication

I dedicate this book to my high school English teacher Angela Johnson, without whose encouragement and support I might have never tried to write anything beyond my juvenilia.

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List of Publications

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The Debt

The Debt

Sister, somewhere, thick in time,
We're screaming at each other.
But in the airy present, I'm
Only your distant brother.

The room we'll meet each other in
Is open once a year.
Here, for an hour, we'll begin
To speak of things we fear

To speak of—of the words that we—
Young and ready-to-forget—
Once let fall with impunity,
Too stupid to regret;

These words we will have not forgotten
When the hour's through.
But let us leave them, lying rotten,
And give the love that's due,

A love, like debt, that's obligated,
Safe as an annuity.
But love it is—if uninflated,
Paid in perpetuity.

Nature

The crush and draw of bone on rock,
The entrails poured out on the street
Emblazoned with the aftershock
Of blood that crusts in summer heat,
Not wholly red, not wholly blue:
This dead raccoon is Nature too.

The cherry tries to bloom in March,
The stinger tears off from the bee.
Hearing a sparrow leave its perch,
The rhino charges at a tree.
Beyond the beauty and the pith,
This is what we are dealing with.

She doesn't mean to drown the ants
Or leave the field-birds underfed,
Nor would she leave so much to chance,
Playing cat's cradle with the thread
Of life and death, were she aware
She seems indifferent or unfair.

Though even stoics like the shade
Of crisscross branches in a park,
They seek the roads that men have made
When Nature calls them toward the dark,
Waving an esoteric hand
Toward what we cannot understand.

Cancer

Encarapaced in astral light,
He crawls across the angled air
Within the groundless void of night,
And wonders why he's even there.
Being so small and recondite,
He feels he hardly has the right
To tread the wheylike thoroughfare
Beside the Lion and the Bear.

Although he has the dimmest flame,
His magnitudes are muted, not
To shell himself away for shame.
Whether he'd run away or fought,
The ending would have been the same:
Someone with "Hera" in their name
Would crush him like an afterthought
And go on acting out their plot.

He's homesick, really, more than shy:
The realm he rules is not his home.
He's restless in the ebbless sky,
Lacking the pressure and thick loam
Of sea-beds where he used to lie,
And wants the carrion-supply
Of beaches that he used to comb
For fish washed up among white foam.

But since he cannot scuttle back
Into the world where crabs belong,
He paces through the Zodiac
Spread like a dowser's double-prong,
Searching for one small hole or crack
Along the vaulted dome of black
From which he, whether right or wrong,
Would make the waters flow like song.

Holy Saturday

A pair of shoulders aching on a pallet
Complaining they were shot and full of splinters;
The man straining to lift them, who could feel it
As deep as frost unthawed for thirty winters;
The air hung with a great concord of Nothing,
Making a racket of a cough or creak,
Begging for women's calls or children laughing,
For any human sound to let it break;
Elsewhere, the women sneezing on their veils,
The rooster restless, pecking around the coop,
The potter weighing silver on rusted scales,
A dozen men unable to get up,
 And distant, grizzled shepherds watching sheep
 With patient eyes that had not gone to sleep.

Invocation to the Muses

Euterpe, Erato, Calliope,
While others seek and find warm hands tonight,
I have no friend or lover—come to me

For needing you that much more desperately.
Sing to me till I lose my appetite,
Euterpe, Erato, Calliope,

For curtained scenes I've lost to memory.
Let me accept that time is not polite.
I have no friend or lover—come to me.

Convince me of my words' authority;
Tell me I'm no dull magpie in your sight,
Euterpe, Erato, Calliope.

Keep me alone as you need me to be—
I don't deny my smallness or your height,
Yet, with no friend or lover, come to me.

If Orpheus had no Eurydice,
Could he have taught the snake how not to bite?
Euterpe, Erato, Calliope,
I have no friend or lover—come to me.

David's Aubade

His mind was dangling from the tied-cloth ladder,
Was pinned by sharpened iron to a wall,
Stalked in the darkness by a jet-black adder—
What had he done to Saul,

To bring this sort of morning to fruition,
To set the red dawn symbolizing blood?
“Go back to first-day haze, you premonition,
Sink back to Sheol's mud”

He rhapsodized, though only kites were listening,
Encircling him like any braying ass
Dying of thirst. He saw the distance glistening
And longed to lick the grass.

