

TEN APPEALS TO THE FRIEND¹

By Hilda Hilst

Translated by

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Love, love, my season

Sylvia Plath

I
If I seem nocturnal and imperfect
Look at me again.
For tonight
I looked at myself as if you were looking.
And it was as if water
Desired

¹ From the title of the collection, the lyrical speaker engages with the Galician-Portuguese troubadour tradition of the “cantiga d'amigo”, where a female speaker addresses her object of desire as a “friend” rather than a “lover”.

To escape your house that is the river,
Sliding only, not touching the margins.

I looked at you. For some time
I understand that I am earth. For so long
I wait
For your most fraternal body of water
To spread over mine. Shepherd and sailor.

Look at me again. With less arrogance.
And more attentive.

II

Love me. There is still time. Question me.
I will tell you that our time is now.
Splendid desire, vast fortune
For the dream that weaves

For so long its own fabric is even vaster.

Love me. Even if I seem
Too intense. And made of harshness.
And transitory if you think me over.

III

If remaking time was my gift
I would turn my countenance of parable
Into a web of honey – labor of sorcery.

And in that bewitched library

Where rare friends smiled at me,
Where you were wheat and tower to me,

My whole courageous Poetry
Would take hold of you. Blessedness
So excessive and large and joyous

That love, my friend, would be enchantment.

IV

My measure? Love.
And your mouth against mine
Undeservingly.

My shame? Ardent
Verse. And my countenance,
The reverse of the dreamer.

My calling? Sagittarius
Next to me
Roped to the Taurus.

My wealth? Obstinate
Search, your presence
Everywhere: July, August,
Foreseen Zodiac, illustrated

Page in a magazine,
Editorial, newspaper,
Broken up web.

In every corner of the House,
Vehement evidence
Of your countenance.

V

We are both in the past. And the friends
And all my sap and my suffering
From not seeing you. Your lack of love, too,
Will pass. I am only a poet

And you, lucid word maker,
Inconsiderate, transparent.

We are both in the past because that is how it always is.
And this inventive time, singular, rare,
Encircles the word. Dark clover

Immemorial, coincidental, ardent
In my mature lifetime.

VI

I smile as I wonder
In which corner of the living-room
You will keep my verse.
Far from
Your books of politics?
In the first drawer
Closer to the window?

Do you smile when you read me?
Or are you tired of reading
So much ruin,
Lovely spark
In my mature countenance?²
Do I look beautiful
Or do I only look
Perhaps more poet
And less serious?
What does the man think
Of the poet? That there is no truth
In my drunkenness?
And that you prefer
A more peaceful friend
Who is less adventurous?
And that it is wholly impossible
To preserve in your living-room
The passionate
Vestige of my tongue?
Do I seem mad?
Do I seem pure?
Do I seem girlish?

Or is it really the truth
That you never got to know me?

VII

It was July indeed and I will never forget it.

² The lyrical speaker of the “cantiga d’amigo” is typically young and unmarried. Hilda, instead, offers a mature one.

Gold over me, iridescent
Word in my mouth.
The urgency of speaking to me about love
Tattooed in memory and confidence.
September in vast silence
keeps my countenance at a distance. I ask:
Do you remember that July in me?

The friends told me that Saturn
Returns this year. And it is tiger
And it is executioner. And that lovers

Pensive, glacial,
Will turn deaf to the moving song.
If things are this way, my love,³
What do I gain from telling you more?

VIII

All the nights that were not yours
Were of moon, madness, and deluge.
Friends and boys with tenderness,

My countenance-thought untouched,
Untouched my body and so much sadder
Always searching for your exact body.

Release me from you. Let me rebuild
My petty little loves. There is a science

³ Sole instance in the poems where the speaker addresses her “lover” rather than her “friend.” The “cantiga d’amor” would address a lover, but the lyrical speaker was typically male in this kind of troubadour song.

To letting me love
Without bitterness. And let them offer me

The enormous incoherence
Of disloving even in love. And while remembering you

– maker of displeasure –
Let me forget you.

IX

Endlessly dying this poet within me
Tries to repeat himself reciting psalms:⁴
How can I know you, architect of time,
How can I know of me, without tasting you?
Your frigid gesture, my blindness,
And that chaste incendiary moment
In case I see me by your side. Weaving
Afternoons, those afternoons that I used to love,
Matter of solitude, intimacy, brightness,
They suffer the sluggishness of certain waters,
As if the ship always refused
Fluidity. My dilated afternoons

Surviving only
For it is at night that I return to my truth:
Your traces, your countenance, frigid, yes

And because of that, perhaps, so beloved.

⁴ While the lyrical speaker of the collection is feminine (she describes herself as “noturna” and “imperfeita” in the first poem), she uses the masculine to talk about her craft as a poet (“esse poeta”).

X

It is not only a vague and modulated affection
That makes me sing with so much enormity
The memory of the two of us. There is more. It is like a breath
Of fire, fraternity and loyalty, fervor,
As if parting caused the pleasure
Of knowing
That in all of you and of me there is a sweet-smelling
Space where the farewell does not exist.

It is no simple vanity to desire
At fifty
That your soul and your body will soften
Freely with the exactness of this poem. There is more.
Hence, forgive all this love stemming from me

And forgive me the indifference stemming from you.

Source: “Dez chamamentos ao amigo” in Hilda Hilst,
Júbilo, memória, noviciado da paixão. 2.impr. São
Paulo: Globo, 2003. p. 15-27. (Primeira edição em
1974.)

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