

Yannis Ritsos

Petrified Time

POEMS FROM MAKRONISOS

Translated by Martin McKinsey and Scott King

Introduction by Martin McKinsey

Red Dragonfly Press

English translations copyright © 2014 by Martin McKinsey & Scott King, respectively
Introduction copyright © 2014 by Martin McKinsey

ISBN: 978-1-937693-23-7
ISBN: 978-1-937693-24-4 (e-book)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2013951914

Πετρινος Χρονος by Γιαννης Ριτσος
© Kedros Editions, 1957
www.kedros.gr

Special thanks to Eleftheria Ritsou, the poet's daughter, for permission to publish these translations,
and to Ekaterini Makrinikola for the generous assistance she has given both translators.

'Ready' and 'Our Old Men' translated by Martin McKinsey were published in
Yannis Ritsos: Selected Poems 1938 – 1988 (BOA Editions, 1989).
'Change' translated by Scott King was published in *Great River Review*.
'Dick' translated by Scott King was published in *Pemmican*.

Some of the translations in this book first appeared, in different versions, on Scott King's blog:
HINTS: The Poetry of Yannis Ritsos (<http://yannisritsos.blogspot.com>)

Designed and typeset by Scott King
using Robert Slimbach's Minion type for English and Greek text,
Myriad Pro for English and Greek titles,
& Carter Sans for Cover titling

Printed in the United States of America
on 100% recycled stock
by BookMobile, a 100% wind powered company

Published by Red Dragonfly Press
307 Oxford Street
Northfield, MN 55057

For more information and additional titles visit our website
www.reddragonflypress.org

CONTENTS

Introduction by Martin McKinsey 7

Things We Know	13
Always	17
Ready	19
Dick	21
The Roots of the World	25
Evenings	27
Noon	29
Today	31
Alexis	35
Small Occurrences	41
Our Old Men	43
Differences	47
Duty	51
Moon	55
Old Mitsos	57
Our Boys	63
Daybreak	67
Time	69
Old Karas and His Son	75
Each Evening	79
Little by Little	81
Nonetheless	85
The Hands of Comrades	89
•	
A. B. C. — Makronisos	93

INTRODUCTION

THE YEAR 2009 marked the centenary of Yannis Ritsos's birth. The event was commemorated in Greece with due ceremony: exhibits, concerts, readings, subway displays, dramatic performances—the kind of official fanfare smaller countries love to lavish on their great poets, but that America tends to reserve for its sports and media stars. So the occasion passed on this side of the Atlantic without a ripple, even among Greek circles—but even if it had been celebrated, it would have been upstaged by the fanfare surrounding the latest translation of the other great twentieth-century Greek poet, C.P. Cavafy. (Make that translations: between 2007 and 2009 there were five new Cavafy translations released in the U.S.) This surely says as much about our twenty-first century tastes as it does about the relative merit of the two poets. Cavafy's antique ironies and foredoomed passions speak the language of our postmodern perplexities and nostalgias. If Cavafy is the poet of old age, as the poet George Seferis wrote, he is also the great poet of disillusionment.

There is plenty of disappointment in the life and work of Yannis Ritsos, starting with the 1949 defeat of the Greek left in the civil war, but little disillusionment. Whereas pessimism and defeat are the very mortar of Cavafy's imagined City (see his "Trojans"), for Ritsos these were the great evils that had to be overcome. Ritsos had to face them from early in his life: through a childhood scarred by family tragedy, through recurring bouts of tuberculosis, through years of persecution and imprisonment. Cavafy's poem "Che fece ... il gran rifiuto" speaks of "The Great Yes" and "The Great No." According to the poem, we carry one or the other response inside us. When the day comes, the day when we will have to give an answer to the question of our lives, it's not a matter of there being a right or wrong answer, simply the answer we have prepared inside. Cavafy's answer was skeptical detachment; Ritsos's was Marxist revolution.

