

# *The Paths of Survival*

SAMPLER

ALSO BY JOSEPHINE BALMER

The Word for Sorrow

Chasing Catullus: Poems, Translations and Transgressions

Catullus: Poems of Love and Hate

Classical Women Poets

Sappho: Poems and Fragments

Piecing Together the Fragments:

Translating Classical Verse, Creating Contemporary Poetry

Rearranging the World:

A Contemporary Anthology of World Literature in Translation

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Josephine Balmer

*The Paths  
of Survival*

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*Just as our lives can be represented as texts which we make, so our selves are inseparable from the texts we read and make our own...*

—Charles Martindale

*Myrmidons... It didn't survive; only the title and some fragments. I would join Sisyphus in Hades and gladly push my boulder up the slope if only, each time it rolled back down, I were given a line...*

—from *The Invention of Love*, Tom Stoppard

*Weapons, we need new weapons...*

Aeschylus, *Myrmidons*

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## Proem: Final Sentence

(Sackler Library, Oxford, Present Day)

Still I am drawn to it like breath to glass.  
That ache of absence, wrench of nothingness,  
stark lacunae we all must someday face.

I imagine its letters freshly seared;  
a scribe sighing over ebbing taper,  
impatient to earn night's coming pleasures  
as light seeped out of Alexandria.

But in these hushed corners of Oxford  
Library afternoons, milky with dust,  
the air is weighted down by accruing loss

and this displaced scrap of frayed papyrus  
whose mutilated words can just be read,  
one final, half-sentence: *Into darkness.*  
Prophetic. Patient. Hanging by a thread.

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# Custodians

*...By absence from battle, am I not our army's  
True champion?...*

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## The Librarians' Power

*(The National Library, Baghdad, 2003)*

We carried what we could to safety.

They seemed like something living:  
fungus on an oak, the pleated folds  
of open mushroom cup, organisms  
that were once books, manuscripts,  
now debris of 'precision' incendiary.

To conserve them we needed ice  
not fire. In a ruined kitchen cellar  
we found a freezer but no power;  
we canvassed, coaxed, cajoled  
until locals offered the sacrifice  
of their one precious generator.

We were asked why we struggled  
to save books while all around us  
so many of our citizens were lost.  
We could only say that, if not fresh,  
here were dividing cells, bare blocks  
of collective memory. Conscience.

The vast record of all our knowledge  
and of our faith: an ancient Quran,  
the House of Wisdom we had built;  
the learning we alone had salvaged  
and then protected for the Greeks –  
Ptolemy's *Almagest*, science, medicine.

Those lost worlds were retrieved  
in the flash of forceps, lifting piece  
on tiny piece, word on broken word.  
Our own enduring, unshakeable belief  
that in each newly-deciphered letter  
a poem waited to be recovered.

## Trespass

*(Monastery of Zavorda, Macedonia, 1959)*

From the crag we watched as he drew  
near, creeping closer like a contagion.

‘My son, we have been expecting you,’  
our unsmiling abbot said in welcome.  
From the cadence of his voice we knew  
he was not talking of days or decades  
but the dry passage of our centuries.  
For weeks our guest rifled the libraries,  
their rare treasures piled around him –  
like a child’s toys or stored-up treats.

Now our abbot did not eat or sleep.  
We saw the apprehension in his face  
as if some half-recalled, splintered dream  
had returned, long dreaded, to haunt him,  
a fear he could barely form or elucidate.  
Our guest found all he had come to seek:  
a tattered codex wrapped round in rags  
like some precious shard of brittle glass.  
He put on his hat and coat, his work done,  
a few more words for his literary canon –

*Abdeluktos philo. Absolved because I loved him...*  
Anathema. The taint of unconstrained sin –  
a snatch of Aeschylus’ foul *Myrmidons*.  
In its shadow we had held sacred homily,  
called our brethren to vespers, benediction.  
Now it was unleashed again, this heresy  
we had guarded here without knowing  
for so long. Unspeakable acts. Trespass.

We waited as he faded, a blur in the dark,  
disappearing back into fold of river pass.

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# Excavators

*...I have shaken  
Out the reins, let loose the horses  
To run the course of truth...*

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## Papyrus Trace

*(Papyrological Institute, Florence, 1953)*

Among the professor's papers  
deposited after her recent death –

calculations, petty cash registers,  
even a house plan in faint sketch –

we found a pencilled transcript,  
scrawled in haste, not remembered,

traced beneath an old shopping list,  
a breath exhaled, deep-buried ember:

trapped in the scent of lavender, musk;  
letters from a lost world, seeping back

to black, etched in breath-blown dust:  
*...speak out... ...dissent... ...enough...*

a few precious words of Aeschylus  
we'd all believed had gone forever –

the fragment found at Oxyrhynchus  
then lost again in an Allied raid

by this second miracle returned to us,  
late violets trembling above a grave.

## The Professor's Prize

(Florence, 23rd March 1944, p.m)

That day I'd seen a student hung  
from a lamp post by a baying mob  
for 'associating' with other men.  
All night I sat alone, working on.  
Which is where I heard it, sob  
of stray, thumb-slipped bomb.  
I didn't think of the house I had  
just lost, not even a prayer – God  
forbid – for the beloved sister  
who'd shared it all these years,  
(no need to panic for the husband  
and children that were never there,  
the family sacrificed for Greek  
that hadn't filled it, never would)  
this fear was for a thin glass case,  
scrap of papyrus pressed between,  
marbled, translucent, bled at the edge  
like collector's rare butterfly wing.  
The only one not in safe-keeping –  
the one I'd held, could not evacuate

Later we found my sister Eugenia  
barely scratched, her face at peace  
as if a chance she still might speak.  
No such fortune for the precious text  
my murdered friend had excavated  
in Egypt, brought back in triumph.  
He was proud that day, possessed –  
like a Greek tragic hero, we all said –  
flushed with his new-found success.  
And with a hero's courage to defy,  
to speak up for his faith, for who  
and what he was, the men he loved:  
*Time now to protest, to dissent...*

Today all I see are his bulging eyes  
and purple lips, the scar of rope,  
face twisted into a scream of *No*.

He'd entrusted me with his prize  
as if written in his own blood,  
our own golden treasure trove  
shrunk away into shrivelled cinder.  
Now it was lost, alchemy in reverse,  
transformed back to lead and dirt.

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