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THE FOURTH DIMENSION

• Y A N N I S R I T S O S •

TRANSLATED BY

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AND

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• THE WINDOW •

Two men are sitting beside the window of a room overlooking the sea. They seem to be old friends, who have not met for some time. One of them looks like a seaman. The other—the one speaking—does not. Dusk is falling slowly—a peaceful spring evening, violet and purple. The sea before them is like oil, its striped and undulating reflections lighting up the sides of boats, ropes, masts, houses. Simply and somewhat wearily at the beginning:

I sit here, at the window; I watch the passers-by
and see myself through their eyes. I feel as if I am
a silent photograph, in its old-fashioned frame,
hanging outside the house, on the west wall,
I and my window.

Now and then I myself look at
this photograph with its amorous, tired eyes—
a shadow hides the mouth; the flat gleam from the glass in the frame,
at certain moments, when facing the sinking sun, or moonlight,
covers the whole face, and I am hidden
behind a square light, pallid or silver or rose,
and I can look freely at the world
without anyone seeing me. Freely—what can one say?
I can't move; at my back
the damp or burning wall; on my chest
the cold windowpane; the small veins of my eyes
reticulate in the glass. And pressed this way
between wall and windowpane, I dare not move my hand
to lift my palm to my brow when the sun blazes
like inexorable glory; and I'm forced
to see, to want, yet not to move. If I tried
to touch something, my elbow
could shatter the glass, leaving
a hole in my side, exposed to rain and to observation.

Then again, if I start to talk, the breath from my voice
clouds the windowpane (as now) and I no longer
can see the thing I wanted to talk about.

Silence and immobility, then. You could also say hypocrisy,
since you know, perhaps, how many crucified cries,
how many kneeling gestures lodge

behind this sheer crystalline brightness.
Especially when night falls, now, in springtime, and the harbor
is a distant fire, gold and red,
amid the dark forest of masts, and you're aware
of the fish, forced by pressure of water, coming up
to the surface, mouths open like little triangles
to take a deep breath—have you noticed that?
At such times the water's dense light is splintered
by a thousand open mouths of tiny fish. No one can stand
to be under the water's mass without respite, in these
mysterious, maritime forests,
in that suffocating transparency, with the infinite, dangerous view.

In the same way, I think that photographs can't stand it behind their
glass,
in whatever pose, no matter how beautiful, at whatever moment of their
lives,
frame-frozen in their prime, at a moment of proud innocence,
one splendid young hand resting on the stylish studio table
or on their knee, with a fresh flower (naturally) in their lapel,
with an imperceptible, triumphant smile on their lips,
neither over-broad, which would reveal arrogance,
nor altogether closed, which would reveal submissiveness to fate.
Yet the whole span of time lies in wait for them, before and beyond their
beautiful moment,
and they want it completely, their time, even if they lose
this petrified respectability of theirs, this
superior pose, premeditated or not—it makes no difference,
even if their upright legend melts like white wax beneath the fire of their
eyes,
even if their youth, starting out from the light of the crystal, should be
belied.

But then again, fear seems greater than their desire
or exactly its equal; and then their smile
is like a silver fish, stretched out and still
between two rocks on the sea bottom—or like a
gray bird with motionless wings, poised in the air,
immobile amid its own motion. And the photographs remain
shut away there, with all their remorse or repentance, their hatred too,

without stirring from their frames, from their longing and their fear,
face to face with imperious heaven and the boundless sea.

Because of this we often choose a narrow space that will protect us
from our own boundlessness. And perhaps that's why
I sit here, at this window, watching
the fresh footprints from the boatman's soles
on the flagstones of the jetty fade, little by little,
like a row of small, oblong moons in a fairy tale.

And I no longer understand anything, or try to understand.
A woman fresh from the bath leans over on the next balcony,
singing softly to dry her hair with her song. A sailor
stands uncertainly, legs apart,
before his enormous afternoon shadow, as if he were
upright at the prow of a ship in a strange harbor
and didn't know the waters or where to drop anchor.
Later, as dusk slowly falls, as the sunset's still violet heartbeat
fades on the walls and yards, before they have lit
the street lamps, there comes a sudden warmth—and then
the faces are more surmised than actually there;
you see the shadow merge into sweaty armpits;
the sound of a fugitive dress stirs the leaves of a tree;
the young men's white shirts take on a distant blue color and steam,
and everything's so lonely, bewitched and elusive, that maybe this is
why
they turn every light on at once, to disperse it all, positively, at their
command.

Inside the houses, the sheets are like drooping flags
in an inexplicable sea-calm, when all have abandoned ship
and the flags have no more reason to wave and hang in the evening air
warmed by the sun, forgotten, slack,
like flayed skins of huge beasts they slaughtered
on a national holiday with parades, music, dancing, feasting.
The holiday's over. The streets are deserted. On the sidewalks
oily bits of paper, crushed rosettes, bread crusts, bones—
yet no one's gone home, as if they'd thought better of it,
as if they'd all taken a break they didn't need.

The rooms remain dark and depressing, lit only
by the multicolored lights from the street and the ships or by a few
absent-minded stars
or the sudden headlights of a passing truck, loaded
with drunken soldiers, shouts and songs,
and the headlights nail the window's shadow inside the house,
silently and discreetly, as if it were a great plank coffin
being carried by two mysterious sailors to a deserted shore.

Some strange ideas come to you then—doesn't that happen to you
too?—
as that each of us may be two people
with muffled faces, and both of them vindictive,
at loggerheads with each other, who only this minute have agreed
to move that coffin, to dig with their nails
a little further up on the beach, and to bury it.

And you too know, just as they do, for all their secretiveness,
that in the coffin lies a dismembered body,
a young body, much beloved; and it is
their own one body, which they themselves killed and buried
as though they were two strangers.

That coffin
with its impeccable shape, the prescribed rectangle,
resembles a closed door,
resembles those framed photographs we were talking about,
resembles this window from which we watch the pleasant activity on the
springtime street.

I have often encountered this body, this face,
especially on nights when there is a moon, strolling
—somewhat pale, but always young—along the quayside
or on the upper street with the filthy brothels,
the painted women, ravenous dogs, rusty corrugated iron,
unshaven sailors, rotten fruit, curses, bits of lemon peel,
green washbasins, toilet bowls, candles, acetylene lamps.
Once I even saw him haggling with a woman,
but she didn't agree since he offered her too much. "No, no," she told
him,
"It won't do. No," in a hoarse voice, and her hand

with its red nails shook a little. She was afraid
they might involve her in something to do with robbery, perversion,
skeleton keys,
with great iron-barred doors like those that fortune-tellers are always
foreseeing
and which, in fact, are never lacking. What did she want with such
things?
Her price was fixed—not, of course, any less, but not any more either.

Unfathomable man, with such eyes—
huge and vacant in the pallor of his face
like burning coals. They could actually set her on fire,
could even melt her hairpins, make
the molten iron run hot from her waved hair down into her eyes.
He always seemed sad—perhaps because of his strength
which he never succeeded in killing—a beautiful sadness
like the broad, afternoon melancholy of spring. And it suited him,
and was almost a necessity for him. He never was,
to the best of our knowledge, dismembered. He'd open the coffin,
calmly,
as though he were opening a door, and emerge whole beneath the moon
with the veins outlined vividly on his hands,
red, so red—strange in such moonlight—
beneath his pale, Christlike skin.

Truly, I sometimes think that only being torn to pieces
can keep us whole—it is enough that we know it.
And how can we not know it, since it is our knowledge
that tears us apart and reunites us with that which we have denied.

On that upper street I told you about, it's delightful—
the most improbable shops in the world—secondhand shops, coal
merchants', groceries,
barbershops with old lithographs and heavy, conspiratorial armchairs,
butcher shops with huge mirrors that reflect, multiplied
into a red procession, slaughtered lambs and oxen;
greengrocers' shops and fish markets mingling the odors of fish and
fruit—
a suspicious, wordless din outside the doors,
a mute illumination like the reflection from sheets of tin

or from large yellow, planed planks leaning
upright against the front of the carpenter's shop. On sale up there in
confusion,
raincoats, poultry, clothespins, bottles, combs,
empty biscuit tins, cheap coffins, perfumed soaps,
rusty cabins from wrecked ships that they'd put up for auction
and hauled off later, bit by bit,
duty-free silks imported from all over, with all sorts of patterns and
colors,
Japanese dinner sets, hashish and tablecloths
and some strange cages, vaulted like half-completed churches
and in them a few red-golden, unfamiliar birds, watching
the activity in the street with strange, unfathomable eyes
like two yellow-black gemstones, stolen at night from the fingers of the
dead.

Barefoot children play dice in the middle of the street,
women bed sailors in low-ceilinged rooms with open windows,
sunburnt itinerant peddlers piss in a row in the yard;
fish in their creels glint fitfully like huge, bloody knives
and, sometimes, a straying bee
buzzes around out there in great confusion,
leaving in the air the golden, wiry coils of its whirling
like little springs from some gutted children's toy.

A cloud of dust stirs slowly at nightfall among the faces
like a purple secret of breath, sweat, self-interest, and crimes,
a deep secret of inexhaustible hunger, hastily nourished,
endless coming and going, endless haggling, endless spending
that sustains commerce, ambition, the clever, and life itself, of course,
so that sometimes you see a beautiful girl wearing a clean, flowered
dress,
in the coal alley, by the pistachio seller's cart and the sacks of coal,
all lit up by the sea,
smiling, with two rows of perfect teeth, at the sound of a ship's siren.

Around her, rotting lemon peels shine like little suns;
a chintz curtain drawn back slantwise in a low window
is like a dog-eared page of a much-loved book
reminding you to come back one day and read it again.

No humiliation, then, in that place where life insists upon living,
where the dogs search with well-bred gestures in the garbage heap
and the girls hold smooth foreheads high, under loads of luxuriant hair
as though balancing black jugs of still water
that they fear might fall. I have seen many girls
in this posture, yes, on that very street,
and swarthy hirsute youths, with fleshy mouths,
always enraged (as the very sad tend to be),
who never manage to be as coarse as they would like
and so they curse still more, in a more forceful voice. If you pay
attention
you will understand. Their voices are
a wide palm stroking the ship's black cat
settled warily on their knees—at night, of course,
so neither the hand nor the cat can be seen. Only the cat's eyes—their
phosphorous glow
like two sidelights on a small boat circling an island thick with flowers.