The utopian visions of Marxism that drove so much of twentieth-century history seem a long way off today. But these visions are what inspired Ritsos—as they did Brecht, Neruda, Hikmet and other mid-century poets—to produce some of the greatest political verse of the age. Rather than pursue some abstract poetics, he chose to link his poetry to what he saw as the political and historical imperatives of his time. It was not so much

events that were shaping his poetry, but Ritsos who, convinced of the utility and responsibility of art, consciously shaped his poetry to fit events (with the ultimate ideal of helping to shape their course). Nowhere did he go as far in this direction as in the poems of *Petrified Time*.

The elegiac or editorial “we” has been a fixture in American poetry for the last half century and more. Chastened by history, made conscious of privilege, we’ve become leery of the presumptive “I.” Ritsos shared that leeriness, but for very different reasons, and the “we” that presides in this book, from the first page to the last, has a more concrete referent: Ritsos’s fellow internees in the “Institute for National Reeducation” on the island of Makronisos. The story of how thousands of former resistance fighters ended up in such island prison camps in the wake of the Second World War is too convoluted to go into here, but in general outline it follows a familiar Cold War script. Ritsos, closely associated with the leftwing National Liberation Front (EAM) since the war years, was picked up in 1948. He was released four years later.

One of those four years was spent on Makronisos, the most notorious of the island camps. There Ritsos committed himself to writing a poetry that would speak directly to his fellow prisoners, that would talk unaffectedly about their shared experiences of torture and privation. What Ritsos wanted was a poetic medium that would be available to all: a direct, intimate and — in spirit — communal expression. A short time before, in the Kontopouli camp, he had written:

*So, brother, we've learned how to speak
quietly and simply.
We understand each other now — and that's all it takes.
And I say that tomorrow we'll become even simpler,
We'll find those words that carry the same weight in every heart,
on every tongue.*

from “The Blackened Pot”

As a Communist, this had always been one of his goals. But in the poems from this period he takes it a step further than ever before, or for that matter ever after. *Petrified Time* stands at the greatest remove from the verbal labyrinths and learned mysteries of the Modernists. Inevitably, the

poetic ideas — not to mention the ideological content — are simplified in the process, especially when compared to Brecht's work from the same period. Still, ideas are not, or not mainly, what make these poems worth reading today. Aside from their documentary interest, what makes them worth reading is their luminous imagery, drawing on the Greek oral tradition of fairytales and folksongs (especially Klephtic ballads), and the controlled power of their free-verse idiom. Their purposefulness should also serve as a reminder of what it means for an artist to step out of him or herself, and conceive of an art that is not simply a record or critique of what is, but a shaper of what will be.

Martin McKinsey

PETRIFIED TIME

— 1949 —

for Dimitri Fotiadi

ΓΝΩΡΙΜΙΑ

Ένας ήλιος από πέτρα ταξίδεψε πλάι μας
καίγοντας τὸν ἀγέρα καὶ τ' ἀγκάθια τῆς ἐρημιᾶς.
Τ' ἀπόγεμα στάθηκε στὴν οὐγία τῆς θάλασσας
σὰν κίτρινος γλόμπος σ' ἓνα μεγάλο δάσος θύμηση.

Δὲν εἴχαμε καιρὸ γιὰ κάτι τέτοια — μὰ, ὅσο νᾶναι,
ρίχναμε ποῦ καὶ ποῦ καμμιὰ ματιὰ — κι ἀπάνου στὶς κουβέρτες μας
μαζί μὲ τὶς λαδιές, τὸ χῶμα, τὰ λιοκούκουτσα,
εἴχανε μείνει κάτι φύλλα ἀπ' τὶς ἰτιές κάτι πευκοβελόνες.

