Yannis Ritsos

Petrified Time
POEMS FROM MAKRONISOS

Translated by Martin McKinsey and Scott King
Introduction by Martin McKinsey

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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 ἀπό πέτρα ταξίδεψε πλάι μας καίγοντας τὸν ἀγέρα καὶ τ’ ἀγκάθια τῆς ἐρημιᾶς. Τ’ ἀπόγεμα στάθηκε στὴν οὔγια τῆς θάλασσας σάν κίτρινος γλόμπος σ’ ἕνα μεγάλο δάσος θύμηση.

Δὲν είχαμε καιρὸ γιὰ κάτι τέτοια — μά, ὅσο νάναι, ρίχναμε ποῦ καὶ ποῦ καμμιὰ ματιὰ — κι ἀπάνου στὶς κουβέρτες μας μαζί μὲ τὶς λαδιές, τὸ χῶμα, τὰ λιοκόουκουτσα, είχαν μείνει κάτι φύλλα ἀπ’ τὶς ἰτιές κάτι πευκοβελόνες.

Εἶχαν κι αὐτὰ τὸ βάρος τοὺς — ὑμείς σπουδαία πράματα — ἢ σχιὰ ἐνὸς δίκρανου στὶς μάντρα, ἀργὰ κατὰ τὸ λιόγερμα, τὸ πέρασμα τοῦ ἀλόγου τὰ μεσάνυχτα, ἕνα τριανταφυλλένιο χρῶμα ποῦ πεθαίνει στὸ νερὸ ἀφήνοντας πίσω του τὴ σιωπὴ πιὸ μονάχη, τὰ φύλλα τοῦ φεγγαριοῦ πεσμένα ἀνάμεσα στὶς καλαμιὲς καὶ στὶς ἀγριόπαπιες.

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

Ὡστόσο ἐμεῖς τὸ ξέραμε πὼς πέρα στὸ μεγάλο σταυροδρόμι εἶναι μιὰ πολιτεία μὲ χιλιάδες πολύχρωμα φῶτα, ἀνθρώπων χαιρετισθοῦνται ἐκεί μὲ μιὰ κίνηση μόνο τοῦ μετώπου — τοὺς γνωρίζουμε ἀπ’ τὴ στάση τῶν χεριῶν, ἀπ’ τὸν τρόπο ποῦ κόβουν τὸ ψωμί, ἀπ’ τὸν ἵσκιο τοὺς πάνω στὸ τραπέζι τοῦ δείπνου, τὴν ἀρα ποῦ νυστάζουν ὅλες οἱ φωνὲς μέσα στὰ μάτια τοὺς κι ἕνα μονάχο ἀστέρι σταυρώνει τὸ προσκέφαλό τους.

Τοὺς γνωρίζουμε ἀπ’ τὴ χαρακιὰ τοῦ ἀγώνα ἀνάμεσα στὰ φρύδια καὶ πιότερο ἀπ’ ὅλα — τὰ βράδια, ποὺ μεγαλώνει ὁ ὀὐρανὸς ἀπάνου τοὺς —
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,
τούς γνωρίζουμε ἀπὸ κείνη τῇ ζυγισμένῃ συνωμοτική τους κίνηση καθώς ρίχνουν τὴν καρδιά τους σὰν παράνομη προκήρυξη κάτω ἀπ’ τὴν κλεισμένη πόρτα τοῦ κόσμου.

τούς γνωρίζουμε ἀπὸ κείνη τῇ ζυγισμένῃ συνωμοτική τους κίνηση καθώς 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.
ΠΑΝΤΑ

Πιάνουμε, μιά κουβέντα — κόβεται στη μέση.
Πάμε να χτίσουμε έναν τοίχο — δε μας ἀφήνουν να τελειώσουμε.
και το τραγούδι μας κομμένο.
’Όλα τ’ ἀποτελείσωνε ο ὀρίζοντας.

Πάνω ἀπ’ τα ἀντίσκηνα περνάνε τα μπουλούκια των ἀστρων
κάποτε κουρασμένα, κάποτε πικραμένα, ὡστόσο σίγουρα
γιά το δρόμο τους, γιά το δρόμο μας.

