Unbuttoning Catullus: As for the Women...

loving none, having all, over and over
just breaking their balls
(Catullus, poem 11, from Catullus: Poems of Love and Hate, 2004)

It’s just the same – a quarrel or a kiss
Is but a tune to play upon his pipe.
He’s always hymning that or wailing this:
Myself I much prefer the business type.
   (Dorothy Parker, ‘From a Letter from Lesbia’, Death and Taxes, 1931)

1. Mirrors Within Mirrors: Catullus 51

‘How could a male heterosexual version of female homosexual desire be rendered into English by a woman translator who had herself previously worked on Sappho’s original?...’
   (from Piecing Together the Fragments, 2013)

Ille mi par esse deo videtur,
ille, si fas est, superare divos,
qui sedens adversus identidem te
spectat et audit
dulce ridentem, misero quod omnis
eripit sensus mihi: nam simul te,
Lesbia, aspexi, nihil est super mi
   [vocis in ore]
lingua sed torpet, tenuis sub artus
flamma demanat, sonitu suopte
tintinant aures gemina, teguntur
   lumina nocte.

That man to me seems the equal of a god;
that man – dare I say? – surpasses the divine,
the one who sits by you, who time after time
looks on you, who hears

you as you laugh so sweetly, while I’m in hell,
senses shredded, torn apart; for when I see
you there Lesbia, there’s nothing left of me –
   [no voice to speak of]

as my tongue is numbed, my lips struck dumb; pale fire
trickles down my limbs, my ears resound, ring-ting
with their own thunder, and my eyes are covered
by these dark nights, twin.

   (from Catullus: Poems of Love and Hate, 2004)
2. The Music of Misery: Catullus 8

‘a concise study in melancholia and repressed wishes’

Miser Catulle, desinas ineptire,
et quod vides perisse perditum ducas.
fulsere quondam candidi tibi soles,
cum ventitabas quo puella ducebat
amata nobis quantum amabitur nulla.
ibi illa multa cum iocosa fiebant,
qua tu volebas nec puella nolebat,
fulsere vere candidi tibi soles.
nunc iam illa non vult: tu quoque impotens noli,
nec quae fugit sectare, nec miser vive,
sed obstinata mente perfer, obdura.
vale puella, iam Catullus obdurat,
nec te requiret nec rogabit invitam.
at tu dolebis, cum rogaberis nulla.
scelesta, vae te, quae tibi manet vita?
quis nunc te adibit? cui videberis bella?
quam nunc amabis? cuius esse diceris?
quem basiabis? cui labella mordebis?
at tu, Catulle, destinatus obdura.

You wretch, Catullus, just stop this faking
and write off now what is faded, failing.
Once you had dazzling sunshine, your skies glowed,
days you’d go anywhere on her say-so -
the one you loved as no other will be.
There was time for laughter, to joke, to tease,
when you said yes (and she didn’t say no);
oh, you had dazzling sunshine, your skies glowed.
Now she demurs so you too must abjure,
don’t play the fool or follow her allure
but see it through, hold on, hold out, harden.
Fare well, girl, Catullus plays the hard man,
won’t persist if you resist, beg where shunned -
though you’ll regret it when you’re begged by none.
You witch, what life now do you think you’ve earned?
Who will posses you? Whose love will you see?
Who’ll obsess you? Whose will you seem to be?
Who will caress you? Whose lips will you burn?…
Come on now, Catullus, hold up, harden.

(from Catullus: *Poems of Love and Hate*, 2004)
3. The Mirrored Ceiling: Catullus 41

‘I like to see how I’m doin’...’

(Mae West, Interview with Charlotte Chandler, 1979)

Ameana puella defututa
tota milia me decem poposcit,
ist a turpiciulo puella naso,
decctoris amica Formiani.
propinquii, quibus est puella curae,
amicos medicosque convocate:
non est sana puella, nec rogare
qualis sit solet aes imaginorum.

Ameana, the girl who goes and goes,
had the nerve to charge me ten thousand whole –
you know, the girl with the big beaky nose,
the one that bankrupt Mamurra’s feeling.
Call in her next of kin, put her in care,
send out for her friends and physicians;
for the girl is insane, she’s not all there:
she needs a brass mirror above the bed
so she can reflect on her own ceiling.

4. Registering the Puns: Catullus 32

‘I didn’t know whether to block her passage or toss myself off.’

(Max Miller, quoted by John East in Max Miller: The Cheeky Chappie, 1977)

Amabo, mea dulcis Ipsitilla,
meae deliciae, mei lepores,
iube ad te veniam meridiatum.
et si iussis, illud adiuvas,
ne quis liminis obseret tabellam,
neu tibi lubeat foras abire,
sed domi maneas paresque nobis
novem continuas fututiones.
verum si quid ages, statim iubeto:
nam pransus iaceo et satur supinus
pertundo tunicamque palliumque.

Please, please me, dear Ipsitilla,
my own sweetness, my so clever,
invite me in for siesta
and I’ll come – but at your leisure.
Don’t block your passage, fold down flaps,
slip off out for other pleasures.
Hold on, get set, let’s fill the gap:
nine full-time, full-on, fuck-fuckings;
just say you’re game, just say you will,
you see I’ve eaten, had my fill,
yet still my lunchbox is bulging.

‘perhaps, as a woman, I could not take his belligerent posturing too seriously. But then neither,
one suspects, did Catullus.’

(from Introduction to Catullus: Poems of Love and Hate, 2004)
5. Chasing Catullus

‘how translation can infect translator...’
(from Piecing Together the Fragments, 2013)

It’s the rule of attraction, the corruption of texts,
the way his corpus tastes of skin and sweat,
that taint of decay, scent of cheated death.

But then, I’ve always liked them old –
parsed hearts, lost minds, redundant souls:
just enough to get me fleshting ghosts,
giving them tongue, jumping their bones.

Yet sleep with the dead and you’ll wake
with the worms – stripped down, compressed,
a little accusative, slightly stressed – to find
the code you crack, the clause that breaks,
is no longer subordinate, it’s now your own.

(from Chasing Catullus: Poems, Translations and Transgressions, 2004)