The sky dissolved. The firmament was fire—
It didn't have a single drop to spill.
“Goodbye,” he thought, “my friend, my wife, my lyre—
I won't be there to kill.”

How he, who left on foot and without water,
Rode into Ramah, no one asked, or would.
He would have coughed and said it didn't matter—
That day was gone for good.

The Owl and the Grasshoppers

The Owl, with his tufted ears,
Perhaps should not have slept by day:
He had prospected wide frontiers
And found a grasshopper at play

Beneath each likely resting perch.
And yet, he'd kindly flown from each.
He would endure an endless search
Rather than curb freedom of speech

By telling them to shut their faces—
Such stifling discourse would not do,
Even if their songs had no basis.
Yet, when the third dawn's shrill tattoo

Sent him to hear a fiddle-song
In favor of regressive taxes,
He thought, "To silence would be wrong,
But feeding is a normal praxis

For an owl when the sun
Is still ambiguously up,
So if I wait until he's done,
Am I not justified to sup?"

Moral

We call that grasshopper most wise
Who knows not to antagonize
The one who says who tolerates
Even the songs you know he hates.

NPC

The art team has quite lovingly detailed
The purple rugs down to the last cartouche,
The golden-fleck patinas in the stones,
A thousand fictive things that no one sees,
And are not meant to see, since it would break
Player immersion—they must strike beneath
The eye and build an aura. In the hall
A man has been complaining for six years,
“They let you in? I’ve been waiting all day.”
If you hold him in view for just a minute,
You’ll see him run through his full range of sorrow,
From staring out to burying his face
Deep in his hands. I wonder, when I leave
Him to his meditations, does he sigh
Or otherwise relax, since I am gone,
Or go outside to smoke and bite his nails?
I sympathize. I am an NPC
Myself, and I run through my tidy macros
When player characters enter a room.
But when, in life, I see my fellows bustling
To predetermined sites, I find I’m always
Hoping for glowing exclamation points
To bloom like flowers from their troubled heads,
And give my log its first and only quest.

Trionfi

The Magician

In no mystic, no flying tower
He passed the lonely after-hour.
He had a window, book, and chart
To glean the signs the stars impart

Or so, at least, the book had said
And so far, the book had kept him fed
But whether what it said was true
Or not, who knew or knew who knew?

He'd sought that Knowledge once, but fear
And sloth had kept him tabled here
With feet that barely touched the floor
Above some small-beer chemist's door.

Real magic was no sort of friend:
It asked for more than banks would lend,
And once you signed, your only prize
Would leave you mad with melted eyes.

But still, he read the chart with care,
Pulling no omen from the air
Of that stale room, but from the sphere
That hung by Virgo's farther ear.

One night a week to check the stars
Was worth it not to libel Mars
By claiming his influence would
Lead not to wars and death, but good

For anyone but rats and crows.
He just provided ink and prose—
Whether the words weren't true or were,
He was at least surely unsure.

For though he lacked the nerve and will
To find some rabbits blood to spill
Around a candle-circled hill,
Yet he was a magician still.

The High Priestess

When endless clouds conspired to break her heart,
She walked demurely through their censored light:
She wouldn't cry—even to make the sunlight start
And satisfy their ugly oversight.

Her strength was like a thousand pounds of feathers,
Her pride as hard to kill as yellow weeds.
She bound her flock of sorrows with short tethers;
They smelled like grief and pomegranate seeds.

Only in moonlight, she turned small and weak:
It tugged at thoughts to hopeless to be hers.
Whose was that voice she heard so starkly speak
Of old devotion paid with thorns and burrs?

But when the sun came, gift-like and unbidden,
With orange paces down from taller spheres,
It was enough, though he would soon be hidden,
To wash his footsteps with her finest tears.

The Empress

Her Mother

“A crown a crown a crown a crown:
You plot and pine to pull it down,
But once you’ve got it on your head—
Only the faster, dear, to drown,”

Or so her Empress-Mother said
Speaking as quickly as she bled
The hidden-dagger’s worth of blood,
Till quiet lips pronounced her dead.

