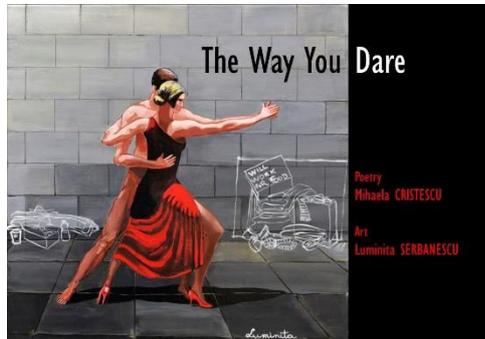


An Offer of Becoming

Luke Carman



The Way You Dare

Poetry by

Mihaela Cristescu

'To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not, you must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy. In order to arrive at what you do not know, you must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.' T.S. Elliot

Mihaela Cristescu's *The Way You Dare* is a collection offering a plenipotentiary vision of the interior territories we might inhabit if we run the red-hot risk of becoming, to go by the way of ignorance. The opening register of the verse in this collection is a one of longing, a desire for passionate experience against the entropic effect of the everyday. In the lines of the collection's first verse, an awakened consciousness takes the form of sunlight trapped in a closed room, and words themselves shed their power, becoming:

'Stuck when they disappear
suspended and hopeless virtuosity
left behind'

The poet Rilke described passion as the sense of seeing an infinitude in a finite thing, and in this collected work of transformative poetry, Cristescu presents a world resonate with passionate revisions of unexpected vocabulary making unexpected demands upon its readers, and demanding new meanings from familiar symbols just as it evokes hidden voices from a multitude of mute images.

The Way You Dare is not only concerned with poetic intensity; it also tells the tale of a complex psychological transformation. The poetic movement in this collection takes a hero's journey, winning wisdom from a dark and dangerous world of uncertainty, with each

sequence described as a chapter, beginning with 'Letter to a Fisherman', which gives the work a novelistic structure, encouraging the 'reliable reader' of the opening poem's envoi to persist with the complexities and subtle ambiguities riven throughout the often enigmatic verse.

Cristescu begins this hero's journey with a sequence on the theme of encounters. Here the poet first conjures hidden resonances in her second-seeing of 'bell ropes shielded in explicitly thin air', whose existence can trace for us 'the running line of consciousness against the sunlight of closed rooms'. Behind the closed doors of the past, our 'virtuosity' is wasted, and we are left 'clinging to the sincerity of names'. The first act of daring in this collection comes at this poem's close - its final stanza makes a promise that if we are 'reliable readers' the poet will work her wonders on those 'worldly' bell ropes, 'tracing back the disk', and undoing time itself; giving second life to us so we might live the world as it might have been, and behold our ecstatic visions and revisions in living colour.

The price for this daring is made clear in the ironically titled 'Sanctuary' of the collection's second sequence. This sanctuary is a descent into an underworld - through which all travellers, 'immigrants on the way to paradise', must pass like 'lovers caught in a dark room of nonsense'. Here, 'hellish words with meaning lifted from the Underworld to the sea are celebrating their success and rescue', and the 'fatal weakness in their language' is 'translated as death.' There is a vision of 'the fight of two daunting serpents, terrible war between fangs, heads and muscles' and cracks and crevices between the foundations of this wasteland open up a daunting 'link between the worlds'. At last, after crossing this 'desert of sense', the poet follows 'The Great One' out of her confusion, testifying: 'he didn't say much. He didn't have to. I barely saw His movement. I hardly heard his steps.'

In the final sequence, 'Infringement' the poet crosses 'over the bridges dismantled' by war, and surveys the world with the newfound wisdom of an integrated self. 'Weary of joy and redemption' she condemns the 'false statements - heard and spoken ahead of time, now ended and completed by resignation'. Reborn into a changed world, the poet crosses 'along the path of the bygone forest' and sees 'the waves of high-speed atoms' feeding her eyes with dust. The Wise Man, who appears in each of the three sequences, has here become a fool, sitting on a log as he speaks mythologies 'incarcerated in smooth words for children'. To those false preachers of love, the poet now carries a wrathful warning: 'what is

concealed in signs I will drag out into perspective, I will smash your arrogance under my shoes wandering towards west step by step every pathetic minute, every lie'. Here the rage of the poet is expressed with such force that the delicacies of punctuation have been obliterated, her words have taken on a revelator's eschatological energy. Now in a rhetorical apotheosis, intensified by her proximity to the divine, the poet enters into the garden of paradise itself to confront The Great Spirit - a final encounter which displays Cristescu's characteristic love of unexpected reversals and disarming modulations.

This complex series of poetic encounters and contestations between language and our untapped passions bristles with a semiotic virtuosity which is as bewildering as it is enchanting – the dialectic world Cristescu weaves in these songs is one of electric unfamiliarity, and the current of its enigmatic movements takes the bold reader on a Jungian quest into the deep and daring waters of meaning. To quote St. John of the Cross, 'To come to be what you are not, you must go by a way in which you are not'. This paradoxical account of faith and the beatific is also the reward great poetry offers its most 'reliable readers', and the poetry of *The Way You Dare* is no exception to this principle.