



**ANA CRISTINA
CESAR**

AT YOUR FEET

Translated by Brenda Hillman and Helen Hillman,
with Sebastião Edson Macedo
Edited by Katrina Dodson

Free Verse Editions
Edited by Jon Thompson

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A teus pés

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Preface

Ana Cristina Cesar was born in Copacabana, Rio de Janeiro in 1952. Daughter of academic and religious parents, she worked as a translator and was known in avant-garde literary and artistic circles in the 1970s. She traveled extensively in Europe and England until her tragic, untimely death by suicide in 1983 at the age of thirty-one.

I became enchanted by Cesar's poetry when I read a few of her poems in *Nothing the Sun Could Not Explain* (2000), a marvelous anthology of Brazilian poetry edited by Michael Palmer, Régis Bonvicino, and Nelson Ascher; the volume introduced English speakers to some contemporary Brazilian experimental poets. Poet and translator Chris Daniels suggested Cesar when I told him I was looking for a Brazilian poet to translate with my mother, Helen Hillman, who was at the time in her late eighties, and who has maintained command of her native Portuguese (she was born to American parents in São Paulo in 1924, raised in Porto Alegre, and came to the U.S. in the 1940s). I was drawn to Ana Cristina Cesar for other reasons as well. She and I were approximately the same age when I also lived as a child with my family in 1950s Rio, in Copacabana. I maintained a bit of my childhood Portuguese.

Cesar's best-known work, *A teus pés, At Your Feet* (1982), daringly collages emotional lyricism with materials of linguistic invention in bold hybrid and other experimental forms. The work is imagistic, but her metaphors often evade and indirectly tease the reader suggestively. The book-length work has features in common with Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée*, in its multilingual qualities, and in its feminist challenges to received traditions. Cesar's phrasing is off-kilter and at times seems unhinged; the polygrammatical units fit together like a jigsaw puzzle ("*quebra-cabeça*" in Portuguese—to smash your head). Just as the poems often refer to slightly reckless driving and travel, they careen between direct meaning and innuendo. Cesar seems to share some of Sylvia Plath's wild lyric atmosphere but with an entirely different aesthetic experience, one more akin to the montages of Gertrude Stein.

In her subject matter and in the "Onomastic Index" that closes this collection, Cesar channels and references other writers and events in modernist fashion, including Charles Baudelaire, Elizabeth Bishop, Octavio Paz, Edgar Allan Poe, Jean Rhys and others. She folds in great Brazilian modernist and contemporary avant-garde writers as well—Carlos Drummond de Andrade, Manuel Bandeira, Armando Freitas Filho, and Francisco Alvim among them—gives nods to popular culture as well as to "high" culture.

She writes of life and consciousness and travel and the agonies and joys of love, spiritual and sensual, for both men and women. As poet and scholar Sebastião Edson Macedo has noted, “In Cesar’s work, the reader will find a body of poems that has inspired distinctive ways of voicing innovative lyric experience in contemporary poetry in Brazil, especially in such leading women poets as Marília Garcia, Júlia de Carvalho Hansen, Tatiana Pequeno and Alice Sant’Anna.” Cesar, often known as Ana C. in Brazil, is a fascinating poet whose work maintains its power and mystery through multiple readings.

The process of translating Cesar’s work was circuitous. My mother and I worked on pieces of *At Your Feet* over a period of five years and did a rough translation of two of her other works as well. We spoke weekly on the phone, usually on Fridays. When I traveled to Tucson where she lived, we worked together on the couch, holding the book between us with my laptop to the side. Often my father (then in his early nineties) would shuffle in to check on us; he loved the fact that we were working on something that gave my mother such pleasure. After we completed the first drafts, I realized the draft did not address many current idiomatic expressions in Ana C.’s work, and sought out Sebastião Edson Macedo from the University of California at Berkeley to refine the work. With the help of Sebastião’s terrific precision and knowledge of current Brazilian idioms, these translations took further shape. It has been a sheer joy to work with Sebastião in Café Royal Grounds, where we have met often. We wanted to capture not only the original formatting of this work, but also the spirit of Cesar’s energy and some of her rather obscure references. Oakland poet and translator of Brazilian poetry Tiffany Higgins offered many suggestions throughout the process.

The bulk of the final edits and corrections were made with the exhaustive and thorough help of Katrina Dodson, a brilliant scholar and the translator of Clarice Lispector’s *Complete Stories*, also from UC Berkeley, who suggested most of the revisions that have brought the project to its final form. Further assistance in deciphering the most mysterious phrases came from our Brazilian colleagues: translation studies scholar Ricardo Ferreira Filho, translator and editor Julia Sanches, the great contemporary poet and translator Paulo Henriques Britto, and Cesar’s own dear friend, the aforementioned poet Armando Freitas Filho. Another talented translator of Brazilian

poetry, Hilary Kaplan, connected us with Companhia das Letras, the current Brazilian publisher of Cesar's work. Thank you to those at Companhia das Letras—Fernanda Dias, Mariano Marovatto, Rita Mattar, Fernando Rinaldi, and Alice Sant'anna—who helped tremendously to facilitate this translation and to establish the correct lineation of the poems, which could be quite complicated! I am grateful to all of these able scholars and writers, as well as to Saint Mary's College for a grant that enabled this project. Jon Thompson and Dave Blakesley of Free Verse Editions and Parlor Press have provided patient hard work in the publishing process.

Finally, I am extremely grateful and send multiple thanks to the family of Ana Cristina Cesar for supporting this publication. As always, I owe a large debt to my husband, Robert Hass, and to our children and grandchildren for their encouragement, and to my brothers Brad and Brent Hillman for their constant support, and most of all, to our beloved mother Helen Hillman, who loves Brazil, Brazilian poets and who is a diligent reader of American poetry as well. I am lucky to have such an amazing mother, and am very impressed that she has command of two beautiful languages, English and Portuguese, after ninety-two years.

Though translation is an inexact art, we hope through this group effort to have maintained a sense of Ana Cristina Cesar's daring love of life and language, her feminism, her continuously radical forms, and the timeliness and timelessness of her experiments with inner and public voices.

Brenda Hillman
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A teus pés

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