Her Youth

The Empress grew and understood.
Gritting her heart, she faced the flood
Trying to force her, crown and all,
A foot beneath the river-mud,

But lacking Mother’s wherewithal,
She spent a varied interval
Of days in rooms so tightly shut,
She could not hear the public squall.

The fun of playing autocrat?
Mother had used up all of that.
The world was in her fingers too,
But just to pry a window slat

And frame the thoughtless geese that flew
Above the pond, and never knew
Their flesh had duties to the state
Until state arrows ran them through.

They scattered; she would abdicate,
And kiss some cousin off to fate.
Instead, said cousin’s opaque hand
Stretched darkly to assassinate

Her decoy in an over-manned
And distant room, while, on the pond,
The would-be mufflers of her screams
Rang cries through all the meadowland.

Her Reign

Her blood was shaken. Mother's themes
Of fear and force and counter schemes
Rose up like ghosts who missed the sight
Of limbs stretched out on wooden beams.

She blew them back to ash and night,
Admitting Mother could be right:
Mercy could be a form of vice.
Goodness might lose, or more than might.

But, stabbed and shot and poisoned twice,
She lived, her mercy cold as ice
Filling the pond the geese had left,
Still echoing their mourning-cries.

Her Epitaph

Serpent and dove, we are bereft
Of something heavier than the theft
Of crowns and scepters—she is gone
Who kissed a killer's head and laughed.

Walker, know what you're walking on:
No Queen of Hearts, no Avalon,
No footstool to a crushing throne,
But strongest and most yielding bone.

The Emperor

Sodded and white-lined across carpet green:
That was his empire; light in the air
Hanging in white beads of loose perspiration.
Sorrow, dominion, he countenanced it all
Under that broad light.

Autumn and drawstrings. The crispness of cold
Taut in the lungs then exhaled in thin spirals,
Visible, audible, burdened by nothing.
Quietly, gently, he threw, and his burden
Fell where he meant it.

Mottoless. Talented. *He* gave the signal,
Reigned from the pocket or ran from the horsemen.
Proud? He was proud. But it wasn't his downfall:
Sent to his knees like a miscreant Caesar
Fleeing a crime scene.

Son, you're no good to us busted to hell—
Nobody said so but eulogies seldom
Reach the cold ears of the dead. They would cut him,
Leave him to cover his face with his jersey,
Hiding his death throes.

Fooled them. That Empire was stuck to his ribs,
Beaten in deeper than death or defeat.
Tartarus acres could stretch to forever,
Fuming despair, and he'd smell the clean air
Wrapped in that broad light.

The Chariot

He used to think stopped wheels must ache,
The asphalt, plush, below
Rolled out like carpet for their sake:
A goer has to go.

He felt the same: the world was made
To expedite his speed.
But, unforshadowed, he would find
That rubber, too, can bleed.

Imagine that crushed heap of car
His early prospects paid for:
A splattered cat without the purr
Its quickened breath was made for.

This served as neat metonymy
For later, larger wrecks,
That did to his psychology
What airbags do to necks.

He groaned, but gathered up his scraps
And beat them into wheels.
He drove his heart beyond collapse
Over banana peels

That lined a highway toward the sun,
To Somewhere fruit must grow;
He might yet skid on every one,
But goers have to go.

The Hermit

He yawned all morning. Raindrops slipped away.
Perhaps he'd watch them fall all day,
Commiserating with their fall,
Their listless tempo of withdrawal—
Self-pitying. Insufferable. Cliché.

What did it mean to be truly alone?
To hear a shower's undertone,
Summoned at six by creaking feet
From someone he would never meet,
And wish their daily rising was his own?

What was it like, again, to have a friend?
To marry minds, let feelings bend
Through pipes and streams and, although pressed
At being someone else's guest,
Not want that ebbing interflow to end?

He envied every gray drop in the rain—
It crystallized around a grain
Of sand in winter, then in spring,
Could spill its heart on everything,
Could cleave on rocks, explode and feel no pain.

But rain is rain, and not a metaphor
To soothe him as he watched it pour.
He waked. He blinked. He was alive.
He'd choose to stay or try to thrive.
But still, he hoped it rained an hour more.

