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## WALLS

With no consideration, no pity, no shame,  
they have built walls around me, thick and high.  
And now I sit here feeling hopeless.  
I can't think of anything else: this fate gnaws my mind—  
because I had so much to do outside.  
When they were building the walls, how could I not have  
noticed!  
But I never heard the builders, not a sound.  
Imperceptibly they have closed me off from the outside  
world.

## AN OLD MAN

At the noisy end of the café, head bent  
over the table, an old man sits alone,  
a newspaper in front of him.

And in the miserable banality of old age  
he thinks how little he enjoyed the years  
when he had strength, eloquence, and looks.

He knows he's aged a lot: he sees it, feels it.  
Yet it seems he was young just yesterday.  
So brief an interval, so very brief.

And he thinks of Prudence, how it fooled him,  
how he always believed—what madness—  
that cheat who said: "Tomorrow. You have plenty of time."

He remembers impulses bridled, the joy  
he sacrificed. Every chance he lost  
now mocks his senseless caution.

But so much thinking, so much remembering  
makes the old man dizzy. He falls asleep,  
his head resting on the café table.

## THE HORSES OF ACHILLES

When they saw Patroklos dead  
—so brave and strong, so young—  
the horses of Achilles began to weep;  
their immortal nature was upset deeply  
by this work of death they had to look at.  
They reared their heads, tossed their long manes,  
beat the ground with their hooves, and mourned  
Patroklos, seeing him lifeless, destroyed,  
now mere flesh only, his spirit gone,  
defenseless, without breath,  
turned back from life to the great Nothingness.

Zeus saw the tears of those immortal horses and felt sorry.  
“At the wedding of Peleus,” he said,  
“I should not have acted so thoughtlessly.  
Better if we hadn’t given you as a gift,  
my unhappy horses. What business did you have down there,  
among pathetic human beings, the toys of fate.  
You are free of death, you will not get old,  
yet ephemeral disasters torment you.  
Men have caught you up in their misery.”  
But it was for the eternal disaster of death  
that those two gallant horses shed their tears.

## PRAYER

The sea engulfed a sailor in its depths.  
Unaware, his mother goes and lights  
a tall candle before the ikon of our Lady,  
praying for him to come back quickly, for the weather to be  
good—  
her ear cocked always to the wind.  
While she prays and supplicates,  
the ikon listens, solemn, sad,  
knowing the son she waits for never will come back.



## THE FUNERAL OF SARPEDON

Zeus mourns deeply:  
Patroklos has killed Sarpedon.  
Now Patroklos and the Achaians rush forward  
to snatch up the body, to dishonor it.

But Zeus does not tolerate that at all.  
Though he let his favorite child be killed—  
this the Law required—  
he will at least honor him after death.  
So he now sends Apollo down to the plain  
with instructions about how the body should be tended.

Apollo reverently raises the hero's body  
and carries it in sorrow to the river.  
He washes the dust and blood away,  
heals its terrible wounds so no trace is left,  
pours perfume of ambrosia over it,  
and dresses it in radiant Olympian robes.  
He bleaches the skin, and with a pearl comb  
combs out the jet black hair.  
He spreads and arranges the beautiful limbs.

Now he looks like a young king, a royal charioteer—  
twenty-five or twenty-six years old—  
resting himself after winning  
the prize in a famous race,  
his chariot all gold and his horses the fastest.

Having finished his task this way,  
Apollo calls for the two brothers,  
Sleep and Death, and orders them  
to take the body to Lykia, the rich country.

So the two brothers, Sleep and Death,  
set off on foot toward the rich country, Lykia;  
and when they reached the door  
of the king's palace,  
they handed over the honored body  
and then returned to their other labors and concerns.

And once the body was received in the palace  
the sad burial began, with processions and honors and dirges,  
with many libations from sacred vessels,  
with all pomp and circumstance.  
Then skilled workers from the city  
and celebrated craftsmen in stone  
came to make the tombstone and the tomb.

## CANDLES

Days to come stand in front of us  
like a row of lighted candles—  
golden, warm, and vivid candles.

Days gone by fall behind us,  
a gloomy line of snuffed-out candles;  
the nearest are smoking still,  
cold, melted, and bent.

I don't want to look at them: their shape saddens me,  
and it saddens me to remember their original light.  
I look ahead at my lighted candles.

I don't want to turn for fear of seeing, terrified,  
how quickly that dark line gets longer,  
how quickly the snuffed-out candles proliferate.

