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Mythistorema

1

The angel –
three years we waited for him, attention riveted,
closely scanning
the pines the shore the stars.
One with the blade of the plough or the ship's keel
we were searching to find once more the first seed
so that the age-old drama could begin again.

We returned to our homes broken,
limbs incapable, mouths cracked
by the taste of rust and brine.
When we woke we travelled towards the north, strangers
plunged into mist by the immaculate wings of swans that
wounded us.
On winter nights the strong wind from the east maddened
us,
in the summers we were lost in the agony of days that
couldn't die.

We brought back
these carved reliefs of a humble art.

4 MYTHISTOREMA

2

Still one more well inside a cave.

It used to be easy for us to draw up idols and ornaments
to please those friends who still remained loyal to us.

The ropes have broken; only the grooves on the well's lip
remind us of our past happiness:

the fingers on the rim, as the poet put it.

The fingers feel the coolness of the stone a little,

then the body's fever prevails over it

and the cave stakes its soul and loses it

every moment, full of silence, without a drop of water.

3

Remember the baths where you were murdered

I woke with this marble head in my hands;
it exhausts my elbows and I don't know where to put it
down.

It was falling into the dream as I was coming out of the
dream
so our life became one and it will be very difficult for it to
separate again.

I look at the eyes: neither open nor closed
I speak to the mouth which keeps trying to speak
I hold the cheeks which have broken through the skin.
That's all I'm able to do.

My hands disappear and come towards me
mutilated.

6 MYTHISTOREMA

4

Argonauts

And a soul
if it is to know itself
must look
into its own soul:
the stranger and enemy, we've seen him in the mirror.

They were good, the companions, they didn't complain
about the work or the thirst or the frost,
they had the bearing of trees and waves
that accept the wind and the rain
accept the night and the sun
without changing in the midst of change.
They were fine, whole days
they sweated at the oars with lowered eyes
breathing in rhythm
and their blood reddened a submissive skin.
Sometimes they sang, with lowered eyes
as we were passing the deserted island with the Barbary figs
to the west, beyond the cape of the dogs
that bark.

If it is to know itself, they said
it must look into its own soul, they said
and the oars struck the sea's gold
in the sunset.

We went past many capes many islands the sea
leading to another sea, gulls and seals.
Sometimes disconsolate women wept
lamenting their lost children
and others frantic sought Alexander the Great
and glories buried in the depths of Asia.

We moored on shores full of night-scents,
the birds singing, with waters that left on the hands
the memory of a great happiness.
But the voyages did not end.
Their souls became one with the oars and the oarlocks
with the solemn face of the prow
with the rudder's wake
with the water that shattered their image.
The companions died one by one,
with lowered eyes. Their oars
mark the place where they sleep on the shore.

No one remembers them. Justice.

8 MYTHISTOREMA

5

We didn't know them

deep down it was hope that said
we'd known them since early childhood.
We saw them perhaps twice and then they took to the ships:
cargoes of coal, cargoes of grain, and our friends
lost beyond the ocean forever.
Dawn finds us beside the tired lamp
drawing on paper, awkwardly, painfully,
ships mermaids or sea shells;
at dusk we go down to the river
because it shows us the way to the sea;
and we spend the nights in cellars that smell of tar.

Our friends have left us

perhaps we never saw them, perhaps
we met them when sleep
still brought us close to the breathing wave
perhaps we search for them because we search for the other
life,
beyond the statues.

6

M. R.

The garden with its fountains in the rain
you will see only from behind the clouded glass
of the low window. Your room
will be lit only by the flames from the fireplace
and sometimes the distant lightning will reveal
the wrinkles on your forehead, my old Friend.

The garden with the fountains that in your hands
was a rhythm of the other life, beyond the broken
statues and the tragic columns
and a dance among the oleanders
near the new quarries –
misty glass will have cut it off from your life.
You won't breathe; earth and the sap of the trees
will spring from your memory to strike
this window struck by rain
from the outside world.

10 MYTHISTOREMA

7

South wind

Westward the sea merges with a mountain range.
From our left the south wind blows and drives us mad,
the kind of wind that strips bones of their flesh.
Our house among pines and carobs.
Large windows. Large tables
for writing you the letters we've been writing
so many months now, dropping them
into the space between us in order to fill it up.

Star of dawn, when you lowered your eyes
our hours were sweeter than oil
on a wound, more joyful than cold water
to the palate, more peaceful than a swan's wings.
You held our life in the palm of your hand.
After the bitter bread of exile,
at night if we remain in front of the white wall
your voice approaches us like the hope of fire;
and again this wind hones
a razor against our nerves.

