

Teresa Carson • *POEMS*

Visit to an Extinct City



Italian translation by Steven Baker

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Book I in *The Argument of Time*

ALSO BY TERESA CARSON

Elegy for the Floater (2008)

The Congress of Human Oddities (chapbook, 2012)

My Crooked House (2014)

The Congress of Human Oddities: A Narrative of 19th Century America (2015)

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For John

Author's Note

Visit to an Extinct City, the first of five book-length poems in *The Argument of Time* series, was triggered by my first visit to Ostia Antica in 2014. My reason for going there was simple: I was determined not to leave Italy without visiting an extinct city, and I did not have enough time to go to Pompeii or Herculaneum. Yet from the moment I stepped through the *Porta Romana*, the place had an inexplicable hold on me. My daylong exploration of the ruins turned into a profound experience: everything in the landscape spoke to me. By the end of that visit, Ostia was pulsing through my veins. Back in New Jersey, I wrote down the title of all five books in *The Argument of Time* without any idea what the actual content of each book would be, except that it would be connected to Ostia in some way and that the poems would have to exist in English and Italian. Good fortune brought Steve Baker into my life; he approached the translation of *Visit to an Extinct City* with the same care and attention with which I approached the original.

While there are many excellent sources for detailed information about the history of Ostia, here is a brief introduction. Unlike the resort towns of Pompeii and Herculaneum, Ostia was a commercial center that served as the main port for goods coming into Rome from everywhere in the Roman Empire. By the second century A.D. its landscape was a densely packed mix of warehouses, apartment houses, temples (for various religions), baths, toilets, bakeries, and take-out food shops. Its decline from prosperous to extinct happened over a few hundred years; by the eleventh century its marble was being scavenged to build cathedrals throughout Italy. For centuries after Ostia's abandonment, treasure hunters scoured its ruins for desirable artifacts that ended up in private collections, museums, and even the Vatican. Fortunately for us there is still much to find in Ostia. Today, systematic excavations undertaken by scientists continue to reveal its complexities and marvels.

Visit to an Extinct City
Visita a una città estinta

omnia mutantur, nihil interit

tutto si trasforma, nulla ha mai fine

everything transforms itself, nothing perishes

Ovid, *Metamorphoses*

Preambolo

Perché: sottovalutato
(anche se sulla carta funzionava).

Perché: quasi alla fine
(su “la prossima volta” non ci si può contare).

Perché: quando dopo a domanda *ovviamente hai* ...
mi dispiacerebbe rispondere *no* ...
(peccato perdere qualsiasi “da non perdere”)

Perché: Pompeii (anche se senza dubbio
la prima scelta) sembra lontano quanto la luna.

Perché: un giro veloce ci basta
(2,048 recensioni menzionano poche attrazioni da “cinque stelle”).

Perciò (anche se non è altro
che un mero premio di consolazione),
ci siamo avviati verso Ostia Antica.

Preamble

Because: underestimated
(although on paper it had worked).

Because: nearly the end
("next time" can't be counted on).

Because: when later asked *of course you ...*
would hate to have to answer *no ...*
(shame to miss a single "must").

Because: Pompeii (although without a doubt
first choice) seems as far away as the moon.

Because: quick tour will be enough
(2,048 reviews note few "five-star" sights).

Therefore (although it's nothing but
a so-so consolation prize),
we're on the way to Ostia Antica.

I

Fuori del treno: scorre paesaggio sbiadito dal sole meridiano.

Ci sarà dell'ombra?

Una città sepolta viva, da *flusso piroclastico*—
la sua morte improvvisa, svelta;
quello che succedeva al momento di spegnere, spento;
nessun mutamento da quel momento in poi.
Quando scavato fuori, tutto al suo posto, dove doveva essere—
non un pasticcio di rimosso e riusato.
Un posto così perfettamente preservato che i turisti giurano
di aver viaggiato nel tempo al 79 d.C..

Cosa facciamo se non ce n'è?