## THE FIRST STEP

The young poet Evmenis  
complained one day to Theocritos:  
“I have been writing for two years now  
and I have composed just one idyll.  
It’s my only completed work.  
I see, sadly, that the ladder of Poetry  
is tall, extremely tall;  
and from this first step I now stand on  
I will never climb any higher.”  
Theocritos replied: “Words like that  
are improper, blasphemous.  
Just to be on the first step  
should make you happy and proud.  
To have come this far is no small achievement:  
what you have done is a glorious thing.  
Even this first step  
is a long way above the ordinary world.  
To stand on this step  
you must be in your own right  
a member of the city of ideas.  
And it is a hard, unusual thing  
to be enrolled as a citizen of that city.  
Its councils are full of Legislators  
no charlatan can fool.  
To have come this far is no small achievement:  
what you have done already is a glorious thing.”

## THE SOULS OF OLD MEN

Inside their worn, tattered bodies  
dwell the souls of old men.  
How unhappy the poor things are  
and how bored by the pathetic life they live.  
How they tremble for fear of losing that life, and how much  
they love it, those befuddled and contradictory souls,  
sitting—half comic and half tragic—  
inside their old, threadbare skins.

CHE FECE . . . IL GRAN RIFIUTO

For some people the day comes  
when they have to declare the great Yes  
or the great No. It's clear at once who has the Yes  
ready within him; and saying it,

he goes forward in honor and self-assurance.  
He who refuses does not repent. Asked again,  
he would still say no. Yet that no—the right no—  
undermines him all his life.

## INTERRUPTION

Hasty and awkward creatures of the moment,  
it is we who interrupt the action of the gods.  
In the palaces of Eleusis and Phthia  
Demeter and Thetis initiate rituals  
over high flames and heavy smoke.  
But Metaneira always bursts in  
from the royal quarters, hair loose, terrified,  
and Peleus, scared, always intervenes.

## THE WINDOWS

In these dark rooms where I live out  
empty days, I circle back and forth  
trying to find the windows.  
It will be a great relief when a window opens.  
But the windows are not there to be found—  
or at least I cannot find them. And perhaps  
it is better that I don't find them.  
Perhaps the light will prove another tyranny.  
Who knows what new things it will expose?



## THERMOPYLAE

Honor to those who in the life they lead  
define and guard a Thermopylae.  
Never betraying what is right,  
consistent and just in all they do  
but showing pity also, and compassion;  
generous when they are rich, and when they are poor,  
still generous in small ways,  
still helping as much as they can;  
always speaking the truth,  
yet without hating those who lie.

And even more honor is due to them  
when they foresee (as many do foresee)  
that in the end Ephialtis will make his appearance,  
that the Medes will break through after all.

## UNFAITHFULNESS

*“So although we approve of many things in Homer, this we will not approve of . . . nor will we approve of Aeschylus when he makes Thetis say that Apollo sang at her wedding in celebration of her child:*

*that he would not know sickness, would live long,  
and that every blessing would be his;  
and he sang such praises that he rejoiced my heart.  
And I had hopes that the divine lips of Apollo,  
fluent with the art of prophecy, would not prove false.  
But he who proclaimed these things . . .  
                                                        he it is  
who killed my son . . .”*

Plato, *Republic*, II. 383

At the marriage of Thetis and Peleus  
Apollo stood up during the sumptuous wedding feast  
and blessed the bridal pair  
for the son who would come from their union.  
“Sickness will never visit him,” he said,  
“and his life will be a long one.”  
This pleased Thetis immensely:  
the words of Apollo, expert in prophecies,  
seemed to guarantee the security of her child.  
And when Achilles grew up  
and his beauty was the boast of Thessaly,  
Thetis remembered the god’s words.  
But one day elders arrived with the news  
that Achilles had been killed at Troy.  
Thetis tore her purple robes,  
pulled off her rings, her bracelets,  
and flung them to the ground.  
And in her grief, recalling that wedding scene,  
she asked what the wise Apollo was up to,  
where was this poet who holds forth

so eloquently at banquets, where was this prophet  
when they killed her son in his prime.  
And the elders answered that Apollo himself  
had gone down to Troy  
and together with the Trojans had killed her son.

## WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS

What are we waiting for, assembled in the forum?

The barbarians are due here today.

Why isn't anything happening in the senate?

Why do the senators sit there without legislating?

Because the barbarians are coming today.

What laws can the senators make now?

Once the barbarians are here, they'll do the legislating.

Why did our emperor get up so early,  
and why is he sitting at the city's main gate  
on his throne, in state, wearing the crown?