If you go a little further up that street, to St. Basil's hill,
you can see the whole harbor beneath your gaze,
and, shining in the dark water, at the very edge of the boundless sea,
large golden-green, iridescent slicks of oil or petroleum,
gleaming slicks, immaculate, you might say, like bright moving islets of
calm indifference
amid the dead dogs, rotting potatoes, straw, pine cones, and boats.

So, you see, you can watch without any hesitation from this window,
or even go out in the street. A quiet sanctity
underlies the doings of men. A violet shadow
rests silently on the left shoulder of a woman tired from love
who turned on her other side and fell asleep alone. You can see
the large boxer shorts in the next door courtyard stained from wet
dreams
or unrolled condoms under park benches
or buttons from women's corsets, fallen on the ground
like little ivory flowers, slightly embittered,
since they no longer have anything else to offer—scent, pollen, seeds.
Nothing.

I too once thought of going out on that same street
to sell this window and the big coffin,
for no other reason but to get free of responsibility for them,
so that I too could have a part in buying and selling,
could hear my voice speaking a strange language. I very soon realized
that I had nothing to sell. It was just an ulterior motive:
the quest for some new ordeal, which once again
I could oversee from this window, even without panes.

I never made it in business. Besides I have
nothing worth buying, nothing
that I can pay for. And these old photographs
aren't worth a thing to anyone else, even though their frames, at least,
are solid gold. Still, for me they are indispensable.

And they aren't dead—no. When evening falls
and the chairs outside the cafés are still warm
and everyone (and I, too, perhaps) tries to take refuge in someone else,
they come silently down from their frames as though coming down
a humble wooden staircase, go into the kitchen,
light the lamp, set the table (one can hear
the friendly sound of a fork hitting against a plate),
arrange my few books and even my thoughts
with comparisons and images (old and new), with respectable
arguments
and sometimes with ancient, unassailable, lived-through proofs.

For this too I hold on to this window with gratitude.
It doesn't in any way prevent me from seeing, or being—indeed, the
opposite.

As for what I said to you earlier, “pressed this way between wall and
windowpane,”
it was a springtime hyperbole, a hyperbole
due to the sensuous profusion of green leaves. The window
is a useful rectangle of calmness and clarity.

When the walls grow dim late in the evening, this window
still shines as if by itself; it retains and prolongs
the last glow of the dying sun,

casts its reflection on the shadowy street,
lights up the faces of passers-by as if catching them red-handed
in their most candid moments, lights up the wheels of bicycles
or the gold chain plunged between a woman's breasts
or the odd name of a vessel anchored in the harbor.

Against these panes, in winter, the wind bends its knees
and I see it depart, furious, turning its broad back.
Or again, from this spot I can hear, on spring evenings like tonight,
the conversations of sailors from one boat to another as though
they were revealing to me the reciprocity of the stars, explaining to me
those incomprehensible numbers on the sides of ships. Suddenly
I hear the sound of an anchor falling into the water
like something offered exclusively to me,
like something that empowers me to point it out.

What complaint can I have, then, about this window?
If you want you can open it halfway, and, without looking outside at
all,
in the panes you can follow, unseen,
real street scenes, in a deeper and more permanent setting,
with the gentle illumination of great remoteness
while everything's acted out right under your eyes, a yard or so away.
If you want to, though, you can open it all the way and look at yourself
in the pane, as though inside
a distant magical mirror, to comb your thinning hair
or rearrange your smile a little. In these panes
everything seems clearer—quieter, stiller,
consequently both indispensable and ageless.

Did you ever
look through a glass underwater? Beneath the troubled surface
the seabed appears splendid in its stillness,
in a crystalline order, at once undisturbed and vulnerable,
in a silent sanctity—as we were saying. Only
sometimes it takes your breath away if you stay that way too long,
so you lift your head up into the air again
or you open the window (but knowingly now) or go out the door.
And there is nothing further that can force down your life or your eyes,
and there is nothing that you cannot show proudly and sing about,
and there is nothing of which you cannot turn the face toward the sun.

They close the window and go out into the street. The ships' riding-lights are already lit. They walk to the end of the jetty, stand, look at the sea, listen to the interrupted leap of a fish in the shallows and, without speaking, clasp hands, palm to palm. Then they sit quietly on a damp coil of cable, light cigarettes, look at each other in the match-flame. They seem strangely and almost unjustifiably happy, with that inexplicable happiness that life always has in spring, when all around the tang of salt mingles with the smell of fried sprats, shredded lettuce, and vinegar. In a little while they will go to eat at the neighboring taverna. They are already hungry, and the sound of the gramophone robustly strengthens this sense of hunger. Near them the harbor patrol passes, at regulation pace, summer uniforms gleaming white in the late evening. The two friends rise from the cable and walk on.

PIRAEUS, APRIL 1959

• WINTER CLARITY •

• ISMENE •

A young officer of the guard has asked to be received by the Lady of the Palace. His father, who has worked on the palace estate since boyhood, has become something very like the man of the house. Now, old and ill, he is sending his son, with a basket of fruit and a pot of basil, to convey his respects, and his farewell, to the last surviving scion of the great family. Permission granted. The young officer, in his well-fitting uniform, is vigorous, handsome, with that bright Greek warmth characteristic of his country origin, but also with a clear if indefinable sensuousness—doubtless developed through his contacts with city folk during off-duty hours away from the barracks. He appears personally touched, flattered, almost erotically aroused in the presence of this aristocratic lady who, though heavily made up and tightly corseted, still preserves the faint charm of a remote and burnt-out beauty. He awkwardly deposits basket and pot on the floor, as though the gesture were somehow unbecoming, and passes on his father's message. She offers him a chair, facing the window. She asks after his father's health, and about the estate. He talks nonstop about life in the fields, about crops, trees, watercourses, horses, cows. Though less than attentive, she affects tremendous interest in everything, eyes fixed on his strong, clumsy hands, now resting on his knees. It is a fine late afternoon in spring. The light that enters by the open window is pale pink. Later it changes to orange, violet, purple, midnight blue. Birds can be heard in the garden. Now and then a reflection from the heavy jewelry she wears catches the furniture, the big mirror, the windows, or the young man's face. Suddenly he falls silent. Night is closing in. An unexplained lull, an expectant pause. Perhaps because of that she now begins to speak, as though filling the void—or to fend off the approach of something indecorous yet inevitable:

Your occasional visits give me great pleasure. Up here time moves slowly; nothing comes or goes any more except this inured decay in the wood of the furniture, in the roofbeams, the floorboards, the stairs, in the plaster, the fittings, the curtains, the hinges—slow decay, a silent rusting, above all in hands and faces.

The big wall clocks have stopped—nobody winds them; and if I sometimes stop in front of them, it's to see, not the time, but my own face reflected in their glass, strangely white, plasterlike, impassive, as though outside time,

while against their dark background the stopped hands,
directly behind my image, are a still lancet
that can no longer open a wound, no longer
strip me of anything—hope or fear, expectation, anguish.

This slow austerity increases the distance between
me and myself, between one action and another,
one memory and another. It can take an entire month
to move from one room to the next. An invisible mist
permeates everything. Often, on winter mornings
I sit here behind the window and gaze amiably out; on occasion
someone will chance to be passing in the distance, mist-wreathed,
a faceless, fleshless blur—you don't try to identify them,
nor do you care where they're going—here or there—it makes no
difference . . .

The trees
are equally insubstantial. At such times, if a woodman
tried to fell with his ax a willow or a cypress,
no sound, no wood, no ax.

This fine indeterminacy
is the one true reality—it makes a stranger of me,
distant, almost invulnerable, like that blur in the mist,
and I'm glad of the lightness, though, yes, I fear it a little.

If I take off these bracelets, if at night I let down my hair,
if I untie my sandal laces, above all if I remove
these heavy necklaces, which clasp my throat like chains,
I feel I'll float up, become airborne. I wouldn't want that.
Perhaps that's why I wear them. They anchor me in some way,
though they're often a burden—I even wear them when sleeping, as
though
I were a dog that I myself had tied to a fallen door.

What you called a moat of silence surrounds this house, to be
respected or not—I wish it were gone. Somewhere here, perhaps even
inside me,
there's a long narrow passageway without skylights,
without lights at all, without doors—it leads nowhere, it smells
of dust, rotten boarding, mildew, roaches, ancient time;

men pass silently, carrying broken chairs,
large wooden boxes, picture frames, antique mirrors—

Sometimes a crystal falls, a tack, or the pallid hand
of a field marshal in an oleograph, or a bunch of violets
from the transparent, delicate hands of some painted lady—
nobody stoops to retrieve them; besides, they're not noticeable
in this soothing eternal shadow, where everything's passed
into the sphere of the unexploited, the inexpressible,
whether of silence or even of mice.

All that can be heard
are the footsteps of mice (not any gnawing—
things no longer have density, nothing to gnaw on), only
their scrabbling steps on the walls and on our bodies
or rather within our bodies.

And it's a fine occupation
to observe this soundless collapse
in so deep a void (bottomless, infinite)
that engenders within you a feeling of boundlessness,
something like those vast ideas we so proudly identify:
freedom, immortality, eternity, and the rest.

Well, not collapse, really (since such things have nowhere to fall from or
to), but rather
an unfettered uplifting, something winged, almost, like birds
that dart up and down or sit still folded in their wings; I'd have called it
a motionless flight amid an absolute, noble futility,
a final equilibrium, the ultimate lightness of all
matter—and so of death too.

That's why you find me so joyful—
if joy is the word for this: the lack of all purposefulness,
of any ambition—a magnificent hibernation
with a total awareness of cold, above all a sense of pity
for those who feel pain from the chill, who discuss the chill,
who huddle in heaps of flannel, overcoats, blankets
to protect themselves. Oh, this ridiculous concern with our protection—
protection of every kind, from cold, heat, hunger, thirst,
from sickness, from error, from death; and our mind never grasps the
fact

that the chill comes up from within us, that in the end you can't escape it.

Of course, in winter, a little fire in the grate is worth something—I was always intrigued by the flames, with their supple dancing movements, their many-hued, insubstantial angels, the shadows they cast on the ceiling and walls—the shadow of the great loom or the spindle, the shadow of a guitar hung from a column; and, most of all, if there are naked bodies—the shadows of their limbs, enlarged, on their own bodies, like another body, black and red: the shadow of breast under breast with the nipple highlighted; the shadow of mouth in mouth; that terrifying physical certitude, that exquisite enmity as limbs straighten up, and then their elegant bending in a deep act, not of abasement but of contrition. That bending is the measure, I think, of true stature. Those who are always frightened (for example my sister) lack the strength to stoop, so that their height is nothing but a frozen rigidity. What sort of pride do they have, then? What kind of innate virtue?