Εἴχαν κι αὐτὰ το βᾶρος τους — ὄχι σπουδαῖα πράματα —
ἢ σχιὰ ἐνὸς δίκρανου στὴ μάντρα, ἀργὰ κατὰ τὸ λιόγευμα,
τὸ πέρασμα τοῦ ἀλόγου τὰ μεσάνυχτα,
ἓνα τριανταφυλλένιο χρῶμα ποῦ πεθαίνει στὸ νερὸ
ἀφήνοντας πίσω του τὴ σιωπὴ πιδὸ μονάχη,
τὰ φύλλα τοῦ φεγγαριοῦ πεσμένα ἀνάμεσα στὶς καλαμιές καὶ στὶς
ἀγριόπαπιες.

Δὲν ἔχουμε καιρὸ — δὲν ἔχουμε,
ὅταν οἱ πόρτες γίνονται σὰ σταυρωμένα χέρια
ὅταν ὁ δρόμος γίνεται σὰν ἐκείνον ποῦ λέει «δεν ξέρω τίποτα».

Ὡστόσο ἐμεῖς τὸ ξέραμε πὼς πέρα στὸ μεγάλο σταυροδρόμι
εἶναι μιὰ πολιτεία μὲ χιλιάδες πολύχρωμα φῶτα,
ἄνθρωποι χαιρετιοῦνται ἐκεῖ μὲ μιὰ κίνηση μόνο τοῦ μετώπου —
τοὺς γνωρίζουμε ἀπ' τὴ στάση τῶν χεριῶν,
ἀπ' τὸν τρόπο ποῦ κόβουν τὸ ψωμί,
ἀπ' τὸν ἴσκιο τους πάνω στὸ τραπέζι τοῦ δείπνου,
τὴν ὥρα ποῦ νυστάζουν ὅλες οἱ φωνές μέσα στὰ μάτια τους
κι ἓνα μονάχο ἀστέρη σταυρώνει τὸ προσκέφαλό τους.

Τοὺς γνωρίζουμε ἀπ' τὴ χαρακιὰ τοῦ ἀγώνα ἀνάμεσα στὰ φρύδια
καὶ πιότερο ἀπ' ὅλα — τὰ βράδια, ποῦ μεγαλώνει ὁ οὐρανὸς ἀπάνου
τους —

THINGS WE KNOW

A sun of stone went with us
scorching the desert wind and thorns.
The afternoon hung from the sea's selvage
like a bare yellow bulb in some deep forest of memory.

We had no time for such things — but even so
now and then we'd look up, and there on our blankets
with the dirt, the oil-stains and the olive pits
a few willow leaves, a few pine needles remained.

Even ordinary things had their weight —
a pitchfork's shadow on the wall toward sundown
the hoofbeats of a horse at midnight
a rose tint dying out in the water
leaving the silence lonelier in its wake —
and down among the reeds and wild ducks, the fallen leaves of
the moon.

No, we had no time — there is no time,
when doors assume the look of arms that are crossed
and the road that of a man who says, "I know nothing."

Yet we knew that off at the great crossroads
was a city lit by a thousand colored lights
where people greet you with the simple nod of the forehead —
we recognize them by their hands
by the way they cut their bread
by the shadows they cast on the dinner table
as every voice grows sleepy in their eyes
and a lonely star makes a cross on their pillow.

We know them by the strife that furrows their brow
but more than that — when the night sky deepens overhead,

τοὺς γνωρίζουμε ἀπὸ κείνη τὴ ζυγισμένη συνωμοτική τους κίνηση
καθὼς ρίχνουν τὴν καρδιά τους σὰν παράνομη προκήρυξη
κάτω ἀπ' τὴν κλεισμένη πόρτα τοῦ κόσμου.

we know them by their poised, conspiratorial manner
as they slip their heart like an illegal leaflet
under the world's closed door.

MM

ΠΑΝΤΑ

Πιάνουμε, μιὰ κουβέντα — κόβεται στὴ μέση.
Πᾶμε νὰ χτίσουμε ἕναν τοῖχο — δὲ μᾶς ἀφήνουν νὰ τελειώσουμε.
καὶ τὸ τραγούδι μας κομμένο.
Ἔλα τ' ἀποτελειώνει ὁ ὀρίζοντας.

