

Under the Ashes

When others flee, we shall outwait the fire
And live forever, though we lack breath.
The entrance gate admits you, no, this way—
That road leads to the games of death.

Guests enter here: peacocks without sound
Fly at your feet, but the waters sing.
This painted Queen of Hell leaving her dread lord
For sun-filled life will bring back Spring.

We loved the spirit of this place: around us
Whirled sweet life, that one day stopped.
Under the ashes, our bodies turned to stone;
The columns fell; the silence dropped.

Rest in this garden, drink from this silver lion,
And listen deeply: that is the old song
Of birds about us, the far sea, that kept us here.
In a minute, I will take you along

To houses of joy and lust: the praise of pleasure
Fills these walls—of what else should we write?
This felicitous sign, the cock erect
Tells it best: fucking was our delight.

How we roamed the social baths in wandering talk,
Walking together from heat to cold
Without women (oh, yes, my dear, without men)
Naked in beauty, the taut young, the old.

In that bar we drank robust Falernian wine,
Eruptions of excitement in the brain;
In back we coaxed the languid boys to life—
Life, we taught them, is not all pain.

You who came after us, who brought from our hollow selves
Our faces back, pity us at your cost—
In your world, at the end, you will find yourselves
Without your bearings, your city lost.

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