Oh, my sister settled all questions with *It's either right or it isn't*, as though she were a precursor of that future creed that divided the world into two (the here, the hereafter), the human body in two, threw out all below the waist.

I felt such compassion for her it almost hurt. If they'd so much respect for her that was because she freed them from doing what she'd done. In her face they honored their own dead opposite, forgave themselves, were exonerated, at peace.

If she'd lived, ah yes, there's no doubt they'd have come to detest her. All she thought about was death. And now I can say it: since she knew there was no way she could avoid it, rather than going slowly and with leaden feet to that meeting, or grovelling to no purpose, she chose to preempt death, to challenge it, in the name of a sly and impertinent magnanimity, turning round the fear of a lifetime, of her own longing for heroism, turning her own ineluctable death into a cheap immortality,

yes, yes, *cheap*, despite its blinding luster. My God, how could she stand it, she who was so eternally frightened, even to the point of anger, eternally scared when faced with food or light, when faced with colors, even when faced with cold, pure water?

Never in her life did she let Haemon touch her hand. Always indrawn as though scared of losing something, folded in on herself, with one hand thrust into the opposite sleeve, with her back stuck to the wall, her eyebrows drawn together, eager only to participate in every misfortune, proudly aware, perhaps, of her own misfortune—but what misfortune?

She never wore any jewelry; even her engagement ring she stuffed away in a chest, promenading her somber arrogance in the midst of our schoolgirl parties, brandishing over our laughter that scowling gaze of hers, like a naked sword of futility.

And if, once in a while, she consented to help at the table, to go get a plate or a jug, you'd think she was cradling a naked skull in her hands to set it among the pitchers. No one got drunk any more.

One night, boys and girls were playing together, dancing, and someone had an inspiration: let's change clothes, make the boys wear the girls' dresses and let us have their male attire. There was a strange fulfillment, an awkward freedom in this exchange—we were like strangers to ourselves, yet at the same time real and honest. Only my sister stayed in her own black dress, in the corner, turned to stone, reproving and repugnant. We rushed down the stairs, streamed out into the garden, scattered. The girls in their male clothes were bolder than the boys. And there was a moon, a big moon like a round tin dish. From the windows came music filtered through the foliage.

Haemon was wearing my dress, and was so much a part of me that I danced in under the fountain, let the water pour down

on my hair, my shoulders, my cheeks—
as if I were crying, he said—till I got chilled through and felt
I'd become a gilded statue of my real self, lit by the moon,
facing my father's blind eyes. That chill still comes back to me.

That was when my sister vanished for three days.
I think she'd run away to your father's place. He brought her back home
riding a mule. From the packsaddle hung, upside down,
two white hens and a dappled rooster. I remember being impressed
by how relaxed they looked in this upside-down position—exhaustion
maybe?
or resignation? quiet acceptance of the inevitable? *She* didn't even see
them.

My sister, you see, was also ashamed of being a woman. Maybe that
was her real misfortune. And perhaps that was why she died. Perhaps
each one of us
would like to be something different. Some bear it, more or less,
others not at all. Fate binds us, they say, on the wheel of the
inachievable,
leaves us circling the well in the depths of which there awaits us,
closed in, dark, unresolved, our own face. My sister
refused to confess, to submit—hopeless and unyielding.

But one noontime in summer, when the whole house was asleep
and I crept barefoot down the stairs, I saw her
by the dining room pantry, a bowl of syrup in her apron,
wolfing down huge spoonfuls of bread pudding. I turned and fled.
At once the chirr of cicadas in the garden filled my ears. She had not
seen me.

I never mentioned it to her. She didn't know. I felt so sorry for her.
She too could be hungry (and knew it). Perhaps she even felt love. What
she couldn't bear
was to yield to her own desires, which were not, of course,
her own acts, her own choice. It was only her death—no, rather
it was only the time, the mode of her death that she could choose.
And indeed, she chose them. And those words of hers, “unwept,
unbefriended”,
above all, that “unwedded”, were her only admission,

her first fine humble gesture, her sole act of feminine daring,
her final, unique flash of honesty, some sort of vindication
for her embittered arrogance. In my eyes, that excused her.

And that other thing—once when we opened the syrup jar
and found it half-empty (a sight that caused everyone amazement),
a red flush crept up her cheeks. I looked away. Through the windows
the day was bright and arduous, so much so that I prayed, fiercely and
silently,
for a general blindness to everything. A few unnoticed roses
looked in past the sill from the garden. And I felt, for the first time, that
death
isn't black, but white—you can't hide. Two servant-girls
were punished for that theft. I think from that moment
she'd decided on her death, was watching and waiting for it.

Her trifling offense—what kind of offense was that?—had scared her,
maybe
because it's wrong to consent to our desires? Never, never
had my sister looked so lovely as when she was dead. All by myself
I made up her cheeks, heavily (perhaps I also remembered
that blush of hers in the dining room, faced with the syrup jar),
painted her lips bright crimson, made her eyes look deep black, huge,
with black burnt cork (she never made up herself). I hung
five rows of necklaces on her to hide the scars round her throat,
plus those earrings with two naked lovers, rings and bracelets,
and a broad gold buckle for her belt. Made up and adorned this way
she'd acquired a curious resemblance to me.
“How like Ismene she is,” a girl whispered. Now
she'd renounced her frightful decisions, her moral principles,
all those stupid male goals and obsessions. By dying
she'd at last become a woman.

And beside her, her suitor,
naked (how does it happen that we discern the body's beauty
with such exactness in the very midst of death? perhaps because
the orange blossom with which they'd sprinkled them smelled so sweet)
—and this bridal youthfulness, complete, unprotected—impregnable—

Almost no one bothered with Eurydice's corpse. The women
were taking their time enshrouding Haemon, they insisted

on washing him so carefully, over and over, bit by bit,
toes and fingers; armpits, breast, limbs,
and the flaccid motion (as they turned him) of abandonment,
or rather of surrender, made me think of that night in the garden,
and the big moon, and the water that drenched me—I'd have liked
to dress him in my clothes again, but hadn't the courage. A butterfly,
orange with black stripes, came in through the window
and perched on his sex. Then the women at once began their keening
and quickly enshrouded him. Then he really became a corpse.

From the courtyard outside came the sound of Creon's wild groans,
and the clang of his sword, emphasizing his guards' silence.

I wonder sometimes if the sole, the only reason for our being born
isn't just to acknowledge the fact of our coming death. Yet in moments
of respite
from this useless inquiry our life moves on.

Haemon

had become remote from us all, he no longer belonged to my sister,
nor to his friends. A great peace, a sense, almost, of contentment—
that irreparable physical deprivation—a calm certainty:
no one any longer can take from us what's nonexistent;
memory holds it entire in a deep exclusiveness,
especially when adjusting it, on occasion, to others. You have something
of Haemon—
that modesty bred of strength and integrity; above all, the chin
with its central furrow.

Evenings when I sit here

I don't know why the birds are still twittering in the garden—
maybe because of the ploughshare's new furrow—

The dead, you know,

always take up a lot of space; however small and unimportant,
they grow bigger at once, they fill the whole house, you can't find
a corner to put yourself in. Even Mother,
decorous, taciturn, eternally self-controlled,
has now acquired an inviolable authority over
the flowerpots, the kitchen utensils, the linen,
the tightly drawn curtains, in that time before evening
when it begins to rain, and her long darning needle
emerges glinting from that ancient workbasket—

this is Mother's place, Mother's style,
her attitude, her concern—all, now, belong to the dead.

Sometimes I stand in front of a mirror
to comb out my hair. The whole of the glass
is taken up with their bodies. Only beneath one armpit,
as they spread their great arms in a gesture of prohibition,
do I glimpse, briefly, a small squashed bit of my face,
or one eye, as though I were monophthalmic. Every morning
the steps were marked with dust-covered footprints made
by their naked, enlarged soles. It was a real problem
to go up or down without treading on them.

Until, one day,

I heard our new gardener come up the steps, two at a time—
"Madam, Madam, the carnations have bloomed," he called out,
breathlessly,
on the very verge of tears. His hair glistened
with fresh drops of moisture. It was May. I went rushing down.

The carnations had bloomed indeed, right by the fountain.
We set the canary cages out on the garden wall,
we washed their feed cups, changed their water, gave them fresh
birdseed,
breakfasted under the trees. The day had warmed up.
I stuck a carnation in my hair. The bread was delicious.

Perhaps those carnations, too, were a gift from your father. He knew
how much I loved flowers. All his life, when he went to the city,
he'd bring me back, in his handkerchief, a mass of damp earth
full of wild cyclamen bulbs. He would help me bed them out. I suppose
they're still flourishing up at the top of the garden. If you'd like
we can go up sometime and see.

Be sure to tell him

that I always remember him; nothing's changed inside me,
nothing, I tell you—and that's hard, at a time when all else
outside and around us is changing: carriages, houses, hands, faces,
weapons, hairstyles and dresses, the hats we used to wear—

I remember the afternoon drives we took then, in the carriage—
those hats all covered with flowers, wax cherries, grapes,

and those long ribbons that fluttered about behind us,
now and then flicking our ears like friendly bridles
that the wind tugged gently, making us hold up our heads,
and drawing the skin of our cheeks right back as well
in a big smile (we might also have been copying
the carriage horses, quite without meaning to)—ribbons blue, pink, and
yellow,
roots of all colors, as though we were heavenly trees,
trees free and free-moving.

And Mother's scarf
fluttered out further still, like some great blue diaphanous bird.

When the evening star came out, it seemed to me as though—
how, I don't know—the rustle from the scarf at once changed,
becoming somehow ill-omened. I was scared
that it might twist round her throat and choke her, might wrap round
her entirely
in the way they once swaddled corpses.

We'd drive back home,
hasten to light the lamps, to do something, anything.
The two lamp brackets at the entrance guarded the gateway. Later,
when the moon came out, it was like the buckle of an invisible belt,
and above it trembled a swan's shadow, or maybe Mother's scarf.

My small brother had a passion for buckles; he'd assembled
a whole collection of them, from different periods, women's, men's,
from wide military baldrics or exquisite antique girdles—
strange patterns, strange designs, strange representations
of men, gods, birds, monsters.