Because the barbarians are coming today  
and the emperor is waiting to receive their leader.

He has even prepared a scroll to give him,  
replete with titles, with imposing names.

Why have our two consuls and praetors come out today  
wearing their embroidered, their scarlet togas?  
Why have they put on bracelets with so many amethysts,  
and rings sparkling with magnificent emeralds?  
Why are they carrying elegant canes  
beautifully worked in silver and gold?

Because the barbarians are coming today  
and things like that dazzle the barbarians.

Why don't our distinguished orators come forward as usual  
to make their speeches, say what they have to say?

Because the barbarians are coming today  
and they're bored by rhetoric and public speaking.

Why this sudden restlessness, this confusion?  
(How serious people's faces have become.)  
Why are the streets and squares emptying so rapidly,  
everyone going home so lost in thought?

Because night has fallen and the barbarians have not come.  
And some who have just returned from the border say  
there are no barbarians any longer.

And now, what's going to happen to us without barbarians?  
They were, those people, a kind of solution.

## VOICES

Voices, loved and idealized,  
of those who have died, or of those  
lost for us like the dead.

Sometimes they speak to us in dreams;  
sometimes deep in thought the mind hears them.

And with their sound for a moment return  
sounds from our life's first poetry—  
like music at night, distant, fading away.

## LONGINGS

Like the beautiful bodies of those who died before they had  
aged,  
sadly shut away in a sumptuous mausoleum,  
roses by the head, jasmine at the feet—  
so appear the longings that have passed  
without being satisfied, not one of them granted  
a night of sensual pleasure, or one of its radiant mornings.

## TROJANS

Our efforts are those of men prone to disaster;  
our efforts are like those of the Trojans.  
We just begin to get somewhere,  
gain a little confidence,  
grow almost bold and hopeful,

when something always comes up to stop us:  
Achilles leaps out of the trench in front of us  
and terrifies us with his violent shouting.

Our efforts are like those of the Trojans.  
We think we'll change our luck  
by being resolute and daring,  
so we move outside ready to fight.

But when the great crisis comes,  
our boldness and resolution vanish;  
our spirit falters, paralyzed,  
and we scurry around the walls  
trying to save ourselves by running away.

Yet we're sure to fail. Up there,  
high on the walls, the dirge has already begun.  
They're mourning the memory, the aura of our days.  
Priam and Hecuba mourn for us bitterly.



## KING DIMITRIOS

*Not like a king but an actor he put  
on a gray cloak instead of his royal  
one and secretly went away.*

*Plutarch, Life of Dimitrios*

When the Macedonians deserted him  
and showed they preferred Pyrrhos,  
King Dimitrios (a noble soul) didn't behave  
—so they said—  
at all like a king.  
He took off his golden robes,  
threw away his purple buskins,  
and quickly dressing himself  
in simple clothes, he slipped out—  
just like an actor who,  
the play over,  
changes his costume and goes away.

## THE RETINUE OF DIONYSOS

Damon the craftsman (none better  
in the Peloponnese) is giving the last touches  
to his Retinue of Dionysos  
carved in Parian marble: the god leading  
in divine glory, with power in his stride;  
after him, Intemperance; and beside Intemperance,  
Intoxication pours out the satyrs' wine  
from an amphora wreathed in ivy;  
near them, Sweetwine, the delicate,  
eyes half-closed, soporific;  
and behind come the singers  
Tunemaker and Melody and Reveller—  
the last holding the honored processional torch  
which he never lets die—and then Ceremony, so modest.  
Damon carves all these. And as he works  
his thoughts turn now and then  
to the fee he's going to receive  
from the king of Syracuse:  
three talents, a large sum.  
Adding this to what he has already,  
he'll live grandly from now on, like a rich man,  
and—think of it—he'll be able to go into politics:  
he too in the Senate, he too in the Agora.

## MONOTONY

One monotonous day follows another  
equally monotonous. The same things  
will happen again, and then will happen again,  
the same moments will come and go.

A month passes by and brings another month.  
Easy to guess what lies ahead:  
all of yesterday's boredom.  
And tomorrow ends up no longer like tomorrow.

## THE FOOTSTEPS

Eagles of coral  
adorn the ebony bed  
where Nero lies fast asleep—  
callous, peaceful, happy,  
in the prime of his body's strength,  
in the fine vigor of youth.

