

# POEM OF THE WEEK

*Gaius Valerius Catullus, translated by Isobel Williams*



Charming and catty, sophisticated and crude, a cynic and a hopeless romantic, Catullus (c84-54BC) is every poet's favourite Latin lover.

His untitled poems are referred to by numbers; the one beginning "Let us live and love" (*"vivamus... atque amemus"*) ranks alongside Chanel and Mambo as one of the all-time great erotic No 5s. It exists in thousands of English versions. So why would anyone bother to write a new one?

To my mind, it's like jazz. For centuries, translators have approached Catullus's hits the way jazz musicians approach the standards, breaking the tune to remake it, not merely playing it but playing *around* with it; the artistry is in the deviations.

And few versions are as deviant as Isobel Williams's *Shibari Carmina* (2021); its metaphors use everything from food banks to the BDSM practice of tying people up with ropes as parallels for Ancient Rome's often strange ideas of romantic bonds.

In "Song of Snogs", her version of "Catullus 5", love meets accountancy – just as it does in the original. A paraphrase of Catullus's opening lines: "Let's live and love, my Lesbia [probably a pseudonym for the poet's lover Clodia], and rate stern old men's gossip at a penny." Later, the poet cries: "Give me a thousand kisses,

then a hundred, then another thousand..." and so on, so that those old men can never tally up these signs of love. Williams's "swell the/ Abacus with kisses" captures the sentiment perfectly. In a witty response to the original's nonsense-arithmetic, here random strings of Roman numerals turn into the kisses themselves ("xxx") or even onomatopoeia ("MMM", indeed!).  
*Tristram Fane Saunders*

## SONG OF SNOGS

Open out to life and love with me,  
Clodia, and we'll set the regulators'  
Hisses at the lowest rate of interest

Suns go down and dawns will come  
But once our pinprick light is out  
The night will never be for more  
than sleeping

I love doing this, let's  
Take a long position, swell the  
Abacus with kisses  
M Cxxx  
MM CxCx Cxxx  
MMM CxCx Cxxx CxCx

And when we've made a killing kissing  
Shake the totals to lose count,  
Take them beyond the kiss  
inspector's reach

*From 'Catullus: Shibari Carmina'  
(Carcenet, £12.99)*