The Boy Persephone

CYRUS CASSELLS

Tullio, if you recall from class:
Sicily was once christened
“Persephone’s Island,”
in homage to the Hellenic tale
of abduction and return.
A cousin to mythical Hades’
fierce, unrelenting chief,
my father Cosimo was a calculating thief,
a wily kidnapper.
Since divorce in Sicily was considered
inglorious, beyond the pale,
every September my devious sire
would abduct me to Messina’s outskirts;
then every spring equinox return me
to my tearful mother and sister
or the lackadaisical cops
would finally haul me home:
this happened enough times
the local gazette dubbed me
“the boy Persephone.”

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Longtime friend,
our stifling town claimed
the both of us were green as grass,
not in the least grown,
but you were already smoking
like a proper delinquent,
and had secretly deflowered
an honest to God pretty girl,
not from Sicily, but Gallipoli
in southernmost Puglia,
the sturdy heel of the boot—

You were in a tailspin: acting tough
and refusing to be toppled,
mourning without ever fully erupting
(like vehement Vesuvius or irascible Etna)
into flat-out tears.
Your closest brother Leandro,
once an able-bodied partisan,
came back in an alderwood box,
so my sister Caterina and Lia,
my pensive mother
prodded me: go comfort him;
he’s more than an orphan,
he’s practically alone—

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In boarding school, kindly provided
by Maddalena, your last surviving aunt,
we were assigned the same room.
Past the dilapidated town marquee,
we happily dissected the latest De Sica film
and debated Sartre’s philosophy.
It was inevitable we compared bodies,
yours more muscular
from steady motorbiking and garden work:

In a way, you’re too pretty, Bernardo!
Boy, girl, who knows what to call you,
but you’re wonderful!—
Then came your secret, pleasure-giving hands and lips, Tullio, and in our “only you and I know” nighttime “experiments,” I discovered my true nature:

I would never be anybody’s spouse or the father of savvy, frolicking sons; I was that sinful, unspeakable thing: the just-awakened lover of another, stronger boy—

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I was adamant it was gold, but for you, my Casanova-in-the-making, our nighttime coupling was more or less adventure, an autumn lark:

Just because you’ve taken a liking, Bernardo, to what’s between my legs—yes, it’s a very loveable cock!—doesn’t mean you’re in the same league as the flirty shoemaker who lives with his handsome “friend.”

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By December 8th, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, you’d reversed course, Sir Tullio, and imposed a moratorium on our carefree lights-out touching, which definitely led to a downright
clashing-like-Crusaders-and-Saracens
winter school break.

Forgive my errant, lovelorn sense
of moviehouse melodrama
and Tinseltown hyperbole,
but for my part, your holiday
abstinence was akin
to my father's seasonal kidnapping
or Persephone's notorious
fall and winter cell-time in hell.

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Even at sixty-two, I can still summon up
how the fluttering Sicilian almond blossoms
broadcast everywhere,
equal to free-floating gossip,
pale as Serafina, the artful milliner's
most intricate lace:
he loves me, he loves not—

It was almond-time: a typical early bird
island spring, and far from cupolas
and tolling church bells,
on the soothing periphery,
we ambled alongside
a hard-at-work stream,
an old mainstay,
and out of the celestial blue—surprise!—
as if in a silent yet somehow
agreed-on truce,
you took my hand once more.
Whatever we meant together that Saturday
as seesawing “night wrestlers”
and no longer bickering sidekicks,
the sunlight on our linked-again flesh
made me grateful, Tullio,
made me giddy suddenly,
as if I’d come back from the dead.

About the author

Is There Room for Another Horse on Your Horse Ranch? (Four Way Books: March 2024) is Cyrus Cassells's latest volume. Everything in Life is Resurrection: Selected Poems, 1982-2022 (TCU Press) and Lorca to the Umpteenth Power (3: A Taos Press) are forthcoming in 2025 and 2026. Among his honors: a Guggenheim fellowship and a Lambda Literary Award. The World That the Shooter Left Us was a Houstonic Book Award finalist and The Gospel according to Wild Indigo, a finalist for the NAACP Image Award. His two books of Catalan translations, Still Life with Children: Selected Poems of Francesc Parcerisas and To The Cypress Again and Again: Tribute to Salvador Espriu, both received the Texas Institute of Letters’ biennial Soeurette Diehl Fraser Award for Best Translated Book. The 2021 Poet Laureate of Texas, Cassells is a Regents’ and University Distinguished Professor of English at Texas State University.