Πάνω ἀπ' τὰ ἀντίσκηνα περνᾶνε τὰ μπουλούκια τῶν ἀστρων
κάποτε κουρασμένα, κάποτε πικραμένα, ὥστόσο σίγουρα
γιὰ τὸ δρόμο τους, γιὰ τὸ δρόμο μας.

Κι ἡ μέρα, ἀκόμα κι ἡ πιὸ ἄδικη, σοῦ ἀφήνει στὴν τσέπη
μιὰν ἀσπρογάλαζη σημαιοῦλα ἀπ' τὴ γιορτὴ τῆς θάλασσας,
σοῦ ἀφήνει στὸ στόμα μιὰ γουλιὰ ξάστερο ἀγέρα,
σοῦ ἀφήνει στὰ μάτια τὸ εὐχαριστῶ δυὸ ματιῶν
ποῦ κοίταξαν μαζὶ σου τὴν ἴδια πέτρα,
ποῦ μοιράστηκαν δίκαια τὸν ἴδιο πόνο, τὸ ἴδιο σύγνεφο, τὸν ἴδιον ἴσκιο.

Ἔλα τὰ μοιραστήκαμε, σύντροφοι,
τὸ ψωμί, τὸ νερό, τὸ τσιγάρο, τὸν καημό, τὴν ἐλπίδα·
τώρα μποροῦμε νὰ ζήσουμε ἢ νὰ πεθάνουμε
ἀπλὰ κι ὁμορφα — πολὺ ὁμορφα —
σὰ ν' ἀνοίγουμε μιὰ πόρτα τὸ πρωὶ
καὶ νὰ λέμε καλημέρα στὸν ἥλιο καὶ στὸν κόσμο.

ALWAYS

We start a conversation — it gets cut off.
We start building a wall — they won't let us finish.
And our songs — cut off halfway.
Only the horizon can complete them.

The stars crowd past above the tents
exhausted one night, bitter the next,
but never uncertain of their road — or ours.

And the day — even the most brutal —
leaves a blue and white flag in your pocket
from the festival of the sea,
and a gulp of starry wind in your mouth,
and in your eyes — the gratitude of another pair of eyes
that have looked on the same rocks as yours,
that have shared the same pain, fair and square, the same cloud and shade.

We've shared everything, comrades —
bread, water, cigarettes, sadness, hope;
now we can live or die
simply and beautifully — yes, beautifully —
like opening your front door at daybreak
and saying good morning to the sun and the world.

MM

ΑΛΛΑΓΗ

Δῶ πέρα ξεχάσαμε ἕνα σωρὸ πράματα.
Δὲν εἶναι ἕνα παράθυρο νὰ κοιτάξουμε τὴ θάλασσα.
Ἄλλιῶς κοιτιέται ἡ θάλασσα ἀπὸνα παράθυρο,
ἀλλιῶς πίσω ἀπ' τὸ συρματοπλεγμα.