One time he showed them to me.
They twinkled and glinted in that autumnal sunset.
I understood nothing. He kept explaining, explaining to me
as though anxious to hide something; and something, for me, did
remain unexplained,
and that was precisely what pleased me. Perhaps he wanted it too—
I mean, to stress the inexplicable. The dominant luster
was a deep cherry red, like blood, or the coppery green
of human entrails. But the thing that stayed with me most
was a sense of vigorous bodies, naked, after the impatient movement

of stripping off their belts. When I told him this, he got cross. (But is
there
anything in the world more baffling, more elusive
than the human body, so tangible—maybe that's why—so full of
variety?)

He was the one who went over to the Argives. My sister had a weakness
for him.

He and she both were uncompromising, touchy, wrong-headed. What I
mean to say is

they cherished a highly personal notion of justice, never perceived
others' rights, or injustice in general. That's how they
and the others were destroyed. But I still keep those buckles—the only
remembrance of him left me. And as I found out later,
he'd collected them from the belts of corpses. That discovery
didn't change my first impression one bit; enhanced it, rather.

How strange that amid all those changes, upheavals, *rearrangements*, as
they say,

the one thing to survive, standing clear from all those deaths,
is the human body—exposed, unsuspecting, obstinate, splendid. I
believe

the only beauty is innocence, the sole virtue, youth—
yet how great is its power? or ours? It's renewed, you'll tell me,
in the generations to come. Not for us, not for us. Then—what kind of
renewal?

I remember when they swept the scraps from the table—bones, crusts,
pits—

my eyes would covertly follow (you know?) those golden coils
of orange peel, so flexible, so enticing, as if they
wanted to regain their shape. A primitive shout, "No, no!"
rose in my throat. I said nothing. I watched. They tossed the skins
over the courtyard wall. Don't you sometimes feel like that?
A suppressed shout. And the nights smelled of orange peel.

Please thank your father from me for his beautiful presents, give him
my best wishes for his recovery. We had good times on the estate—
our only enjoyable summers. It was there we got acquainted

with horses, plane trees, brooks—with the stars too, I may say. It was there we learned the names of plants and birds—tomtits, goldfinches, blackbirds.

Once they brought me a partridge in a basket; a few days later it died as inexplicably as a man will. I buried it under the two apple trees. My tears wouldn't come. I heard the shouts of boys bathing in the river. Soon, bare as they were, and dripping, they mounted their horses, bareback, and vanished into the forest.

Maybe you too were among them. Me they left behind. Me they taught riding separately, in a fenced-off meadow full of nettles, thistles, mallows. Things were just fine then. I loved the vintaging too. The whole place smelled of must—house, air, water, clothes, windows. I would gaze at the feet of the grape-treaders, red, bright red, as though washed with blood in the course of some mock battle that nevertheless preserved a splendid savagery. "Their wives," I said to Mother, "should lick off their feet to stop all that must going to waste." And Mother laughed.

Those evenings stretched out for ever. The whole of creation smelled sweet, like thick must jelly. A myriad stars sprinkled the cisterns with fine powdered cinnamon. A horse whinnied in our dreams.

Haemon's horse, you know, never budged from his graveside after his death. I took it fodder and water, offered it sugar lumps in my palm—it never touched them. In a week it too was dead. Afterward everything quietened down.

We gave away their clothes, locked their rooms. No one spoke their names any more. We even covered their mirrors.

Your father may have told you of the difficult times we went through. What did they learn, my God, what did they gain? Troubles, troubles, duties, pointless heroic acts; great doors they opened, closed on the same darkness; masks of plaster, bronze, gold, velvet, flattery, tricks, disguises—to hide from whom?

from themselves? from others? from fate? And that gluttonous taste for glory—

I think each reputation rests on endless misunderstandings, and in any case on the denial of life—what, after all, can you do with it?

A man kept calling from the rocks down below—perhaps it was just in our heads—

calling, calling; no one listened, they were in a hurry to be off—where? to do—what? They had no time to themselves for undressing, lying around, dreaming in their own body, looking in a mirror, looking *at* one another; they looked in each other's eyes only—what did they hope to see there? perhaps what they hoped for, certainly not what they knew.

One day a bird flew into the dining room. General confusion. People didn't know how to react, though no one was asking them; they got cross:

"Get it out! Get it out!" they shouted, jumping up from their chairs, gesticulating.

They broke two glasses. The bird flew out of the window.

The maids stooped down and swept up the glass shards. I watched them.

They were the only ones smiling—they knew the bird. I winked in their direction

and smiled too. The innocent always (don't you think?) have an air of guilt about them. You know this yourself, I'm sure.

The fear never left me that one day they'd put me on the throne. Only those scared of themselves pursue honors, or, rather, those who hate life and mankind. I would get no joy at all from being a public figure, from having no shadow, no place of my own in my own private region, where I could kick off my sandals at night, play with the keys to my armoire, let them dangle from a carefree hand when I was in bed.

My poor father—I think of him always—had a face like a clenched fist, clutching a great black curtain, to draw it; indeed, as I've sometimes said, perhaps it was good he was blinded, perhaps that way at least he could see inside himself, remember bit by bit all that he'd never seen; and thus maybe really see it, since till then

he'd viewed his autocratic person (much flattered, of course) through
the eyes
of his frightened subjects. We felt so sorry, from childhood on,
for him and them both.

An unbearable burden, I feel,
that of ruling and giving orders. And always, in the last resort, each
one of us is ruled by what he rules—not counting that boundless
suspicion
of everything, everybody—let a bird's shadow but flit haphazardly
into a room at sunset, it's a quivering knife
fashioned from soundless metal. This is why tyrants
become daily more wholly tyrannical. When the world fears you
or needs you, you never know what to expect from it.

Better then (but how?) to neither rule nor be ruled—
sufficient the rule that stamps us before our birth; sufficient
the death that lurks in wait for us—you know something about that.
The years between lose their edge in the end, the body goes slack,
color leaches from hair, windows, eyes;
the hand loses its grip, that once had palmed and held
a large, hard, golden coin, while our entire life
was an effort to keep this coin, a terror
of dropping it, losing it; one hand became useless,
useless one half of our life, our entire life.

Now my hand has unclenched itself, given up;
the coin dropped, they took it from us. Only in my palm
there remains, deep-etched, the mark of that endless pressure. The flesh
has grown softer, smoother. At last you can move
both your hands freely. You can walk
swinging empty hands in the empty air without alarm—
an idle, frivolous rowing in the acme of pointlessness, till
they cast in your teeth another, copper, coin.

Lies are bad—so your father, too, used to say. Inside this softened body
desire persists; harsh as ever, unyielding—along with the sense
of an inexcusable slowness. At such times women often
embrace statues, kiss their stone mouths, have dreams
that they're sleeping with them. If you've ever happened to notice
statues' lips wet, it's from the saliva of passionate women. Of course,

memory's some sort of refuge. Yet it too is being drained;
it's needed for new images, be they casual or alien.

This is my favorite window. Curled up here, half in, half out,
I watch and remember. No duties. A great calm.
I'm beginning once more to study trees, birds, colors,
the feet of hunters trudging homeward at nightfall. I feel so free.
They have something to tell me, a secret to reveal. At times I'm ashamed
of this new tenderness of mine—childishness rather—
that descends on my lips despite myself, in some sense like
a swallow perched on a tumbledown roof.

Odd, really,
the way that noise quieted down (it hadn't let you hear anything else),
the way it faded into the distance. Am I really, was I ever, myself?

People
went up and down then, whispering to one another, jerky movements—
politicians, soldiers, diplomats—what revolting people, my God,
like walking rote memories, calculated, repeated. You didn't know what
hour, month, or year it was.

Wars, revolutions, counterrevolutions, the same again and again,
ashes heaped in the squares from the fires they lit
for great festivals, or the dead—the ash is the same.
Sometimes they even burned those whom a little before they'd called
heroes.

The bay leaves had completely lost their meaning.

You shut your eyes as you'd shut a door in a strange house,
so as not to see, not to think. Intrigues, bribes, betrayals;
those with the most pliant backbones always stood the tallest:
Thebans, Argives, Corinthians, Spartans, Athenians—which of them
really
ran things? A secret power seemed to be pulling strings from a distance;
masked men came out at midnight with powerful torches,
a face you knew changed suddenly into white lightning or thunder,
people seemed to melt back into fear.

One afternoon,
high up, from a poor student's garret, came the sound of a flute. The
women
gathered below in the street, knelt, wept. The madman,

shirt unbuttoned, kept beating his breast with a stone, groaned

“Mother, mother,
mother, I want to die,” groaned “I want to die.”
A covered truck went past. They all scattered. The flute fell silent;
the madman pissed in midroad. People parted once more
unrecognized, jostling, strangers.

But I was young then,
so young I didn’t understand. Forgetting was easy. In that window
was left hanging, aflutter, tied with string,
one little rose. Just that. It too withered.

The bells rang, were still. People arrived, left, went running.
Sometimes it rained in torrents: the cisterns inside the houses brimmed
over,
you’d think the water would bear everything down to the sea, wash it
away.
Then the sun came out again; things dried; nothing had changed. The
garden
played innocent; the carnations gleamed. Up beyond the garden
printing presses and typewriters rattled. The same men with different
masks,
wound up or run down, entered the halls, sat down
at large black polished legal tables;
their hands were huge insatiate lymphatic spiders
unwinding scrolls. They read, wrote, sealed; sent off for
yet other documents; gestured; opened their mouths wide.
But no shout, or sound, emerged—a black hole in the air;
maybe they shouted “Long live—” or “Down with—,” but I couldn’t
make out a thing;

one fear alone stood out, though I didn’t know why then; it baffled me
how
mere equipment could be rigid with fright, tables and chairs,
the open chimney flue, half-finished wine in the glass,
a roast chicken on its dish, a fork poised above the plate—
motionless, frozen.

Some fine messengers showed up;
they too opened their mouths, but again, not a sound emerged,
though otherwise they were themselves—they panted, and we were
pleased

by this panting of theirs; their tongues, too, were visible—red,
a bright red, like summer, high summer, with streams and trees.

Then they sent word and summoned the blind old prophet. A sweet little
boy
led him by the hand. Majestic, conniving, handsome,
with his long beard down to his knees, with his huge vacant eyes
(I thought he was acting blind, that his beard was false),
with his staff of authority—he breathed calm, serenity, wholeness;
knew—it was said—the tongues of birds, fire, silence, winds;
a dove perched on his shoulder.

