SUSAN McCASLIN

The Teresa Poems

Born Teresa de Cepeda y Abumada, St. Teresa of Avila, the woman who inspired these poems, lived between 1515 and 1582 in Spain during the Counter-Reformation. A mystic, contemplative, and reformer, she took the Carmelite habit at the age of 21 and was later active in the formation of its "discalced" (or barefoot) branch. St. John of the Cross, mystic, poet, and theologian, was one of her protegés. One of her confessors urged her to record her thoughts in her Life, which fell into the hands of the Inquisition and was under examination for its orthodoxy some 13 years. She was able to elude the Inquisition and continued writing until her death.

"You look on one another face to face, as two lovers do."
—Teresa, Life

Oh, the favors love gave me with Love, all my little pecadillos vanquished.

Love made me a warrior for love, and even Juan de Yepes,
to you, St. John of the Cross, confirere, younger brother,
who wrote so eloquently of that long embrace
and did his stint in prison too, suckled from those luxuriant breasts,
wound in his hands braids of the beloved,
ward in the secret chamber. We who are in love
sing in the great breath and counterbreath, yoked coplas,
(and I go with so little theology) breaking forth.

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"I can find nothing with which to compare the great beauty of a soul and its great capacity."
—Teresa, Interior Castle

Yet you do, Teresa, compare that is, prizing analogies, orient pearls,
diamonds, crystals, scented gardens, even the dry little shrub,
palmito, with its layered rinds and sticky sweet edible centre.

All things spacious, ample, small, intricate and precious.

Since you lived in a Medieval walled town, your soul built you an interior castle
you could not enter for you were already in it.

You were it, so to speak, giving us to understand
how many ways there are of being in the capacious palace of the self.

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"Do then, whatever arouses you to love."
—Teresa, Interior Castle

Marginal, but Not Irrelevant

I come as a witness. Mystics are poets and poets mystics
always for the unspeakable will be spoken will enter language
which pants and sweats
after silence; a witness
free-floating, risking all

Susan McCaslin is a Canadian poet and English professor, residing in Port Moody, B.C. with her husband and 13-year-old daughter. The Teresa Poems will be published in Altering Eye by Borealis Press this year.