Fortune

The fishapod who, longer finned
Than most, with lung-gills barely fit to suck
Unwatered oxygen from air,
First crawled Pangean muck,
Turned back to face the water, grinned
And smugly said, "There's no such thing as luck."

A smirking swordsman claimed, by skill
He cropped his foeman down from flesh to dust.
Ah, Fortune, I can see you there!
Wheel-bearing, blithe, not fussed,
Though knowing it was by your will
The other tripped into his clumsy thrust.

One day the sky will fall perhaps,
Then all the world will call you by your name.
We'll call you evil and unfair,
But call you all the same.
We'll watch the upper air collapse
And cry, "That bitch named Fortune is to blame!"

A thousand universes bloom
Before you, like an inverse flower-train.
You see our world-lines like thin hair
In your unseen domain
And weave the world upon your loom,
In primal bliss, and hear no one complain.

The Hanged Man

Winter: I dug indifference like a trench
To block the grayly hopeless dome of sky.
In Spring, I would not budge one hopeful inch.
I smiled, watching earthworms pass me by.

Summer: the tyrant Sleep made me his minion.
I slept through shifts like no Sandman before.
In Fall, I rode his ship, pale as an onion.
The sea was flatter than an underscore.

Such is the calm concealing dragon-waters.
You yawn, and smoke and talons clutch your throat.
Your boat becomes wreath of blood and splinters.
You struggle, wakefully, to stay afloat.

Thank you, Disaster, thank you Pain and Strife,
You who deliver us from Sleep. Remind
Us sleepers there's no road so straight and safe,
It leaves the waking-dream of day behind

Temperance

He can pour fire from a water flask,
Can count the leptons dancing on a pin,
But facing just one girl he (somehow) loves,
The air itself is acid and no gloves
Or goggles can protect him—something robs
His store of clever things to say and ask.

Each time they meet, courage and hope
Are like twin particles that flicker in
And out of being with such stealth and speed
That just to prove it happened, you would need
Three-hundred football fields of plastic tubes
To pull the proof out like a stethoscope.

To him, she is the sheen of untold metals
With atoms close-crushed in an ancient sun—
Untouchable, far as the asteroid belt—
A light to make a craftsman's fingers melt,
To be exalted past the noise of labs
With all his heart of arabesques and petals.

The Devil

Sometimes I hate the world
And want to burn it down,
Or raise so great a flood
That even fish would drown.

The mountains would throw up,
I'd shake the earth so hard.
The winds that I would whip
Would leave the sky unstarred.

Then from my clever ark,
Secure somewhere in space,
I'd comment on my work,
"I never liked that place."

But when the world was shattered
And everything was dead,
I'd start, too late, to wonder,
What would I hate instead?

The world may have more evils
Than angels could defend,
But even bitter devils
Should not want it to end.

Because we know they need it,
Something to execrate.
We grudgingly admit it:
We know the love in hate.

Re: Sonnets

Retreat

An image fades, but leaves the facts you know:
I met a girl whose face I don't remember
At some church social fifteen years ago:
The only one I ever gave my number.
Her friends gave me one too, said it was hers.
I pictured dialing just to hear, "The time
Is five o'clock"—an automated curse
To tell me I was weird and fat and slime.
That had to be it. So I never called.
She didn't either. I was justified.
No hearts were broken—my number was balled
And thrown out first-thing on her homeward ride.
My mind was never steeled, though, only stiff.
Even tonight, I think, "What if? What if?"

Retrospective

I never crammed my guts with expectation,
But wrote my letter coldly, without hope,
Knowing the story's likely culmination
Before I even sealed the envelope.
But this is just a retrospective posture
Of stoicism that I lacked, and lack.
In truth, I crystal-gazed her every gesture
For looks portending she would like me back.
Like Roman poets chanting in Greek meters,
A boy of barely seventeen in love
Can't help it if his reason balks and teeters,
Possessed by forces he's unconscious of,
 Forgetting basic probability,
 So stupid, so unready. He was me.