My sister feared him,
would hide behind his back, or slip out to the next room,
and from there, I’m convinced, would eavesdrop. I loved him. One day
he took me by the chin and lifted my face. “You’d be better looking,” he
told me,
“if you were a boy.” “I am,” I said. We both
laughed like conspirators. The others got cross with him,
as though he were to blame for all that awaited them. He rapped his
staff and left.

Behind him lingered some wisps of down—black, white, reddish gold.

For a while a great silence fell, as though everything had lost
its weight and significance. A tranquil relaxation
crept round the back of one’s knees. No one chased off
the cat that had climbed on the table and was gnawing a fish. Light
poured
diffuse and near-pure white through the windowpane. The next moment
drums began to beat wildly. One trumpet call from the ramparts,
another across in the olive trees. At night beacons
flared from hilltop to hilltop. Torchbearers passed by,
in the darkness a vast hole opened, chaos made visible. Then
night vanished in night again. Everyone vanished. I understood nothing.

Sometimes they made us recite poems in front of strangers.
We were children, we didn’t want to. We cried. Sometimes they made us
take
a bouquet to some ugly, feeble old man with false teeth. Sometimes
they’d drag us out onto the balcony with them, to wave to the crowd.
Sometimes they hid us

down in the cellars with the big jars. We'd watch the spiders;
the wax candle dripped, we took the hot blobs and shaped them
into hares, ploughs, boats, or naked figurines. Sometimes they sent us,
at night, with an escort, out to the estate, to your father.

We scarcely had time to take off our sandals, stroll round the lawn,
pick one apple each for ourselves, before they took us back.
The flags changed on the battlements, over the public buildings. Who
won, who lost?
The cavalrymen sprang from their horses, removed the saddles,
lugged them into the hallway. They sat on stools, took off their belts,
took off their boots. Their feet were enormous.
They smelled of pinewood and goatstink. The women feigned head
colds,
kept grinding the coffee mill by the window till moonrise.

That, I think, was the time that the wolves and foxes came down
from the forest. The whole night shone as though freshly whitewashed.
The streams held still, didn't flow. The rocks were white.
In front of their beds gaped the huge boots of the horsemen.
The smallest one felt hot, stripped stark naked,
stepped behind the curtain. The curtain glowed bright.
Golden leaves rained on the terraces. Birds called.

It was just about then that Father was blinded. Suddenly everything
turned red, vivid red with green spots, even the dishes
red, with a hole in the middle. Somewhat later
trumpets were heard once more. The men were torn from their sleep,
strapped on swords, leaped on their horses. An enormous shadow
was left behind in the courtyard—perhaps from the dawn moon,
perhaps from the winged marble lion on the ancient tower.

The place where they'd lain on the beds stayed warm for a little, then
grew cold.
The women rolled themselves up in their bedclothes and wept. My sister
lost weight from day to day, became harsher, grew pale,
avoided Haemon and me. Afternoons, she went out alone—
perhaps as far as the gates of Thebes, perhaps to hold converse
with that lion-bodied woman. Her eyes would nail you

with two frozen questions, and you'd wish she were looking anywhere
else.
Clearly she was waiting for something extraordinary. She never slept at
night.

The sheets fell on the floor. Often I'd pretend to be sleeping,
watch her as she lay there, so still and tense. One night
the moonlight had entered our chamber, bathed it halfway across;
I saw her move her bright fingers like a dancer, a priestess,
as though weaving an unseen rope, as though writing figures in air.
She was adding up something—her years perhaps (or the lack of them?),
and then she grasped her throat, let her silvered fingers linger,
and began, suddenly, shaking, as though in terror. She rose,
took Mother's white lace umbrella, opened it,
sat beneath it, hunched on the bed, as though to protect herself
from the moon, or the night's shadows. Posed thus she looked
as though tattooed all over with minute silver-blue meanders.

But perhaps meanwhile I'd fallen asleep. When I opened my eyes,
the beds' sturdy cast-iron feet struck me as hirsute, bestial.
I heard the jugmaker going by to his work. I looked out the window.
In the street were empty cigarette packs, paper flags and napkins,
cartridges.

Behind the cypresses gleamed the wall of the marble workshop
with a great bronze horseman. One day we heard
a terrifying, unfamiliar noise. There in the dining room
the huge chandelier had fallen, smack in the middle
of the breakfast table. After that, you could expect anything to happen.

Nothing was left but fragments of crystal and luster. In the doorway
stood two hugely tall cripples with crutches.
The maidservants chased them away. The menfolk had vanished.
From that instant everyone idled. The women wore no make-up.
They slouched around late in slippers, forgot to light the lamps,
crossed themselves behind their loose hair. Nettles grew in the gardens.
They'd hidden the keys in the ivy. Father's horse, now very old,
vanished one evening and never came back. They hung up
one of its old shoes on the storeroom door. Its tether
they strung up between two trees as a line for the washing.

At moments, amid the general confusion, there descended a marvellous silence, so transparent it scared you. Everything took on a new look, a new sound, a fresh attraction, that loaded sense of indifference. You saw things straight, really heard them.

The hens ran loose in the graveyard, scratched about all day; they laid huge eggs just anywhere, among the daisies, under the rosemary bushes, in the road, on chairs. An invisible hand removed, one by one, the big rusty nails from the doors. The flies woke early, drummed on the windowpanes.

Outside the walls the dead multiplied. I was always curious about corpses—not an attempt to win familiarity with death, or reconciliation either. Sometimes I'd dodge the watchful eyes of my mother and tutors, scramble up to the battlements, peer out through the embrasures. They'd be moving the dead on handcars, stretchers, ladders;

others still lay sprawled on the plain, in elegant postures, quiet, youthful, handsome, beside their slain horses. I saw them without the slightest distress—handsome, as though ready for love. Until our own dead came; and all at once we grew up.

I saw my sister at daybreak in the courtyard—marked by fate—so very pale. Her hands, her clothes, her hair were dusty all over. The dawn frost chilled us through. We shivered. Daylight descended in infinite whiteness, riddled with black crows.

What did they learn, my God, what did they gain? The rest you know. Nothing was left. Only the stony Sphinx on her rock outside the gates of Thebes, indifferent, undistracted—she no longer poses questions. The vain hubbub subsided. Time fell vacant.

An endless Sunday with shut windows. Incredible that on summer evenings they still water the gardens.

A moat of silence—just as you said. Look, the moon's come out. You can hear the fountain outside too. Don't you hear it? Your hands still keep those beautiful calluses from fieldwork. I hope you don't stay in the army for ever. When your term of service expires go back to the estate, near your father. This door

leads straight to my apartment. The passage facing south is never guarded. Knock seven times. At midnight, I'll let you in. I'd like to give you some little things for your father.

One of those suits of Haemon's—I've kept them in the closet—should fit you beautifully, I think. And his new sword, with its ivory, gold, and rubies—he never got around to strapping it on. It's a beautiful night. Mind the stairs.

By now it is dark. She retreats to her apartment while the young officer's footsteps can still be heard on the stairs. She fumbles for the matches on the little table, and lights the three candles in the candlestick. She strikes the hanging gong, and the Nurse appears. "I won't want supper tonight," she says, "I won't be needing you any more, you may go to bed. Oh yes—bring me a glass of water. And wind up the wall clock in the hall, we forgot it. Take away that basket of fruit, too. Put the flowerpot in the window." After a moment the Nurse returns with the water, then goes. All is still. She locks both doors. The tick of the clock is now audible from somewhere nearby. 9 P.M., 9:15, 10, 10:30. She stands facing the mirror, removes her make-up, undresses. Sagging breasts. Marks on her belly where the corset pinched her. The fingerprints of time on her thighs. 11 o'clock. She strips off her necklaces. The skin under her chin is slack, pendulous. 11:15. She grasps the candlestick in her left hand, and goes right up to the mirror. With the ring finger of her right hand she draws down the skin beneath each eye. The eyeball is blurry, with a faint network of red veins. Now she moves her fingers to her dyed hair. The roots are white. An expression of nausea invades her immobile features; the corners of her mouth are drawn down. 11:30. She begins to make herself up. She puts on a red dress, puts her jewelry back on. Then she relaxes in the red velvet armchair, opposite the mirror. She closes her eyes. Midnight. Seven discreet taps on the door. Silence. Then seven further taps, a little louder. Silence. And yet again. Then, nothing. A vast stillness. The glass gleams. She rises, goes to the mirror, makes herself up again, plaster white, her eyes huge, black-circled. A plaster mask. She takes off her dress, puts on one of her sister's—full, pleated, buttoned-up, brown. She adds a belt with a broad buckle. She opens the drawer of the nightstand, takes something out. With her back to the candlestick and the mirror, she drinks the water in a series of small, separate gulps, as though

swallowing aspirin tablets. She sinks back on the bed, fully dressed, and still wearing her sandals. Motionless. At peace. She closes her eyes, smiles. Has she fallen asleep? From the hall nearby the tick of the clock can still be heard.

ATHENS, SEPTEMBER–DECEMBER 1966; SAMOS, DECEMBER 1971

• AJAX •

• HELEN •

The dilapidation is already visible from way off—unplastered, crumbling walls, faded shutters, the balcony rails eaten with rust. A curtain stirs outside the upper-floor window, yellowing, its lower edge ragged. When he gets nearer—hesitant still—the same neglect is apparent in the garden: plants running wild, with great fleshy leaves, the trees unpruned, the few flowers choked by nettles, the fountains dry and cracked, lichen growing on the fine statues. A lizard squats, motionless, between the breasts of a young Aphrodite, warmed by the last rays of the setting sun. So many years ago. He was very young then—twenty-two? twenty-three? And she? You could never tell. There was this great radiance she gave off—it blinded you, pierced through you, you no longer knew what existed, if it existed, if you yourself existed. He rings the doorbell, and hears it sound inside, a lonely echo, in a room he once knew, unknown now because differently arranged, with unfamiliar dark-colored side passages. They are in no hurry to answer the door. Someone peers down from the upstairs window. Not her. A maidservant—very young, who seems to be laughing. She withdraws from the window. Another pause. Then footsteps on the stairs inside. The door is unbolted. He goes in, climbs the staircase. A smell of dust, rotten fruit, dried lather, urine. This way now. Bedroom. Wardrobe. Metal mirror. Two broken-down ladderback chairs. A small zinc-topped table with coffee cups and cigarette butts. And she—? No. No. It isn't possible. Old. Old, a hundred, two hundred years old. Even five years ago—no. No. Holes in the sheet. There she is, sitting on the bed, hunched up, absolutely still. Only her eyes—still huge, imperious, penetrating, vacant.

