

SUSAN McCASLIN

The Teresa Poems

*Born Teresa de Cepeda y Ahumada, 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 protégés. 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 favours love gave me with Love,
all my little peca-dillos vanquished.*

*Love made me a warrior for love,
and even Juan de Yepes,*

*to you, St. John of the Cross,
confrere, 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,*

*wed 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.*

"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.

"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.*