

TED BYRNE / Sonnets: Guido Cavalcanti

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Your eyes heartless love impoverish me
harsh noisy squint splits my resistance
and if you didn't smile once in awhile
my voice my guile would abandon me
and love would nail me to the door
with spikes of the imaginary

From above the corner of her mouth
the little wicked winged thought
climbs in my ear lugging the real

3

Didn't you see him babe when he grabbed me
by the vest and all I could do was gulp

It was fuckin A out of nowhere
like a Syrian hitman dressed to kill
suddenly finding us cornered me

He took your sighs your eyes for ammo
and shot me so full of holes I fled
into the arms of death and that crowd
of hopeless buggers all drenched in tears

6

(pezzo di legno)

Taken mindful painful and morose
inanimate my beaten chorus
sighs empty my late suffering eyes

Eros knowing your talent my fate
says your ears miss what they hear of me

Others see death when they see me see
stone or lead or a piece of wood

articulated automaton
each unmastered wound an open sign

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(for Bertolt Brecht)¹

Imagined imperium our gaze
a love of looking not of seeing
the air trembling as she passes by

Dumb we sigh but there'd be no reply
if she turned and countered our regard

Contrary or not she moves inside
the ring inscribed by beauty's compass

Our minds lifted drop back to the street
filled with sorrow but not with knowledge

1 See "Über die Gedichte des Dante auf die Beatrice."

10

Oh dear me Unsightly passions see
a singular pain yet redouble
these empty indecorous words

Oh my As you know my heart's struck through
by joy by torsion and her coy glance
Oh dear Please lift me out of this trap

It's just like Fred Williams in that film
He appears and I go weak inside
My soul is lost and found forever

13

Her eyes met then spirited away
inspirit thoughts beyond direction
My spirits declining and in thrall
find themselves again in sprightly dance

The spirit that has me by the balls
is the same spirit that makes me bold
An other this spirit another calls
a snow storm of spirits falling
from the lips of a specter with eyes

21

Perhaps when you saw me you saw death
rare spirit love is only there then
assassination so close to thought
drained at the outer edge of silence
when yes a light let's say your eyes yes
a glance near meaning's sweet inside me
you gave perhaps a light a lightness
and that subtle spirit looking out
gave life again to thought's affections

In order to properly read Pound's translations, and in preparation for a reading of "Donna mi pregha," I made literal translations of these poems in the late 70s. In making those translations, and in revisiting them now, I relied mainly on the editions of Pound, Contini, and Cattaneo. For this selection I have retained the order in which Pound arranged the sonnets. I also consulted Rossetti's translations, and Lloyd Howard's commentary (dissertation, Johns Hopkins 1976). Also useful: Pound's essay "Cavalcanti," Rachel Jacoff's dissertation "The Poetry of Guido Cavalcanti" (Yale 1977), Bruno Nardi's *Dante e la cultura medievale* (1983), and especially Maria Corti's *La felicità mentale* (1983), Maria Luisa Ardizzone's *Guido Cavalcanti: the Other Middle Ages* (2002), and Giorgio Agamben's *Stanzas* (1977).