Review

I learned how not to love, to cut off yearning
Directly from the weak spot in my brain.
I thank the girl I loved once for my learning.
Her lessons were too subtle to explain
Directly, so she showed me, with examples,
That what I thought was hope did not exist.
Comparing these results with prior samples,
I realized it was pointless to persist.
All research in the matter quickly stopped.
I don't love anybody in that way.
Yet, love looms like a class too quickly dropped
And now I'm worried, did I fail that day?
 Love is no Sunday puzzle, no quiz show,
 And maybe I don't know the things I know.

Remembrance

When I was born, or so my dad has told me,
They ripped me out with feces in my gut.
My mother didn't get the chance to hold me.
Since I was blue, and her insides not shut.
My mom had four more kids, and then she died.
And how I grew up from a cytoblast
Into the man you see? I can't provide
Insights I lack myself into that past.
Two years ago, I found my baby book
Full of her twenty-four-year-old's soft love
That I'm still scared to give a second look.
That I'm wholly unfit for speaking of.
 I hid that awful love far, far away,
 And if I find it, it won't be today.

Reversal

There are five books on my refrigerator
Their spines are facing toward the kitchen wall.
They are, to me, the just-deposed dictator
And henchmen who, before their shocking fall,
Had ruled over my brain more than I wanted.
Aquinas, Duns—they reigned despotically!
They couldn't leave a single thought unhaunted
With fears of regress and contingency.
But this is exile, and not rejection:
When I am more the sovereign of myself,
I'll know them not through fear, but by election,
And place them willingly on my own shelf.
 But until all is well in my own state,
 They must, with pages facing outward, wait.

Elsewhere: Translations, Imitations, and Other Poems from Far Away

Heroides

I. Ariadne

I ran my fingers through the wave-fringed sand,
There on the shore of Naxos, in a shift o
Of Cretan wool, something I'd spun myself
While staring at the sea as I was then.
That Theseus had hair like Persian silk,
A frame as firm and neat as any ship,
In Father's fleet, I hardly can deny;
Nor can I say my heart had never trembled
When had pulled me by my sweating wrist
And set me on his ship three days before.
But life, I knew it even then, was bitter.
I'd had seen Icarus, my erstwhile playmate,
Sail toward the sunset, and yet he had fallen
And crashed into the sea she thought was soft.
I was at least alive, if broken too,
And I had spent enough long hours cursing,
The waters he had fled on. I lay down
Deep in a bed of grasses I had made
And did not sigh, but counted out the stars.

II. Electra

“You know your brother who I had to strangle?”
She said, “I didn’t really strangle him,
And now it seems he’s back.” The clever girl!
I slapped her back and gave her half my sausage
(They didn’t give me much, the former king’s
Despised daughter, left to sweep the hearth
And carry greens and offal to the pigs)
Since I would have a full plate of revenge
And lick it till I saw my own reflection.
I found that man, his hair a nest of hornets,
His puffed out with little rills of red.
You see me in these plays as all dissembling,
All flowing tears and vague insinuations,
But I gave him the knife within the minute,
And not a smooth one meant to peel the meat
From fattened heifers—no, some rusty thing
Found in the barnyard, one for cutting throats.
I’d hold her down and he would do the cutting,
A privilege I gave up reluctantly
As had never even held a weapon
And his taut arms would get the job done better—
She, after all had half a god’s blood in her,
And killed that Agamemnon, who I knew
From our half hour’s tiny reacquaintance
Twitched like a Sybil at the smallest sound
From years of war, and could not have been killed
Without a struggle, even by his wife.
Within the hour, we were tired and bloody,
As if a clumsy serving-boy had tripped
And doused us in the redness of a wineskin
Too much for him to carry. It was strange.
I thought I would feel better than I did—
I wasn’t empty, but I wasn’t full.
My brother ran away. I didn’t follow.
I was so tired and at length I lay
Beneath an apple tree and stretched my hands
Toward fruits I didn’t think I’d ever reach.

III. Camilla

When I was eight, my father taught me killing:
The legends put it at my first firm steps,
But it was eight. He made me break the neck
Of some hare he had snared—I can't remember
That much about it, save that it was soft,
Like running fingers through my mother's hair.
At ten I carved a javelin. At twelve
I made a bow with deer gut I had pulled
Out of the abdomen myself.