L'altra cancellata da *abbandono graduale*,
sgretolarsi a stratonni mentre nascosta in piena vista.
Certamente nessuna certezza sopravvive al declino sporadico.
Non importa quanto in fondo gli scavatori scavano,
poco rimane di *allora* da trovare.
Dobbiamo impegnarci, colmare le lacune,
tradurre quello che rimane da incoerente a
affidabile specchio di Roma antica.

Sono all'altezza?

I

Outside the train: midday-bleached landscape rushing by.

Will there be any shade?

One city buried alive, by *pyroclastic surge*—
its death sudden, swift;
whatever was going on at the moment of ending, ending;
no changes from that moment on.
When dug up, everything where it was, where it should be—
not a mess of removed and reused.
A place so well preserved that tourists swear
they've traveled back to A.D. 79.

What will we do if there's none?

The second erased through *gradual abandonment*,
crumbling in fits and starts while hidden in plain sight.
Certainly no certainty survives haphazard decline.
No matter how deep excavators dig,
there's little left of *then* to find.
We'll have to work hard, fill the gaps,
to translate what remains from incoherent to
reliable mirror of ancient Rome.

Am I up to that?

II

Pagato il biglietto, sfioriamo appena la necropoli—
dando retta al consiglio in una guida popolare:
non perdere tempo sulle tombe
se vuoi fare tutto nel tempo che hai.

All'inizio seguiamo i numeri sulla cartina—
sequenza di grande importanza a questo punto.
All'inizio sillabiamo le iscrizioni
e facciamo battute sulla nostra ancestrale lingua morta.
All'inizio giochiamo a Shangai con la storia—
togliendo, senza capo né coda:
la prima della *Medea* di Ovidio nel teatro
(Sì, sì, la chiassosa folla fischiando al suo atto malvagio!);
la visione di Sant'Agostino nella casa della mamma morente
(Sì, sì, si sporgevano da una finestra.
Potrebbe essere stata quella casa?
O quella? O una di quelle?);
le sei visite di Pio IX quando Ostia apparteneva al Vaticano
(Chissà quanti oggetti sono andati a finire direttamente nei loro musei?);
E guarda: una latrina pubblica da ventiquattro posti! Che ridere!
(Ti immaginavi che cagavano fianco a fianco?)

Ogni [nome] ci ricorda di un [nome] visto altrove in un altro momento.

Sì, sì, stiamo cercando di capire questo posto,
inserendoci nelle storie man mano che procediamo—
storie da raccontare più e più volte a casa.

La gita non sarà un fiasco totale, dopotutto.

II

After paying our fees, we hurry past the necropolis—
heeding advice in a popular guide:

don't waste time looking at graves
if you want to fit it all in in the time allotted.

At first we follow numbers on the map—
sequence of great importance at this point.
At first sound out inscriptions
and joke about our dead ancestral tongue.
At first play pick-up sticks with history—
removing, without rhyme or reason:
the premiere of Ovid's *Medea* in the theatre
(Yes, yes, the boisterous crowd hissing her evil deed!);
Saint Augustine's vision in the house of his dying mother
(Yes, yes, they were standing at a window.
Could it have been in that house?
Or there? Or one of those?);
Pius IX's six visits when Ostia belonged to the Vatican
(Wonder how many objects went straight into its museums.);
Oh, look: the twenty-four-seat public latrine! What a laugh!
(Can you believe they shat side by side?)

Each [noun] reminds us of a [noun] seen at another time somewhere else.

Yes, yes, we're figuring out this place,
adding ourselves to stories as we go along—
stories to tell time and again at home.

The day won't be a complete flop, after all.

III

[6] Terme di Nettuno ✓

All'inizio, ingorghi di turisti come noi

[10] Piazzale delle Corporazioni ✓

nella stessa zona,

[11] Teatro ✓

facendo più o meno la stessa cosa,

[17-21] Foro ✓

fammi sentire al sicuro.

[Senza numero] Caffetteria degli Scavi ✓

non so perché.

Comincio a non sentirmi al sicuro?

Esponendomi a dei rischi?

III

[6] Terme di Nettuno ✓

At first, knots of fellow tourists

[10] Piazzale delle Cirporazioini ✓

in the same general area,

[11] Teatro ✓

doing the same general thing,

[17-21] Foro ✓

make me feel safe.