But in the alabaster hall that holds  
the ancient shrine of the Aenobarbi  
how restless the household gods—  
they tremble, the little Lares,  
and try to hide their insignificant bodies.  
They've heard a terrible sound,  
a deadly sound coming up the stairs,  
iron footsteps that shake the staircase;  
and now faint with fear, the miserable Lares  
scramble to the back of the shrine,  
shoving each other and stumbling,  
one little god falling over another,  
because they know what kind of sound that is,  
know by now the footsteps of the Furies.

## THAT'S THE MAN

Unknown—a stranger in Antioch—the man from Edessa  
writes and writes. And at last, there,  
the final canto's done. That makes

eighty-three poems in all. But so much writing,  
so much versifying, the intense strain  
of phrasing in Greek, has worn the poet out,  
and now everything weighs down on him.

But a thought suddenly brings him out of his dejection:  
the sublime "That's the man"  
which Lucian once heard in his sleep.

## THE CITY

You said: "I'll go to another country, go to another shore,  
find another city better than this one.

Whatever I try to do is fated to turn out wrong  
and my heart lies buried as though it were something dead.  
How long can I let my mind moulder in this place?  
Wherever I turn, wherever I happen to look,  
I see the black ruins of my life, here,  
where I've spent so many years, wasted them, destroyed  
them totally."

You won't find a new country, won't find another shore.  
This city will always pursue you. You will walk  
the same streets, grow old in the same neighborhoods,  
will turn gray in these same houses.  
You will always end up in this city. Don't hope for things  
elsewhere:  
there is no ship for you, there is no road.  
As you've wasted your life here, in this small corner,  
you've destroyed it everywhere else in the world.

## THE SATRAPY

Too bad that, cut out as you are  
for grand and noble acts,  
this unfair fate of yours  
never offers encouragement, always denies you success;  
that cheap habits get in your way,  
pettiness, or indifference.  
And how terrible the day you give in  
(the day you let go and give in)  
and take the road for Susa  
and go to King Artaxerxes,  
who, well-disposed, gives you a place at his court  
and offers you satrapies and things like that—  
things you don't want at all,  
though, in despair, you accept them just the same.  
You long for something else, ache for other things:  
praise from the Demos and the Sophists,  
that hard-won, that priceless acclaim—  
the Agora, the Theatre, the Crowns of Laurel.  
You can't get any of these from Artaxerxes,  
you'll never find any of these in the satrapy,  
and without them, what kind of life will you live?

## THE IDES OF MARCH

Guard, O my soul, against pomp and glory.  
And if you cannot curb your ambitions,  
at least pursue them hesitantly, cautiously.  
And the higher you go,  
the more searching and careful you need to be.

And when you reach your summit, Caesar at last—  
when you assume the role of someone that famous—  
then be especially careful as you go out into the street,  
a conspicuous man of power with your retinue;  
and should a certain Artemidoros  
come up to you out of the crowd, bringing a letter,  
and say hurriedly: “Read this at once.  
There are things in it important for you to see,”  
be sure to stop; be sure to postpone  
all talk or business; be sure to brush off  
all those who salute and bow to you  
(they can be seen later); let even  
the Senate itself wait—and find out immediately  
what grave message Artemidoros has for you.



## THINGS ENDED

Possessed by fear and suspicion,  
mind agitated, eyes alarmed,  
we desperately invent ways out,  
plan how to avoid the inevitable  
danger that threatens us so terribly.  
Yet we're mistaken, that's not the danger ahead:  
the information was false  
(or we didn't hear it, or didn't get it right).  
Another disaster, one we never imagined,  
suddenly, violently, descends upon us,  
and finding us unprepared—there's no time left—  
sweeps us away.

## SCULPTOR OF TYANA

As you'll have heard, I'm no beginner.  
I've handled a lot of stone in my time,  
and in my own country, Tyana, I'm pretty well known.  
Actually, senators here have also commissioned  
a number of statues from me.

Let me show you  
a few of them. Notice this Rhea:  
reverential, all fortitude, very old.  
Notice Pompey. And Marius here,  
and Paulus Aemilius, and Scipio Africanus.  
The likeness as close as I could make it.  
And Patroklos (I still have to touch him up a bit).  
Near those pieces of yellowish marble there  
stands Kaisarion.

And for some time now I've been busy  
working on a Poseidon. I'm studying  
his horses in particular: how to shape them exactly.  
They have to be made so light  
that it's clear their bodies, their legs,  
are not touching the earth but galloping over water.

But here's my favorite work,  
wrought with the utmost care and feeling.  
This one—it was a summer day, very hot,  
and my mind rose to ideal things—  
this one came to me in a vision, this young Hermes.

*(continued...)*

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