

Caroline Wilcox Reul

This city is a particle accelerator, poems by Carl-Christian Elze

German poet, Carl-Christian Elze's work is so often characterized by an exploration of the self, where its boundaries lie, and the ways in which experience allows it to become porous or malleable. His forthcoming volume of poems, *langsames ermatten im labyrinth* – Verlagshaus Berlin, forthcoming Winter, Spring 2019 – is the result of Elze's 2016 residency in Venice, where he experienced a deep interaction between the cityscape and his inner landscape. These poems express the correspondences and the dissonances that the mapping onto each other of two such realms creates, how disorientation allows the eyes to see both realms and the hidden connections between them.

The poems stretch across several focal points beginning with the speaker as observer of the physical surroundings, but rather than marveling at palaces and monuments, it's the teeming life that happens around them, especially that of the neglected and the overlooked, that captivates: the narrow alleyway behind the palace, the flesh fly enjoying the evening sun and an evening meal on scaffolding, the hungry refugee, a lonely nighttime passenger on a vaporetto sailing along the Grand Canal. Warmth and generosity toward life in all its forms emanate from these poems, grounded in commonalities Elze finds within himself.

The speaker then moves on to the Tintoretto's and the Bellini's, the centuries old paintings by grand masters with religious themes, and seeks their relevancy in the world today. The fear and exhaustion of the travelers in Tintoretto's *The Flight into Egypt* is not unlike the contemporary refugee experience. Tintoretto's *Raising of Lazarus* similarly shows the way a person can become victimized by sudden celebrity, taken unawares and devoured by the public. As with the first set of poems, these pieces express a need for a new way of looking, a softening of one's defenses, an invitation to open up one's capacity for empathy and recognize the universality of human experience.

The poems that tie these more outward-looking pieces together are the ones based on the disorientation of the speaker while exploring the city and its environs, the way the city and the psyche interact to dissolve the sense of self, which seems to open up to a new way of being. The speaker in these pieces drifts through the Venetian landscape and discovers he is sightseeing within himself, as if the roles of agent and patient had flipped and Venice was doing its work on him. The payoff is finding a place where “nothing and everything is possible.” Almost all of these poems end with an exclamation of delight, a reward for allowing the terrain of the city to create a new inner map, a drawing out of more, the realization that given a chance, the self can be limitless, an understanding that beauty holds the power to reroute the pathways of the heart.

“langsames ermatten im labyrinth” is another example of how Elze seeks to see the world with both old and new eyes, how to understand the way the self is present in all that we see, so that opening up our view of the world can allow an expanding perspective that finally notices the ever-present but overlooked. Venice is a floating city, so what better place to float the self, suspend one’s sense of identity for a short while and see what new discoveries come to the surface. This book of poems shows the reader how to do that.

Caroline Wilcox Reul is a freelance lexicographer and translator. She has a MA in computational linguistics and German language and literature from the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in Munich. Her translation of “*Wer lebt*” by Elisabeth Borchers was published by Tavern Books in May 2017 under the title “*Who Lives*”. The Broadsided Press published a bilingual broadside of Borchers’ “*Der Schweigsame*” – “The Silent One” – in 2016, and her translations of the poet Carl-Christian Elze can be found at *Exchanges*, *The Los Angeles Review*, *Lunch Ticket*, *Tupelo Quarterly* and *Poetry International*.