[No number] Caffetteria degli Scavi ✓

I don't know why.

Am I beginning to feel unsafe?

Putting myself at risk?

IV

Enea sbarca alla foce del Tevere.
Accampamento diventa colonia.
Giove. Giunone. Minerva.
Il fiume cambia corso.
Sfami le bocche di Roma: tutto il grano passa per te.
Invasori prendono il comando, partono; pirati saccheggiano, partono;
Saraceni. Imperatori. Papi.
Carrozze scolpiscono solchi in blocchi di basalto.
Sali salgono dalla terra, sciolgono il cemento.
Fortune fatte e perse; persone care trovate e perse.
Medea—l'unico dramma di Ovidio—scompare senza lasciare traccia,
ma le sue poesie sono trasmesse in molte lingue.
Strati di terra diventano strati di tempo.
Sant'Agostino scrive che sua madre e lui “erano protesi con la bocca del cuore”.
Palazzi cadono e nessuno li tira su.
Il libro una volta amato mai più aperto.
Le strade si riempiono di macerie.
Domani non sarà come oggi.
Ordine devolve in ordine diverso.
Lapidi di marmo—iscrizioni intatte—riutilizzate come tombini.
L'assenza prende il sopravvento sulla presenza.
Ianuarìa, raffigurata come una ragazza *frivola* in un graffito, appassisce in un nome
derivato dal primo
Il fiume si prosciuga.
L'impero cade.
Il *cardo* diventa incolto.
Radici invadenti spezzano blocchi di tufo.
Crescita diventa decadenza diventa crescita—
avanti e indietro si confondono in un'unica linea
finché non vince la decadenza.
Nessuno ricorda quale sacrificio da fare agli dei per cambiare venti sfavorevoli.
Nessuno rimane a spazzare via la sabbia.
Il piano superiore dell'*insula* diventa il terreno.
Tieni alle tradizioni antiche però hai un cervello tutto tuo.
L'impronta delle strade che esistevano prima del reticolo romano
è difficile da trovare.
Animali si rintanano. Uccelli si annidano.
La connessione tra simboli scolpiti—ramo, bastone, e braccialetto—non più chiara.
Mani e menti non smettono mai di mantenere quello che sparisce.
Turisti portano via tessere sciolte da souvenir.
Vieni visto da una finestra.
Miti rimpiazzano la storia.

IV

Aeneas lands at the mouth of the Tiber.
Settlement becomes colony.
Jupiter. Juno. Minerva.
The river changes its course.
You keep Rome fed: all grain comes through you.
Invaders take over, leave; pirates sack, leave;
Saracens. Emperors. Popes.
Cartwheels carve ruts into basalt blocks.
Salts rise from the ground, dissolve cement.
Fortunes made and lost; loved ones found and lost.
Medea—Ovid’s only play—disappears without a trace,
but his poems are handed down in many tongues.
Layers of dirt turn into layers of time.
Saint Augustine writes that his mother and he “panted with the mouth of our heart.”
Buildings fall and no one picks them up.
The book once loved no longer opened.
The streets fill with rubble.
Tomorrow will not be like today.
Order slips into order of a different kind.
Marble gravestones—inscriptions intact—reused as drainage lids.
Absence takes over from presence.
Ianuarina, described as a *frivolous girl* in graffiti, withers to a name derived from first
month of the Roman calendar.
The river dries up.
The empire falls.
The *cardo* becomes overgrown.
Intrusive roots crack tufa blocks.
Growth turns into decay turns into growth—
back and forth blurs into a single line
until decay wins out.
No one remembers what sacrifice to make to the gods to change unfavorable winds.
No one’s left to sweep the sand.
The upper floor of the *insula* becomes the ground.
You stick to time-honored ways but have a mind of your own.
The imprint of roads that existed before the Roman grid
becomes hard to find.
Animals burrow. Birds nest.
The connection between carved symbols—branch, stick, and bracelet—no longer clear.
Hands and minds never stop trying to keep things from going away.
Tourists pick up loose tesserae as souvenirs.
You’re seen from a window.
Myths replace history.