Yes, yes—it's me. Sit with me for a little while. No one comes any more.

I've nearly
forgotten the use of words. And I've no need for them. I guess summer
must be almost here:
the curtains stir differently, they're trying to say something. Such
nonsense. One of them
has already got out of the window, it's straining to break loose from its
rings,
to fly away over the trees—perhaps already it's trying to uproot
the whole house, take it somewhere else—but the house resists with all
its corners
and I too with it, though I feel, have felt for months now, freed
from my dead, and indeed from myself; and my very resistance,

incomprehensible, involuntary, strange, is my sole possession—my link with this bed, this curtain—but also my fear, as though my entire body were controlled by this ring with the black stone that I wear on my forefinger.

I stare at this stone now, hour after hour in the night—black, no reflections—it grows and grows, is brimming with black water, the water rises, floods; I sink down, not to the lower depths, just to an upper level, from which I can make out my room below me, myself, the wardrobe, the slave-girls silently bickering; I see one climb up on a stool to strip from the window that photograph of Leda, with surly vindictiveness; I see the duster leaving a dust trail of tiny bubbles that rise and burst with a silent popping around my knees or ankles.

I see you too, your face thunderstruck, confused, broken up by the black water's slow currents—your face now widening, now elongated with yellow stripes. Your hair rises toward the surface like an inverted medusa. But then I say: "It's only a stone, a small precious stone." Then all its blackness contracts, dries out, is concentrated on one tiny point—I feel it, here, just below my throat. And there I am, back in my room, on my bed, beside familiar flasks and bottles, that look at me, nodding agreement, one by one—they're my only help against insomnia, fear, remembrance, forgetfulness, asthma.

And what about you? Are you still in the army? Take care, don't be too concerned with heroic deeds, high position, glory. What use are they to you? Do you still have that shield with my portrait engraved on it? You were so funny in that lofty helmet of yours with its outsize plume—so young, so shy and reserved, as though your handsome face were hidden in the back legs of a horse, and its tail hung down over your naked back. Don't get angry again. Stay a little longer.

The time for rivalries is long past, the desires have dried up; maybe now we can look, together, at the same scene of futility,

where, I believe, the only true encounters happen—indifferent perhaps, but always soothing—our new identity, solitary, quiet, empty, without displacements or contrasts—merely raking over the debris in the hearth, sometimes building fine tall ash mounds with the cinders, or, seated on the ground, beating the earth with soundless palms.

Little by little things lost their meaning, grew empty; or could it be that they'd never had any meaning? Sagging, hollow; we stuffed them with chaff or bran to give them shape, body, solidity, to firm them up—chairs and tables, the beds we slept on, words—always empty, fill them like those canvas bags and sacks that merchants use, their contents identifiable even from outside: potatoes or onions, wheat, corn, almonds, flour.

Sometimes a full sack will catch on a nail on the stairs or on an anchor fluke down at the harbor, tearing a hole through which the flour trickles, a small stupid river. The sack slowly empties.

Beggars scoop up the flour with their cupped hands, to make flat bread or porridge. The sack sags. Someone picks it up by its two lower corners, shakes it out in the air, so that a cloud of white dust envelopes him, whitens his hair, especially whitens his eyebrows. The others watch him. They don't understand at all, they're waiting for him to open his mouth and speak, but he says not a word, just folds the sack into fours, strides off all white still, incomprehensible, no explanations, like a person in fancy dress, like some naked lecher draped in a sheet, or a clever corpse, resurrected in its grave clothes.

So, no meaning to past events, or things; and it's the same with words, even though we use them as names, at random, for those things we miss, or those we never saw in our lives—the ethereal, we say, the eternal—words: innocent, seductive, consoling, ambiguous always in their pretense of accuracy. What a sad story, giving a name to a shadow, saying it in bed at night with the sheet drawn up to our throat; and, hearing it, we suppose

in our folly that we rule the body (it rules us), that we're holding out
against the world.

Now I forget the names I once knew best, or confuse them one with
another—

Paris, Menelaus, Achilles, Proteus, Theoclymenus, Teucer,
Castor and Polydeuces—my brothers, moralists both; I think
they turned into stars (so it's said), guides for ships—Theseus,
Peirithoüs,

Andromache, Cassandra, Agamemnon—sounds, mere sounds
without substance, without their image cast on a windowpane,
or on a metal mirror, or on the coastal shallows, as then
one still and sunny day, with a bristle of masts, when the battle
had slackened off, and the snap of damp sheets in the blocks
dominated the world, like the lump of a sob held fast
in a crystalline throat—and you saw the lump glitter, shiver
without becoming a cry, and suddenly that whole scene, ships,
sailors and wagons, sank into the light, into anonymity.

Another submergence now, deeper, darker—from those depths
occasional sounds drift up—when hammers struck wood
trenailing a new trireme in the little shipyard; when a big
four-horse chariot passed on the stony road, picking up the strokes
of the cathedral clock in another age, as though the hours
were far more than twelve, and as though the horses were forced
to go round and round in the clock until they were tired; or, one night
when two handsome youths under my window sang
a song for me, without words—one was one-eyed, the other
had a belt with an outsize buckle, it shone in the moonlight.

Words now won't come to me of themselves—I search for them, as
though translating
from some tongue I don't know, yet can still translate. Between the
words,
or even in them, deep holes remain; I peer through these
as though through the gaps where knots have dropped from the boards
of a door
that's been nailed shut for ages. Nothing. I see nothing.

Words and names I no longer distinguish, a few sounds only—a silver
candlestick

or a crystal flower vase sound of themselves, then are suddenly silent,
acting as though they know nothing, as though they didn't ring, as
though no one

had touched them, or even come near them. A dress sinks softly
from chair to floor, transferring attention from
the previous sound to the simplicity of nothingness. And yet
the idea of a silent conspiracy, though dissolved in air,
floats densely, almost palpable, up to a higher plane,
just as in the very lines and wrinkles deepening round your mouth
you see the presence of an intruder, taking your place,
making *you* the intruder, here, on your own bed, in your own room.

Oh this foreignness of ours, inside our own aging clothes,
inside our own wrinkling skin; while our fingers
can't grip things any longer, can't hold even the blanket
around our body—it lifts up of itself, dissolves, vanishes, leaving us
naked to the void. And then the guitar hung up on the wall,
forgotten for years, with corroded strings, begins to tremble
as the jaw of an old woman will tremble from cold or fright, and you
must

put the palm of your hand on the strings, cut short
their contagious shivering. But you can't find your hand, you have no
hand,
and you sense, in your gut, that it's your own jaw trembling.

In this house the air has grown heavy, mysterious, perhaps
from the naturalness of the presence of the dead. A wooden chest
opens by itself, and out rustle old clothes—they stand up,
move around silently. Two gold bits of fringe are left on the rug. A
curtain

is thrust aside. No one is visible, yet someone's there; a cigarette
smokes itself in the ashtray with regular puffs; whoever
left it there is in the next room, a somewhat awkward figure,
back turned, inspecting the wall, perhaps a spider
or a patch of damp—like that, facing the wall, so one can't make out
the shadowed hollow beneath his jutting cheekbones.

The dead no longer bother us, and that's strange—isn't it?
not for them so much as for us—this neutral familiarity of theirs
with a place that's rejected them, and in which they contribute nothing
to the cost of its upkeep, the worry about its decay,
but are simply themselves, consummate, changeless, only seeming a little
larger.

That's something we're sometimes surprised by—the abnormal
expansion of the immutable,
their silent self-containment. They're not haughty at all, not anxious
to burden you with their memories, to please you. The women
let their bellies go slack, leave their stockings fallen; they take
tacks from the silver box and hammer them one by one,
in two neat straight lines, into the velvet of the sofa; then they collect
them
and start all over again, with the same polite concentration. Someone
very tall
comes in from the corridor; his forehead smacks the lintel above the
door, yet he makes
not the slightest grimace, and the blow remains wholly inaudible.

Yes, they're just as stupid as we are. Only quieter. Another one
lifts his hand in a formal gesture, as though to deliver a eulogy,
cuts a crystal from the chandelier, and places it in his mouth
very simply, like a glass fruit—you think he's going to chew it, reactivate
some kind of human function; but no, he just holds it between his teeth
so that the crystal glitters with idle brilliance. A woman
scoops face cream out of its round white jar
with a practiced movement of two fingers, and writes
two big thick capital letters—E and ©, perhaps—
on the windowpane. The sun warms the pane, the cream melts, drips
down the wall—
this has no significance whatever—in two short greasy tracks.

I don't know why the dead stay here when no one pities them; I can't
think what they want,
traipsing from room to room in their fine clothes, their fine shoes,
well polished, smooth and silent—as though not treading the ground.
They clutter the place, they flop anywhere, in the two rocking chairs,

down on the floor, in the bath; they leave the faucets running,
leave the perfumed soap to melt away in the water. When the maids
pass among them, sweeping with their big brooms,
they don't even notice them. Only, sometimes, a hint of constraint
will show in one maid's laughter—it doesn't float free, out the window,
it's like
a bird with a string tied to its leg, jerked down by someone below.

And then the slave-girls get cross with me for no discernible reason,
throw their brooms
here, into my room, take off for the kitchen—I hear them
heating coffee in the big pots, spilling sugar on the floor—
the sugar crunches under their shoes, the smell of coffee
creeps down the corridor, fills the house, can be seen in the mirror
like a stupid swarthy insolent face, with uncombed kiss-curls,
with two blue earrings—cheap imitations; its breath blows in the
mirror,
clouds the glass. I feel my tongue searching my mouth,
sense that I've still some saliva. "A coffee for me too," I call out to the
slaves,
"a coffee—" (I ask only for coffee, I want nothing else). They pretend
not to hear me. I call out again and again, without resentment
or anger. They still don't answer. I hear them slurping their coffee
from my porcelain cups with the gold rims
and that pattern of tiny violets. I fall silent and stare at
one particular broom thrown down on the floor, like the rigid corpse
of that lanky greengrocer's boy who, years ago,
showed me his big stiff cock behind the garden hedge.

Oh yes, sometimes I laugh. I hear my husky laughter rising,
not from my chest now, but far lower, from my feet, or lower still,
from beneath the earth. And I laugh. How senseless it all was,
without substance, permanence, purpose—wealth, wars, grudges,
reputations,
fine jewelry. Even my beauty.

What senseless tales,
of swans and Troys and loves and deeds of valor!

