

from Tristia

I

My friend, until you have been cursed
to wander, kinless, foreign lands where range
barbarians so foul the farmer goes
with a machete strung across his back
simply to milk his kine, you cannot know
time's secret ministries: how it can crawl
like a disease that steals
so sly upon a man he barely feels
its subtle victories; or like an army
marching at half speed. It's true: I have bogged down
in this forgotten outpost. Do not upbraid
narrowness of theme: I never wrote
to better purpose than when I implore
Augustus to be merciful.

IV

The gods flee to the stars where they become
daft stories poets use
to show their mastery of form;
an exercise in rhyme.

Perhaps a corner yet remains in Rome
that holds in reverence the name
of one who versed with bite:
wherever poets meet

let the best chair stand empty;
let them remember
Naso, who would not stoop to wring
old metre from a heathen tongue,

who shamed the gods with his inventions
and found men less forgiving.

VI

I watch you wave and when you disappear
become a house where nobody lives,
an old façade decayed, a pillow bereft
of the smell of your hair. A stranger asks
but nobody can place who lived in that
boarded-up ruin children say is haunted,
where manuscripts lie strewn about the floor;
where lemon trees have overrun the orchard;
where, in the quartered fields, stogged wheat
reeks like a byre and rape holds sway.
You wave your arms and crows
scatter like crows. And that's the pose
in which I've held you (waiting, open armed)
for seven years. And I'm still here.

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From *The Sinking Road*

First published in *Modern Poetry in Translation Vol. 3 No. 2* and in *Tower Poetry Review*