Diana

I never met. I made the offerings
And went about my business as I pleased.
I don't know if she saved me as a child,
Much less if she avenged my death in battle,
Though on that count I really hope she didn't.
My cuirass was thick, my arrows feathered,
I killed a dozen men, then I was killed.
I don't see anything worthy of vengeance—
Such is the ordinary course of killing,
The pheasant in the fox's dripping mouth;
The hours that are killed by other hours,
Not to be mourned and never to return.

III. Penelope

Much has been made of my regressive loom,
The bow contest no one was meant to win,
And other stalling tactics I employed.
If I am chaste, and I admit I might be,
It was hardly a choice borne out of virtue,
Or looking stoically across the ocean
With eyebrows bent in grim determination.
It came, rather, from silly sort of moments,
Romantic comedy, from running into
(By this I mean colliding) his smooth chest
Before I knew the name Odysseus
And blushing like the girl I seventeen
In purple silk and perfume that I was.
He brought me to his island, to an orchard
He held my hand amidst the stir of leaves
Like dueling armies on the whipping wind,
And he himself was Autumn when we kissed
Beneath the wizened tree he made our bed.

I do not want to give the wrong impression,
I am no flighty girl of scarves and sonnets,
But not Athena either, though her alter
Within our house was always laid with grains
And summer grapes. Why history has thought me
More like her than I was, I hardly know.
I loved my husband more than civil peace
And did not have the heart for brewing poison
As Anticlea said, to save what substance
We had remaining. Might I be a coward?
It's possible. I took what selfish measures
I could to save myself from strangers' bedsheets—
I did what anyone in love would do.

V. Nausicaä

Never forget me, for I gave you life,”
I told him. It was true. Beside the beach
I found him, sun-burnt, flecked with sores and sand,
His toes still pruned from brine, his hair uncombed.
I dressed him in the laundry I had handy,
A servant’s robe that stuck to his wet skin,
And even half-ridiculous, he seemed
To me as handsome as a god. That man—
The sawing of his hands as he told stories,
His clever eyes that darted like twin hares,
The back broad as a mountain and as scarred.
I loved him, but he had to leave. I knew
He had a wife, long suffering as stone
Beaten with twenty years of rain. I knew
That he had sat on goddess-hallowed shores
And wept to see her. Still, I wanted him
All for myself. And yes, my handkerchiefs
Of flax and silk gave out before my cheeks
Were done with them. I wanted my own ship,
A ship I dreamt of, swift and sturdy-planked,
To bear me to his land, and then to others,
Where strange adventures lurked in every shadow
And when I woke, I longed to clutch a sword,
To slay a giant at the world’s far edge.

To Varius

Swan-like, Varius of Homeric song
will write of your victories over foes, and your valor,
whatever the deeds done by the undaunted soldiers
you lead into battle by boat or on horseback.
My skill's too meager to try the subject
Agrippa, or tell of Achilles' harsh gall,
who never stepped backward, nor of the sea-voyage
of crafty Ulysses, or Pelops' cruel house,
and all such high matters, because modesty
and the Muse who wields the unwarlike lyre
won't let me praise you or peerless Caesar
and tarnish your triumphs through my lack of talent.
Who else is worthy to write of well-armored Mars
in his metal-hard tunic, or of Meriones,
his figure turned dark with Trojan dirt,
or Diomedes, god-peer by the help of high Pallas?
I sing of banquets and the battles of maidens
with their fierce youth and nails finely-trimmed,
whether love sings me or I'm (gladly) single,
keeping light-hearted as is my custom.

—Horace, Odes 1.6

Archytas

The ghost of the cartographer Archytas, who perished at sea, seeks burial rites from a mariner so he may pass to the underworld.