At sad evening parties
I met my former lovers again, with white beards,

white hair, distended bellies, as though they were already pregnant with their deaths; saw them, strangely voracious, wolf down roast kid, without a glance at the shoulder blade—but what was there to look at? a flat shadow filled it with tiny white stains.

As you know, I still held on to my former beauty as though by a miracle (though also with dyes, herbs, lotions, lemon juice, cucumber water). The one thing that scared me was seeing, in their faces, the passage of my own years too. Then I'd clench my stomach muscles, set my jaw in an artificial smile, as though I were shoring up, with one thin prop, two walls on the point of collapse.

So enclosed, tensed, taut—the fatigue of it, my God—tensed every moment, even sleeping, as though I were inside an icy suit of armor or a wooden body corset, or my very own Wooden Horse, treacherous, cramped, aware already of the futility of deceit and self-deceit, the futility of fame, the futility—and transience—of each victory.

A few months

ago,
on the death of my husband (months? or is it years?) I abandoned my Wooden Horse forever, down there in the stable, with his ancient nags,
for the spiders and scorpions to explore. I no longer dye my hair.

Great warts sprouted on my face. Coarse bristles appeared round my mouth—I can feel them. I don't look in the mirror—long, rough bristles, as though someone else has settled inside me, some malicious impertinent man, and his beard is pushing out through my skin. I let him be. What else can I do? I'm scared that if I get rid of him, he'd drag *me* off as well.

Don't go. Stay a little longer. I've so much time to talk. No one visits me any more. They were all in a hurry to go, I could see it in their eyes—all impatient for my death. Time drags slowly.

The slave-girls hate me. I hear them at night, opening drawers, helping themselves to lacework, jewelry, gold bars—who knows

if they've left me even one good dress for a special occasion or a single pair of shoes? They stole my keys, too, from under my pillow—I didn't stir, pretended to be asleep—they'd have got them some other way in the end. At least I'd rather they didn't know I know.

Yet without them what would become of me? "Patience, patience," I say, "patience," and even that's a tiny victory, when they're reading old letters from my admirers or the verses great poets devoted to me. They declaim them with crass pomposity, countless errors of emphasis, rhythm, accent, syllabic stress. I don't correct them. I pretend not to hear. At other times they take my black eyebrow pencil and draw giant moustaches on my statues, or adorn their heads with an antique helmet or a chamber pot. I watch them calmly. They get furious.

One day, when I felt a little better, I asked them—the first time in ages—to paint my face. They painted it. I went and found a mirror. They'd painted it green, with a black mouth. "Thank you," I told them, as though I'd seen nothing odd. They were laughing. One of them stripped naked in front of me, put on my golden robes, and then, barefoot, with those fat legs of hers, began to dance, sprang up on the table in a frenzy, danced, danced, curtsied, mimicking (I think) my own forgotten gestures. High up on her thigh I saw a bite mark made by strong, even, male teeth.

I watched them as though I were at the theater. No humiliation or distress or outrage—what was the point? I just kept whispering to myself, "One day we will die," or rather, "One day *you* will die," and that was an assured revenge and dread and consolation. I stared straight at everything, with an indescribable, impassive clarity, as though my eyes were independent of me; I stared at my own eyes, stuck there a yard in front of my face, like the panes of a distant window, behind which someone else sits watching what's going on in an unfamiliar street with cafés, camera shops, perfumeries, all closed,

and I had the sensation that a small fine crystal flask
had broken, and the scent had spilled in the dusty shop window.

Passers-by
stopped short uncertainly, sniffed the air, recalled something pleasant,
then disappeared beyond the pepper trees or the end of the road.

At moments I still catch a whiff of that perfume—remember it, rather;
isn't that odd? Things we normally call important have melted, are
gone—

Agamemnon's murder, the slaughter of Clytemnestra (they'd sent me
a fine necklace of hers from Mycenae, made up
of miniature golden masks, linked by rings put through
the upper part of their ears—I never wore it.) They are forgotten
though other things remain, unimportant, insignificant—I remember
one day
seeing a bird perched on a donkey's back, and that inexplicable
incident seemed to explain, if only for me, some mystery.

I still remember, as a child, on the banks of the Eurotas, by the warm
oleanders,
hearing the sound of a tree's bark peeling off; the fragments
fell softly into the water, sailed like triremes, drifted away,
and I waited, stubbornly, for an orange-striped black butterfly
to perch on a strip of bark, puzzled at moving while sitting still;
and it amused me to think that butterflies, for all their mastery
of air, don't know the first thing about water travel, or rowing. And it
came.

There are odd isolated moments, almost funny. One man
strolls out at noon with a basket on his head; this basket
completely obscures his face, it's as though he were headless, or
wearing
a marvellous eyeless, many-eyed mask. Another,
wandering in a reverie at nightfall, stumbles somewhere, curses,
turns back, searches, finds a small pebble, picks it up, kisses it. Only
then
does he remember to look around him. And slinks off, guiltily. A
woman

thrusts one hand into her pocket, finds nothing, pulls her hand out,
raises it, looks at it carefully, as though it were powdered with the dust
of the void.

A waiter has trapped a fly in his fist. He doesn't squash it.
Then a customer calls him, he's distracted, he opens his fist, the fly
buzzes out, alights on a glass. A scrap of paper drifts down the street
hesitantly, pausing often, without attracting attention
from anyone. That pleases it. But every so often it gives off
an odd rustling sound that belies its indifference, as though it were now
seeking
some incorruptible witness to its shy, secret progress. And all these
things
acquire a desolate, inexplicable beauty, a deep compassion
from our own strange and obscure gestures—don't they?

Everything else if gone, as though it never existed. Argos, Athens,
Sparta,
Corinth, Thebes, Sicyon—mere shadows of names. I pronounce them,
they sound like ruins
that collapsed still half-built. A pedigree dog, lost, stands outside
a cheap dairy's shop window. A passing girl eyes it;
it makes no response, its shadow spreads over the broad sidewalk.
I never learned the reason. I don't think there is one. All that remains
is this humiliating, forced (by whom?) gesture of approbation
as we nod in assent, as though greeting someone with incredible
servility, though nobody's passing, nobody's there.

I seem to recall that someone else told me, one evening, in a totally
colorless voice,
the events of my life. I began to nod off; inwardly I prayed
that he'd finally stop, that I'd be able to close my eyes,
to fall asleep. And while he was talking, to do something, hold sleep at
bay,
I counted, one by one, the strands of the fringe on my shawl, keeping
time
with a silly children's song for blindman's buff, until
all sense was lost from his story. But the sound remains—

shouts, thuds, creaks—the sound of silence, an odd wailing,
someone scratches the wall with his nails, scissors fall on the
floorboards.

Someone coughs (hand over his mouth, so as not to wake the other
person sleeping beside him—his death, perhaps), then stops. Afterward
silence comes spiralling back from an empty, covered well.

These nights I can hear the servants moving my heavy furniture,
hauling it downstairs—a mirror, held like a stretcher,
reflecting the worn plaster moldings on the ceiling; one panel
bangs on the banisters, but doesn't break. The old overcoat on its
hanger
lifts empty hands for a moment, then stuffs them back in its pockets.
The settees with their tiny castors squeak on the floor. I feel,
here, in my elbow, that scrape on the wall from the wardrobe's sharp
corner, or the corner
of the big carved dinner table. What will they *do* with them? "Bye now,"
I say
almost mechanically, as though bidding farewell to a guest who's still a
stranger. Only
that vague sound lingering in the passage, as though from the horns
of ruined master-huntsmen, amid the last spring rains, in a burnt-out
forest.

And really, such a mass of useless objects, gathered with such greed—
the whole place was cluttered up, we couldn't move, our knees
would bump into other knees, of wood, stone, or metal. Of course, we
badly need
to grow old enough to become just, to attain that gentle
impartiality, that sweet altruism in comparisons and judgments,
when our own part exists no longer save in this peace.

Ah yes, all those stupid battles, heroics, ambitions, arrogant gestures,
sacrifices, defeats, more defeats, more battles, for objects already
determined by others, in our absence. And men, quite innocent,
blinding themselves with hairpins, beating their heads
against that towering wall, well aware that the wall wouldn't collapse
or even splinter, yet at least trying to see through a crack

to a little blue, unshadowed by time and their shadow. And yet—who
knows—
maybe there, where someone holds out without hope, maybe there what
we call
human history is beginning, and the splendor of humankind,
amid rusty fetters and bones of oxen and horses,
amid ancient tripods on which a little bay still burns,
while its smoke rises fraying in the sunset like a golden fleece.

Stay a bit longer. Night's fallen. The golden fleece, yes. Oh, thinking
comes late to us women, it relaxes us somehow. But with men it's
different,
they never stop thinking—perhaps they're afraid, perhaps they don't
want
to look straight at their fear, recognize their exhaustion, rest—
no, into the dark they rush, vainglorious, cowardly, bustling. Their
clothes
always smell of smoke from some conflagration they've gone
through or past without noticing. They undress so quickly, throw
their clothes on the floor, sprawl on the bed. Yet even their very bodies
smell of smoke, it makes them drowsy. In the hair on their chests
I found, while they still slept, some small burnt leaves
or gray-black down from slaughtered birds. These I collected, laid
away in a casket—sole proof of this secret contact—I never
showed them to *them*, they would not have acknowledged them.

Oh, at certain moments, yes, they were handsome—when naked, for
instance, surrendered
to sleep, quite relaxed and open, with their great strong bodies
damp, slack, like brawling streams that have tumbled down
from the high hills to a peaceful plain, or like abandoned children. Then
I loved them, I really did, as though I'd borne them. I watched their long
eyelashes
and wanted to take them into myself to protect them, or in this way
to couple with their whole body. They slept. And such sleep compels
your respect, since it's so rare. These things too are gone. Forgotten.

It's not that my memory's lost—I still remember—just that memories
are bare of emotion, don't move us; are faceless, tranquil,

clear, to their bloodiest backwater. Only one
still keeps the air about it, can still breathe.

Late one afternoon,
surrounded by the unending cries of the wounded,
by old men's whispered curses and their amazement, amid
the stink of a common death that, from moment to moment,
gleamed on a shield or spearpoint or on the metope
of some neglected shrine or on a chariot wheel, I climbed alone
to the top of the high walls, and walked there.