Κι ή μέρα, άκομα κι ή πιό άδικη, σού ἀφήνει στην τσέπη
μιάν άσπρογάλαζη σημαιούλα ἀπ’ τή γιορτή τῆς θάλασσας,
σού ἀφήνει στό στόμα μιά γουλιά ξάστερο ἀγέρα,
σού ἀφήνει στά μάτια τό εὐχαριστώ δνό ματιών
ποι κοίταζαν μαζί σου τήν ίδια πέταρα,
ποι μοιράστηκαν δίκαια τόν ἱδιο πόνο, τό ἱδιο σύγνεφο, τόν ἱδιον ἴσκιο.

’Όλα τά μοιραστήκαμε, σύντροφοι,
tό ψωμί, τό νερό, τό τσιγάρο, τόν καημό, τήν ἐλπίδα·
tώρα μπορούμε νά ζήσουμε ἢ νά πεθάνουμε
ἀπλά κι ὁμορφά — πολὺ ὁμορφά —
σά ν’ ἀνοίγουμε μιά πόρτα τό πρώι
καὶ νά λέμε καλημέρα στόν ἦλιο καὶ στόν 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.
ΑΛΛΑΓΗ

Δώ πέρα ξεχάσαμε ένα σωρό πράματα.
Δὲν εἶναι ένα παράθυρο νὰ κοιτάξουμε τὴ θάλασσα.
Ἀλλιώς κοιτιέται ἡ θάλασσα ἀπόνα παράθυρο,
ἀλλιώς πίσω ἄπ’ τὸ συρματόπλεγμα.

Ἡ φωνὴ ἕνὸς 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 σπιτιοῦ
κι ὁ ἴσκιος ἑνὸς εὐγενικοῦ χεριοῦ ποὺ βάζει ένα λουλούδι στὸ
ποτήρι — ποῦ εἶναι; —
και τὸ γραμμόφωνο τοῦ Σαββατόβραδου στὸ σκιασμένο περβάζι,
ἡ γάτα ποὺ σεργιανοῦσε στὴ στέγη τοῦ σπιτιοῦ
μέσα σ’ ένα σούρουπο όλο ναφθαλίνη,
ἐκείνη ἡ μαύρη γάτα τῆς γειτονιάς — βασανισμένη
μὲ δυὸ σταγόνες με λάδι μοναξιᾶς μέσα στὰ μάτια της,
καὶ τὸ γραμμόφωνο τοῦ Σαββατόβραδου στὸ σκιασμένο περβάζι,
ἡ γάτα ποὺ σεργιανοῦσε στὴ στέγη τοῦ σπιτιοῦ
μέσα σ’ ένα σούρουπο όλο ναφθαλίνη,
ἐκείνη ἡ μαύρη γάτα τῆς γειτονιάς — βασανισμένη
μὲ δυὸ σταγόνες με λάδι μοναξιᾶς μέσα στὰ μάτια της,
βασανισμένη μαύρη γάτα την ὥρα πὸ ποὺ σεργιανοῦσε μὲς στὸ σούρουπο,
ξύνοντας μὲ τὴν οὐρά της τ’ ἀσπρο φεγγάρι. Ξεχάσαμε.

Ἂδω εἶναι πολὺ τὸ κρύο τὶς νύχτες,
εἶναι πολλὴ μοναξιὰ κάτου ἄπ’ τὸ φόβο
κι εἶναι πολλὴ συντροφιὰ κάτου ἄπ’ τὸ φόβο
τὴν ὥρα ποὺ ὁ θάνατος ἀπάνου στὰ φυλάκια
παίζει τὰ ζάρια μὲ τους φρουροὺς καθισμένους σταυροπόδι στὸ χῶμα.

Ἂδω κι οἱ γάτες εἶναι ἀλλιώτικες,
ἀγριὲς, ύπομονετικὲς, ἀμίλητες,
δὲν τρίβουνε τὸ μάγουλο 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,
ye study sorrow,
ye study revenge, the resolve,
σπουδάζουν τη ζωή μέσα στα μάτια μας,
oi ἀχάιδευτες,
oi ἄγριες γάτες,
oi σιωπηλὲς γάτες τῆς Μακρόνησος.

Καὶ τοῦτο τ’ αὐγουστιάτικο φεγγάρι ποὺ κρέμεται πάνου μας
eἶναι σὰν τὴ μεγάλη λέξη ποὺ δὲν εἰπώθηκε
μαρμαρωμένη στὸ λαρύγγι τῆς 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.