Each of us writes you the same thing
and each falls silent in the other's presence,
watching, each of us, the same world separately
the light and darkness on the mountain range
and you.
Who will lift this sorrow from our hearts?
Yesterday evening a heavy rain and again today
the covered sky burdens us. Our thoughts –
like the pine needles of yesterday's downpour

bunched up and useless in front of our doorway –
would build a collapsing tower.

Among these decimated villages
on this promontory, open to the south wind
with the mountain range in front of us hiding you,
who will appraise for us the sentence to oblivion?
Who will accept our offering, at this close of autumn?

12 MYTHISTOREMA

8

What are they after, our souls, travelling
on the decks of decayed ships
crowded in with sallow women and crying babies
unable to forget themselves either with the flying fish
or with the stars that the masts point out at their tips;
grated by gramophone records
committed to non-existent pilgrimages unwillingly
murmuring broken thoughts from foreign languages.

What are they after, our souls, travelling
on rotten brine-soaked timbers
from harbour to harbour?

Shifting broken stones, breathing in
the pine's coolness with greater difficulty each day,
swimming in the waters of this sea
and of that sea,
without the sense of touch
without men
in a country that is no longer ours
nor yours.

We knew that the islands were beautiful
somewhere round about here where we grope,
slightly lower down or slightly higher up,
a tiny space.

The harbour is old, I can't wait any longer
for the friend who left for the island with the pine trees
for the friend who left for the island with the plane trees
for the friend who left for the open sea.
I stroke the rusted cannons, I stroke the oars
so that my body may revive and decide.
The sails give off only the smell
of salt from the other storm.

If I chose to remain alone, what I longed for
was solitude, not this kind of waiting,
my soul shattered on the horizon,
these lines, these colours, this silence.

The night's stars take me back to Odysseus,
to his anticipation of the dead among the asphodels.
When we moored here we hoped to find among the
asphodels
the gorge that knew the wounded Adonis.

14 MYTHISTOREMA

10

Our country is closed in, all mountains
that day and night have the low sky as their roof.
We have no rivers, we have no wells, we have no springs,
only a few cisterns – and these empty – that echo, and that
we worship.

A stagnant hollow sound, the same as our loneliness
the same as our love, the same as our bodies.
We find it strange that once we were able to build
our houses, huts and sheep-folds.
And our marriages, the cool coronals and the fingers,
become enigmas inexplicable to our soul.
How were our children born, how did they grow strong?

Our country is closed in. The two black Symplegades
close it in. When we go down
to the harbours on Sunday to breathe freely
we see, lit in the sunset,
the broken planks from voyages that never ended,
bodies that no longer know how to love.

11

Sometimes your blood froze like the moon
in the limitless night your blood
spread its white wings over
the black rocks, the shapes of trees and houses,
with a little light from our childhood years.

16 MYTHISTOREMA

12

Bottle in the sea

Three rocks, a few burnt pines, a lone chapel
and farther above
the same landscape repeated starts again:
three rocks in the shape of a gateway, rusted,
a few burnt pines, black and yellow,
and a square hut buried in whitewash;
and still farther above, many times over,
the same landscape recurs level after level
to the horizon, to the twilit sky.

Here we moored the ship to splice the broken oars,
to drink water and to sleep.
The sea that embittered us is deep and unexplored
and unfolds a boundless calm.
Here among the pebbles we found a coin
and threw dice for it.
The youngest won it and disappeared.

We put to sea again with our broken oars.

Hydra

Dolphins banners and the sound of cannons.
The sea once so bitter to your soul
bore the many-coloured and glittering ships
it swayed, rolled and tossed them, all blue with white wings,
once so bitter to your soul
now full of colours in the sun.

White sails and sunlight and wet oars
struck with a rhythm of drums on stilled waves.

Your eyes, watching, would be beautiful,
your arms, reaching out, would glow,
your lips would come alive, as they used to,
at such a miracle:
that's what you were looking for
 what were you looking for in front of ashes
or in the rain in the fog in the wind
even when the lights were growing dim
and the city was sinking and on the stone pavement
the Nazarene showed you his heart,
what were you looking for? why don't you come? what
 were you looking for?

18 MYTHISTOREMA

14

Three red pigeons in the light
inscribing our fate in the light
with colours and gestures of people
we once loved.

15

Quid πλατανῶν opacissimus?

Sleep wrapped you in green leaves like a tree
you breathed like a tree in the quiet light
in the limpid spring I looked at your face:
eyelids closed, eyelashes brushing the water.
In the soft grass my fingers found your fingers
I held your pulse a moment
and felt elsewhere your heart's pain.