Alone, completely alone,
between
Trojans and Achaeans, feeling the air mold my finespun
robe against me, caress my nipples, unclothe my entire body,
leaving it stark naked except for a broad silver band
that held my breasts up high—

so lovely, inviolate, tested,
while my two rival lovers were battling, and the outcome
of that interminable war was being settled—

I never saw
Paris' helmet strap severed, only a glitter of bronze,
a circular flash, as his opponent, enraged,
twisted it on his head. A dazzling nothing.

It wasn't worth watching
at all.

The result had been fixed in advance by divine decision, and Paris,
minus his dusty sandals, would shortly turn up in bed,
washed by the goddess's own hands, smiling awaiting me, maybe
wearing
a strip of pink sticking plaster to hide a sham wound in his side.

I saw nothing else; I hardly even heard their bloodthirsty war cries—
high on the wall as I was, above these mortals' heads, airy, sensual,
belonging to no one, needing no one, as though
I, in my self-containment, were the whole of love—released
from fear of death and time, with a white flower in my hair,
with a flower between my breasts, and one more in my mouth, to hide
my smile of freedom.

They could
have shot me from either side.

I offered an easy target,

strolling along the ramparts, clearly outlined
against the gold and crimson of the evening sky.

I kept my eyes shut
to make any hostile gesture by them easier—though knowing at heart
that no one would dare it. Their hands shook in wonder
at my beauty, my immortality—

(perhaps I can add, now, that I didn't
fear death, I felt it was so remote from me).

Then
I threw away the two flowers from my hair and breasts—the third
I still held in my mouth—threw one to each side of the wall
with a totally evenhanded gesture.

And then the men, inside and out,
hurled themselves one at another, foes and friends, to grab hold of
these flowers, to offer them to me—my own flowers. I saw
nothing else after that—only those bent backs, as though they all
were down on their knees on the ground, where the spilt blood was
drying in the sun—perhaps
they had trampled the flowers already.

I didn't see.
I waved,
stood on tiptoe, and vanished—letting
the third flower, too, flutter free from my lips as I went.

One thing's still left to me—a reward of a sort, a remote justification,
and perhaps
it really *does* survive, somewhere in the world—a momentary freedom,
illusory, too, of course—as a plaything of chance, of our ignorance. The
sculptors
tried, as I recall, to fashion the last statues made of me
in exactly that pose—the statues are still out there in the garden,
you'll have seen them as you came in. Sometimes (when the maids are in
a good mood,
and carry me across by the armpits to that windowseat),
I too can see them. They gleam in the sun. A white warmth
reaches up to here from their marble. I don't think about them any
more. After a little
this too exhausts me. I prefer to watch a stretch of the road
where two or three children are playing with a softball, or a teenage girl
lets down a rope with a basket from the balcony opposite.

Sometimes the slave-girls forget I'm there. They don't come and put me
back in bed,
so I stay there all night, watching an old bicycle, parked
in front of the lit-up window of a new confectioner's store,
until they switch off the lights, or I fall asleep on the window ledge.

Every so often
I imagine I'm wakened by a star gleaming in space
like saliva from an old man's open, toothless mouth.

Now

they have leisure to carry me to the window. I stay here in bed,
sitting or lying—that I can do. To pass the time
I take hold of my face—the face of a stranger—feel it, trace its contours,
measure hairs, warts, wrinkles—what's inside
this face of mine?

A sour taste rises in my throat—nausea and fear,
the fear (so stupid, my God) of maybe losing even this nausea, too. Stay
a bit longer—
there's a little light from the window, they'll have turned on the
streetlamp outside.

Would you care to ring the bell and have them bring you something? A
little cherry

or orange preserve—maybe there's something left in the big jars,
crystallized by now, solidified—that is, of course, if those gluttonous
slave-girls have left any. These last years I've become a solitary
sweet-eater—what else is there to do?

After Troy, our life in Sparta's
so dull, boring, provincial: shut up indoors all day
amid the piled-up booty of all those wars. And the memories,
faded and troublesome, creeping behind you, there in the mirror
when you comb your hair, or there in the kitchen, seeping out
with the rich steam from the cooking pots; and you hear in the boiling
water
a run of dactylic hexameters from that Third Rhapsody, while
somewhere close by, from a neighborhood henhouse, a cock crows
strangely.

You know, too well, the monotonous life we lead. Even the newspapers
are all alike, same shape, same size, same headlines—I no longer read
them. Now and again

there are flags on the balconies, national ceremonies, military parades
regular as clockwork toys—only the cavalry keeps a touch of the
impromptu,
the personal; because of their horses, maybe. They kicked up dust in
clouds,
we used to shut the windows. Afterward you'd sit there dusting, one by
one,
the vases, cups, picture frames, porcelain figurines, mirrors, sideboards.

I no longer went to these ceremonies. My husband would come back
from them all sweaty,
hurl himself, smacking his lips, at his food, chewing up with it
old boring glories, stale exhausted grudges. I used to contemplate
the buttons of his waistcoat, straining as though they'd burst—he'd
become very fat.
Under his chin a broad dark birthmark flushed and faded.

Then I'd take hold of my own chin, still eating abstractedly,
feeling inside my grasp the shifts of my lower jaw,
as though it was severed from my head, and I held it, naked, in my
palm.

Perhaps that's why I too grew fat. I don't know. Everyone looked
frightened.

I saw them, sometimes, through the window. They moved about
crabwise
as though limping a little, or with something hidden under one arm. In
the afternoon
bells tolled for a funeral. Beggars knocked on doors. In the distance
the maternity hospital's whitewashed facade, as twilight deepened,
looked whiter still,
more far off and incomprehensible. We lit the lamps quickly. I made
over
one of my old dresses. Later the sewing machine broke, and they took it
down to the basement, along with the old sentimental oleographs,
all commonplace mythical scenes—Anadyomenes, eagles and
Ganymedes.

One by one our old acquaintances departed. Correspondence dwindled
too.

Nothing, now, but a brief postcard on the odd feast day or birthday—a typical view of Taygetos, jagged peaks and a wide blue sky, a shot of the Eurotas, white pebbles and oleanders, or the ruins of Mistra amid its wild fig trees. But most frequent of all were telegrams of condolence. No replies ever came. Perhaps the recipient, too, had died meanwhile—we never discovered.

My husband no longer travelled, never opened a book. In his final years he'd become very edgy. He smoked constantly. At night he'd pace around in the big drawing room, wearing those frayed coffee brown slippers and his long nightgown. Every day, at the lunch table, he'd rehash Clytemnestra's treachery or the justified act of Orestes as though he were threatening someone. Who cared? I no longer listened to him—and yet when he died, I missed him a lot, I especially missed those stupid threats of his, just as though they'd precisely defined my immovable place in time, just as though they stopped me from aging.

Then I would dream of Odysseus, ageless too, with his smart three-cornered hat, putting off his return (man of many wiles!) with the most fantastic perils as an excuse, while he (supposedly shipwrecked) put himself in the hands now of a Circe, now of a Nausicaä, to scrape the barnacles off his chest, wash him with small bars of scented soap, kiss the wound on his thigh, rub him with oil.

I believe he too got home to Ithaca—that graceless fat Penelope fooled him, I'm pretty sure, back into wedlock with her web trick. Since then I've had no news; it well may be that the slaves tear up his letters, but what need of them now? The Symplegades have been moved somewhere else, more internal—you get the feeling they're softer, unmoving, more fearful than ever—they don't clash together now, just squeeze tight in thick black liquid from which no one escapes.

You can go now. It's dark. I feel drowsy, I want to close my eyes, to sleep, not to see either without or within, to forget the fear of sleep and the fear of waking. I can't do it. I jerk up, scared that I'll never wake again. I remain sleepless, listening to the snoring of maids from the drawing room, to the spiders on the walls, to the cockroaches in the kitchen, or the deep and heavy breathing of the dead—as though they're asleep, as though they've found some peace.

I miss my dead now, too. I missed them before. Going, going, gone.

Sometimes, past midnight, I hear from the road below the rhythmic clip-clop of horses, drawing a late wagon, as though returning from a dismal show in some tumbledown local theater with plaster fallen from the ceiling, with peeling walls, with a huge red faded curtain, down now, but shrunken from repeated washing, so that through the gap below it you can make out the bare feet of the stage manager or the electrician, maybe rolling up a forest backdrop before dimming the lights.

That crack remains lit up, though out in the pit chandeliers and applause have long since faded. In the air the breath of silence hangs heavy, and the hum of silence under the empty seats, along with sunflower seed husks and crumpled tickets, a button or two, a lace handkerchief, a twist of red string.

... And that scene on the walls of Troy—perhaps I reached back to the truth when I let fall from my lips—sometimes even now I try, lying here in bed, to fling my arms wide, to walk on tiptoe, to walk on air—the third flower—

She falls silent. Her head drops back. Perhaps she is asleep. Her visitor gets up. He does not say good night. It is now quite dark. As he goes out into the passage he sees the maids, ears glued to the wall, eavesdropping. They don't move an inch. He goes down the central staircase as though descending into a deep well, with a sense that he won't be able to find the front door, or any door. His clenched fingers are already searching for the door handle. He imagines his hands to be two birds gasping for air, though at the same time he knows that this image is not quite the

comforting one we normally invoke against vague fears. Suddenly he hears voices upstairs. Lights go on in the stairwell, along the corridor, in the rooms. He goes back up, confident now. The woman is sitting in bed with her elbow propped on the little zinc-topped table, her chin resting on the palm of her hand. The maids scurry in and out, screaming and shouting. Someone is telephoning in the corridor. Women from the neighborhood begin to arrive, keening, hiding objects under their skirts. More telephoning. The police are already on their way up. They send the maids and the neighbors away. The latter, however, have already had time to carry off the canaries in their cages, a number of exotic potted plants, a transistor radio, and an electric heater. One has got hold of a picture in a big gilt frame. They lay out the corpse on a bier. The police chief seals the house—"until the heirs are found," he says, though he knows very well that no heirs exist. The house will remain sealed for forty days, and after that its contents—or what's left of them—will be sold at auction and the proceeds turned over to the public treasury—"for the mortuary," it says on the catalogue. The laid-up car and its cover are removed. Suddenly everything vanishes. Absolute silence. Only he, the visitor, remains. He turns and looks. The moon has come out, shedding misty light on the statues in the garden—her statues standing there alone beside the trees, outside the sealed house. And a peaceful, seductive moon. Where will he go now?

KARLOVASI, SAMOS, MAY—AUGUST 1970

• PHAEDRA •

TO YANNIS TSAROUCHIS

... It's natural,

when the gods so will it, for mortal men to err.

EURIPIDES, *Hippolytus* 1433-34