Ἡ φωνὴ ἑνὸς παιδιοῦ τ' ἀπόγεμα — ποῦ εἶναι; —
μιὰ γυναίκα στὸ κατώφλι τοῦ σπιτιοῦ, τὸ σπίτι — ποῦ εἶναι; —
κι ἡ ντουλάπα μὲ τὰ χειμωνιάτικα ροῦχα
κι ἡ σιωπὴ ποὺ πέφτει ἀπ' τὸ ρολόι τοῦ τοίχου πάνω στὶς καρέκλες
κι ὁ ἴσκιος ἑνὸς εὐγενικοῦ χεριοῦ ποὺ βάζει ἕνα λουλουδί στὸ
ποτήρι — ποῦ εἶναι; —
καὶ τὸ γραμμόφωνο τοῦ Σαββατόβραδου στὸ σκιασμένο περβάζι,
ἡ γάτα ποὺ σεργιανοῦσε στὴ στέγη τοῦ ἀντικρυνοῦ σπιτιοῦ
μέσα σ' ἕνα σούρουπο ὄλο ναφθαλίνη,
ἐκεῖνὴ ἡ μαύρη γάτα τῆς γειτονιάς — βασανισμένη
μὲ δυὸ σταγόνες λάδι μοναξιᾶς μέσα στὰ μάτια της,
βασανισμένη μαύρη γάτα στὴν ἀντικρυνὴ σκεπὴ —
παράξενα ἤσυχα ποὺ σεργιανοῦσε μὲς στὸ σούρουπο,
ξύνοντας μὲ τὴν οὐρά της τ' ἄσπρο φεγγάρι. Ξεχάσαμε.

Ἐδῶ εἶναι πολὺ τὸ κρύο τὶς νύχτες,
εἶναι πολλὴ μοναξιὰ κάτου ἀπ' τὸ φόβο
κι εἶναι πολλὴ συντροφιά κάτου ἀπ' τὸ φόβο
τὴν ὥρα ποὺ ὁ θάνατος ἀπάνου στὰ φυλάκια
παίζει τὰ ζάρια μὲ τοὺς φρουροὺς καθισμένους σταυροπόδι στὸ χῶμα.

Ἐδῶ κι οἱ γάτες εἶναι ἀλλιῶτικες,
ἄγριες, ὑπομονετικές, ἀμίλητες,
δὲν τρίβουνε τὸ μάγουλό τους στὸν ἀγκώνα μας,
στέκουν στὰ γόνατά μας καὶ σπουδάζουν
σπουδάζουν τὸ θάνατο,
σπουδάζουν τὴ λύπη,
σπουδάζουν τὴν ἐκδίκηση, τὴν ἀπόφαση,
σπουδάζουν τὴ σιωπὴ καὶ τὴν ἀγάπη,

DIFFERENCES

Here we begin to forget things.
There's no window to look through onto the sea.
The sea has a certain appearance through a window,
another appearance through barbed wire.

The voice of a child in the afternoon — Where is that voice? —
a woman on the front steps of a house — Where is that house? —
the wardrobe full of winter clothing
and the silence that falls from the clock on the wall above the chair
and the shadow of a gentle hand that places a flower in a glass — Where are
they?
and the gramophone that played each Saturday evening from the shaded
ledge,
and the cat that walked on the roof of the house across the street
in a twilight of mothballs —
that black cat from the neighborhood — neglected
with two drops of loneliness for eyes,
the neglected black cat on the roof of the house across the street —
strangely quiet as it walks through at dusk,
brushing its tail against the white moon. We forget these things.

Here the nights are very cold,
there's a lot of loneliness beneath the fear
there's a lot of friendship beneath the fear,
especially when Death visits the guardhouse
to play dice with the guards, sitting cross-legged on the ground.

Here the cats are different,
wild, resigned, and silent
they won't rub their cheeks against our elbows,
or stand on our knees and study us,
instead they study death,
they study sorrow,
they study revenge, the resolve,

σπουδάζουν τή ζωή μέσα στά μάτια μας,
οί άχάιδευτες,
οί άγριες γάτες,
οί σιωπηλές γάτες τής Μακρόνησος.

Και τοῦτο τ' αὐγουστιάτικο φεγγάρι πού κρέμεται πάνου μας
εἶναι σάν τή μεγάλη λέξη πού δέν εἰπώθηκε
μαρμαρωμένη στό λαρύγγι τής νύχτας.

they study silence and love,
they study the life inside our eyes,
these wild,
unpettable cats,
these silent cats of Makronisos.

And this August moon that hangs over us
is like an important word that can't be voiced,
transformed into marble inside the throat of night.

SK