

REQUIEM

W. F. Lantry

All the attributes of Miranda are measured in circular forms. Her waist is a meridian, her bracelet an orbit of light. In the rushed luminosity of dawn, in the declining radiance of an autumn evening, when the voices of birds are falling around us, and the owls begin moving in silence between the unclothed branches, the echoes of her singing voice move out in infinite circles. A ring constrains even her finger.

And the liquid sequences of her notes are like the fluid records of a stone skipped dexterously across a pond. The closest circle widens as the stone moves off to make another, another, all the way to the opposite bank, where it settles into silence. We can watch the circles widening, note the harmony of their continuous pattern, the straight line their centers describe,

but they are always rings overlapping rings, each a small vortex of sound, a corona of notes both performed and heard. Through her breath, we pass into breathlessness, aroused and composed by her voice. When the tempo slows, when the voice moves up her scale as the dawn light moves across our earth, or as the stars move in circles through the darkening air, then we long to be one of those nightbirds, with their secret wings, climbing along on the waves of her sound, disappearing into what has always been.

The sensuous joy of our listening, the miracle we newly sense of simply being able to hear such delight, reminds us there was a time when we knew only silence, and makes us regret that time will come again. Its beauty teaches the rapture of a particular moment, makes us desire to dwell within her space now, and in the next moment, and the next, each note a bound moment of the eternal, caught within her lips and shaped to the forms of our elations.

Driven beyond accomplishment or artistry, the trained expertise and the physics of resonant air, part of us still measures the singular rhythm, the practiced pitch of exactness, the way the tone moves from one place to the next, the way a hummingbird's wings beat in precise orbits, each feather moved by particular muscles, all of them working as one.

We have all heard *Panis Angelicus*, how many times, and *Pie Jesu*, and yet in her voice it all becomes new, as if it were composed in that moment, from

eternal lips to hers, infinite now in our present, and in memory imprinted as if by wood block, or engraving, as if a lithograph could bear its lines unchanging. Her voice is the sharpened burin, and we the copper plate. And if the paper is pressed against us, how could we resist replicating her form, or remaking the mark it has left in our flesh?

I have heard the learned men standing outside the Basilica, on the steps near those statues, discussing her phrasing, analyzing the pulsing undulations of her song, unable to capture in eloquent syntax even the tenth part of enduring emotion she calls with such ease to the air. Better to remember the weeping of women in the pews, my own weeping as I listened, the joy and anguish of feeling her openness, her presence among us, there on the raised dais, her arms spread wide to gather us into the flames she inhabits, and which burn within her untended.

Only surrounded by mosaiced walls is she fully herself, only when her voice lingers around the marble columns lit by rose windows, her face glowing in the tinted light, the wind singing through her in the windless space, does she become the one voice, her singular inflections lifting us above the incense of mourning, as if we were mere particles of smoke, roiled on the currents of sound moving through her, the light down of doves floating under transept arches.

And yet, we hear her words written within us. Whatever song she sings, the terms of the *Lacrymosa*, our sadness caught within them, like the sadness of all who have suffered. There is no comfort, but there is also no despair, our sorrows are made crystalline, constant but faceted, as if her voice could cleave their rough edges, and preserve beauty within loss.

So we move on, always caught in that moment, as the next song begins, unable to remember what came before, or what would follow, we live inside her and she in us, the first stanza, the following refrain. Unable to believe there could be a next moment, longing that each be the one, and endure, and yet longing to hear the grace of transition, for part of the joy is in harmony, the stone skipping, the circles merging on the water's surface, a mirror of all we've become, and everything we desire to be.

For the laid out body once had such desires, before the incense was lit, before the elegant wood was cut, and planed down by hand, before it was sanded and finished, and rough hands polished its flanks. Those feet, so still now, once ran towards a consuming passion, the lips, silent now as a stone beneath water, once spoke of a beauty like hers. And the corpse, dressed in such clothes as it wore on the brightest occasions, now is anointed with small waterdrops, and the same drops are flung into the pews, to remind us. And she goes on singing like the endless sea, or like a woman walking beside it, the spaced breakers her background chant.

Perhaps because she knows the breakers will continue? How else could she go on? Now the doors open, as her voice rises. Now the people stand, invited by her lifting arms, now they turn and watch the procession go past. The steps of the bearers match her slow rhythm. They move through the doors, and into sunlight.

But I am standing in the darkest corner, still listening. All I possess are the shadows. She gathers up the sheets of her music, and walks to me in silence.

W.F. Lantry, a native of San Diego, is the recipient of the *Paris/Atlantic* Young Writers Award, and in 2010 won the Lindberg Foundation International Poetry for Peace Prize, the *Crucible* Editors' Poetry Prize and the *CutBank* Patricia Goedicke Prize. His work has appeared in *Gulf Coast*, *Anemone Sidecar*, *Literal Latté*, *Istanbul Literary Review*, *Blip* and *Aesthetica*. He currently works in Washington, DC and is a contributing editor of *Umbrella: A Journal of Poetry and Kindred Prose*. His website is <http://wflantr.com/>.