I, who surveyed seas, lands and sands
no count could measure, Archytas, am cloistered
by thin-grained dust, my grave unknown:
How was I served, with my still-mortal soul,
that I tried heaven's halls without hesitation
or ran my wit through the wide-vaulted sky?
Pelops' father fell, once the gods' feast-mate;
likewise Tithonus was taken to the sky,
and Minos, though admitted to Jove's mysteries.
Though he proved his past life in Troy by pulling
his old brass buckler down from its bindings,
and so showed only sinew and flesh submit
to black death's undoing (nor would you deign him
a writer a of nonsense, who knew truth and nature
so well and widely) yet Euphorbus still went
into Tartarus' care his second time down.
The Furies force some to fight for unfeeling
Mars's amusement; likewise mariners,
for whose wreck the sea is always rabid.
Both seniors and youths will be stuffed into urns
and no forehead escapes fear-striking Proserpina.
For me, ripping Notus that rides with Orion
in his downward turning entombed me in tides
off Illyria's landfalls, like any other.
But lest you refuse, sailor, even to scatter
wind-blown sand on my unburied bones
and give no grain for my graveless head:
though Eurus shake the Hesperian ship-lanes
as much as he pleases, he will punish the pines
of nearby Venusia, leaving you none-the-worse,
and that flood will float you many prizes further,
granted by Neptune, the guardian god
of Tarentum, joined by just-dealing Jove,
if you would help me. At least, you would hardly
commit such a crime that would soon curse
your faultless children? Chances are, you'd change course
if proud Fortune's ire and the price for guilt
fell on yourself. Forsaken, my prayers
will render a revenge no prayer will relieve.
Whatever the heading you hold back no haste for,

I won't waylay you an overlong while:
You need only throw three brief times
a spare bit of sand, then sail on your way.

—Horace, Odes 1.28

To Iccius

Iccius, now you dream of Arab hoards
Stacked high with gold, and plan a cruel campaign
Against those never-beaten Sheban lords,
And already you're linking up a chain

To bind the dreadful Medes. Her lover dead,
What savage girl will be your concubine?
What boy with oiled hair their courts have bred
Will stand with cup in hand to serve you wine,

Who knows well how to ply his father's bow
With Chinese arrows? Who will find it strange
If downward-sloping rivers start to flow
Up lofty mountains, or the Tiber change

Its course, when you who snatched them all up, trade
Your books of Panaetus and Socrates
And all his school to buy this Spanish-made
Armor, who promised better things than these?

— Horace, Odes 1.29

To Venus

Queen of those isles fringed with foam, please spurn
Your well-beloved Cyprus—rather, turn
To Glycera's neat little shrine that calls
To you with all the incense it can burn.

Come quickly down with Cupid, burning bright,
Graces and Nymphs, their belts not bound too tight.
Send Mercury post-haste—yet escort Youth:
If she has charms without you, they're too slight.

— Horace, Odes 1.30

Dedication for a Shrine of Apollo

What is the poet's prayer to enshrined Apollo?
What does he wish for as he lets the new wine
spill from the saucer? Not for rich Sardinia's
fruit-bearing fields not for feverish Calabria's
eye-pleasing plow-cattle, not for a whole pile
of goods from the Ganges of ivory and gold,
not lands slowly swallowed by the silent Liris
with its stream of soft-flowing nearly still waters.
Let them who good fortune grants use of the grapevine
of Calenia keep it well-clipped with the sickle.
Let the rich merchant guzzle from golden goblets
the wines that he won with his Syrian wares:
The gods love that man: they must, since he manages
to look on the leagues of the distant Atlantic
and returns to tell of it three times a year.
But as for myself, if I have mild mallows,
small olives and succory that's plenty for supper.
Just keep me healthy, happy with what I have;
Let me stay, Latona's son, reasonably sane,
and don't let my dotage be something disgraceful.

—Horace, Odes 1.31

Apples Flowing with Ripe Barrels

I'll bring you apples flowing with ripe barrels,
Weave coats of purple words to help you sleep
A sleep the coldest draft never imperils.

The locks on all your dream-doors will not keep
My hands from your desk drawer and memory.
I'll rearrange the furniture and sweep

The dust from underneath the rugs—you'll be
Confounded, yes, but pleasantly surprised
(In time). You think I'm speaking triflingly?

Not so! My words are never improvised—
I engineer them to a fine infection
And you, my dear, should know you're compromised

From your listless hours spent in recollection
Of things displaced—you hold a glass of pills
And stumble in the water-caps direction.

My word-contagion's not the kind that kills,
Fills you with pain or sadness, makes you crazy
Or fall in love—it is the mirth that spills

From floating in a world gone light and hazy,
So you don't get too attached to this beach ball,
The earth, or too proud to be lazy.

That's all.

— after “An Apple full of baskets” by Hafez Moosavi