Under the plane tree, near the water, among laurel
sleep moved you and scattered you
around me, near me, without my being able to touch the
 whole of you –
one as you were with your silence;
seeing your shadow grow and diminish,
lose itself in the other shadows, in the other
world that let you go yet held you back.

The life that they gave us to live, we lived.
Pity those who wait with such patience
lost in the black laurel under the heavy plane trees
and those, alone, who speak to cisterns and wells
and drown in the voice's circles.
Pity the companion who shared our privation and our sweat
and plunged into the sun like a crow beyond the ruins,
without hope of enjoying our reward.

Give us, outside sleep, serenity.

The name is Orestes

On the track, once more on the track, on the track,
how many times around, how many blood-stained laps,
 how many black
rows; the people who watch me,
who watched me when, in the chariot,
I raised my hand glorious, and they roared triumphantly.

The froth of the horses strikes me, when will the horses tire?
The axle creaks, the axle burns, when will the axle burst
 into flame?
When will the reins break, when will the hooves
tread flush on the ground
on the soft grass, among the poppies
where, in the spring, you picked a daisy.
They were lovely, your eyes, but you didn't know where
 to look
nor did I know where to look, I, without a country,
I who go on struggling here, how many times around?
and I feel my knees give way over the axle
over the wheels, over the wild track
knees buckle easily when the gods so will it,
no one can escape, what use is strength, you can't
escape the sea that cradled you and that you search for
at this time of trial, with the horses panting,
with the reeds that used to sing in autumn to the Lydian
 mode
the sea you cannot find no matter how you run
no matter how you circle past the black, bored Eumenides,
unforgiven.

17

Astyanax

Now that you are leaving, take the boy with you as well,
the boy who saw the light under that plane tree,
one day when trumpets resounded and weapons shone
and the sweating horses
bent to the trough to touch with wet nostrils
the green surface of the water.

The olive trees with the wrinkles of our fathers
the rocks with the wisdom of our fathers
and our brother's blood alive on the earth
were a vital joy, a rich pattern
for the souls who knew their prayer.

Now that you are leaving, now that the day of payment
dawns, now that no one knows
whom he will kill and how he will die,
take with you the boy who saw the light
under the leaves of that plane tree
and teach him to study the trees.

22 MYTHISTOREMA

18

I regret having let a broad river slip through my fingers
without drinking a single drop.
Now I'm sinking into the stone.
A small pine tree in the red soil
is all the company I have.
Whatever I loved vanished with the houses
that were new last summer
and crumbled in the winds of autumn.

19

Even if the wind blows it doesn't cool us
and the shade is meagre under the cypress trees
and all around slopes ascending to the mountains;

they're a burden for us
the friends who no longer know how to die.

24 MYTHISTOREMA

20

In my breast the wound opens again
when the stars descend and become kin to my body
when silence falls under the footsteps of men.

These stones sinking into time, how far will they drag me
with them?

The sea, the sea, who will be able to drain it dry?
I see the hands beckon each dawn to the vulture and the
hawk

bound as I am to the rock that suffering has made mine,
I see the trees breathing the black serenity of the dead
and then the smiles, so static, of the statues.

21

We who set out on this pilgrimage
looked at the broken statues
became distracted and said that life is not so easily lost
that death has unexplored paths
and its own particular justice;

that while we, still upright on our feet, are dying,
affiliated in stone
united in hardness and weakness,
the ancient dead have escaped the circle and risen again
and smile in a strange silence.

So very much having passed before our eyes
that even our eyes saw nothing, but beyond
and behind was memory like the white sheet one night in an
enclosure
where we saw strange visions, even stranger than you,
pass by and vanish into the motionless foliage of a pepper
tree;

having known this fate of ours so well
wandering among broken stones, three or six thousand years
searching in collapsed buildings that might have been our
homes
trying to remember dates and heroic deeds:
will we be able?

having been bound and scattered,
having struggled, as they said, with non-existent difficulties
lost, then finding again a road full of blind regiments
sinking in marshes and in the lake of Marathon,
will we be able to die as we should?

23

A little farther

we will see the almond trees blossoming

the marble gleaming in the sun

the sea breaking into waves

a little farther,

let us rise a little higher.

Here end the works of the sea, the works of love.
Those who will some day live here where we end –
should the blood happen to darken in their memory and
overflow –
let them not forget us, the weak souls among the asphodels,
let them turn the heads of the victims towards Erebus:

We who had nothing will school them in serenity.

December 1933–December 1934

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