V

Sogni, rimpianti, bisogni, lotte, voglie,
sebbene una volta contenuti in quello che una volta sembrava solido, lasciano
nessuna traccia di essere mai esistiti.

Tutto finisce alla fine.
Cosa mi aspettavo?

Era un errore?
Non posso mettermi nei tuoi panni?
Non so abbastanza di te da quello che altri hanno detto?
Non posso risuscitarti?
Perché sei chiusa? Non posso immedesimarmi in te?
Non siamo simili?

Ho portato tanto da dire a questo posto
però le mie parole diventano cenere nella tua presenza,
lasciandomi senza niente dietro cui nascondermi.

I miei ricordi non sono qui.
Saremmo dovuti rimanere a casa con i nostri propri morti.

V

Dreams, regrets, needs, struggles, lusts,
though once contained within what once seemed solid, leave
no evidence of having been at all.

Everything ends in the end.
What did I expect?

Was this a mistake?
Can't I walk in your shoes?
Don't I know enough about you from what others have said?
Can't I resurrect you?
Why are you closed off? Can't I feel as you did?
Aren't we alike?

I carried so much to say into this place
but my words turn to ash in your presence,
leaving me nothing to hide behind.

My memories are not here.
We should have stayed at home with our own dead.

Coda

Di nuovo sul *Decumanus Maximus*,
grati per il tratto d'ombra sotto una fila di pini a ombrello,
che, ci siamo soffermati a considerare, possono trovare bis-bis-bis-bis-bis-antennati in quelli
sotto i quali Agostino camminò nel 389 d.C.

Né John né io abbiamo messo crema solare—un grosso errore.
La sua macchina fotografica è diventata pesante intorno al collo.
Nonostante le scarpe scelte con cura, le gambe sono stanche, caviglie storte, piedi dolenti
da blocchi di basalto irregolari e carreggiate solcate.
Una sottile patina di polvere riveste la nostra pelle.
Occhi non ce la fanno più.

La strada ci porta fuori la Porta Romana, accanto alla necropoli antica.
Ci soffermiamo tra le tombe che sono sopravvissute.
Tocco iscrizione dopo iscrizione, finché, prima o poi,
ci basta. Possiamo andare.

Dopo aver passato il parcheggio,
dopo esserci affrettati oltre il ponte per prendere il treno delle 18:20 per Roma,
dopo aver guardato, attraverso una finestra, il paesaggio scorrere sotto i nostri occhi,
e aver discusso dove mangiare,
la città estinta sparisce piano piano dalla nostra vista ...
eppure,
eppure rimane.

Notes & Acknowledgments

Notes

I

In 79 A.D. Vesuvius erupted and buried Pompeii under a pyroclastic surge, which meant instantaneous extinction for the city. Ostia, on the other hand, took centuries to go extinct.

IV

This section compresses Ostia's more than 2,000-year history, both factual and legendary, into a one-page poem.

XI

The description of the Endymion sarcophagus comes from *www.metmuseum.org*.

The description of the Townley Venus comes from *www.britishmuseum.org*.

The description of the Balbo column is the actual inscription on the column, which is currently in Chicago.

Acknowledgments

I consulted many sources but returned time and again to *Roman Ostia*, by Russell Meiggs, which some consider the definitive study of Ostia, and www.ostia-antica.org, which offers an extensive bibliography and links to various resources.

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About the Author

Teresa Carson holds an MFA in poetry and an MFA in theatre, both from Sarah Lawrence College. She is the author of three collections of poetry: *Elegy for the Floater* (CavanKerry Press, 2008); *My Crooked House* (CavanKerry Press, 2014), which was a finalist for the Paterson Poetry Prize; and *The Congress of Human Oddities* (Deerbrook Editions, 2015). She lives in Florida, where she co-curates two programs aimed at fostering cross-disciplinary collaborations and putting art into public settings: the Unbroken Thread[s] Project and Art in Common Places.

About the Translator

Steven Baker is an adjunct professor in the Department of Italian at Columbia University and the Division of Applied Undergraduate Studies at NYU and Managing Editor of the “Italian Poetry Review” (IPR). He is also a prolific and widely published translator of texts of all sorts from Italian into English.