

Πάνω σ' έναν ξένο στίχο¹

Στὴν Ἑλλάδα, Χριστούγεννα 1931

Εὐτυχισμένος ποὺ ἔκανε τὸ ταξίδι τοῦ Ὀδυσσεά.

Εὐτυχισμένος ἂν στὸ ξεκίνημα, ἔνιωθε γερὴ τὴν ἀρματωσιὰ μιᾶς ἀγάπης, ἀπλωμένη μέσα στὸ κορμί του, σὰν τὶς φλέβες ὅπου βουίζει τὸ αἷμα.

Μιᾶς ἀγάπης μὲ ἀκατέλυτο ρυθμό, ἀκατανίκητης σὰν τὴ μουσικὴ καὶ παντοτινῆς γιατί γεννήθηκε ὅταν γεννηθήκαμε καὶ σὰν πεθαίνουμε, ἂν πεθαίνει, δὲν τὸ ξέρουμε οὔτε ἐμεῖς οὔτε ἄλλος κανεῖς.

Παρακαλῶ τὸ θεὸ νὰ μὲ συντρέξει νὰ πῶ, σὲ μιὰ στιγμή μεγάλης εὐδαιμονίας, ποῖα εἶναι αὐτὴ ἡ ἀγάπη·

κάθομαι κάποτε τριγυρισμένος ἀπὸ τὴν ξενιτιά, κι ἀκούω τὸ μακρινὸ βούισμά της, σὰν τὸν ἀχὸ τῆς θάλασσας ποὺ ἔσμιξε μὲ τὸ ἀνεξήγητο δρολάπι.

Καὶ παρουσιάζεται μπροστά μου, πάλι καὶ πάλι, τὸ φάντασμα τοῦ Ὀδυσσεά, μὲ μάτια κοκκινισμένα ἀπὸ τοῦ κυμάτου τὴν ἀρμύρα

¹ Ἀπὸ τὸ *Τετράδιο Γυμνασμάτων, Α΄* (1928-1937) (1940)

κι ἀπὸ τὸ μεστωμένο πόθο νὰ ξαναδεῖ τὸν καπνὸ ποὺ βγαίνει ἀπὸ τὴ
ζεστασιὰ τοῦ σπιτιοῦ του καὶ τὸ σκυλί του ποὺ γέρασε
προσμένοντας στὴ θύρα.

Στέκεται μεγάλος, ψιθυρίζοντας ἀνάμεσα στ' ἀσπρισμένα του γένια,
λόγια τῆς γλώσσας μας, ὅπως τὴ μιλοῦσαν πρὶν τρεῖς χιλιάδες
χρόνια.

Ἄπλώνει μία παλάμη ροζιασμένη ἀπὸ τὰ σκοινιά καὶ τὸ δοιάκι, μὲ
δέρμα δουλεμένο ἀπὸ τὸ ξεροβόρι ἀπὸ τὴν κάψα κι ἀπὸ τὰ
χιόνια.

Θᾶ ἄλεγε πὼς θέλει νὰ διώξει τὸν ὑπεράνθρωπο Κύκλωπα ποὺ βλέπει
μ' ἓνα μάτι, τὶς Σειρήνες ποὺ σὰν τὶς ἀκούσεις ξεχνᾷς, τὴ Σκύλλα
καὶ τὴ Χάρυβδη ἀπ' ἀνάμεσό μας·

τόσο περίπλοκα τέρατα, ποὺ δὲν μᾶς ἀφήνουν νὰ στοχαστοῦμε πὼς
ἦταν κι αὐτὸς ἓνας ἄνθρωπος ποὺ πάλεψε μέσα στὸν κόσμον, μὲ
τὴν ψυχὴ καὶ τὸ σῶμα.

Εἶναι ὁ μεγάλος Ὀδυσσεύς· ἐκεῖνος ποὺ εἶπε νὰ γίνῃ τὸ ξύλινο ἄλογο
καὶ οἱ Ἄχαιοι κερδίσανε τὴν Τροία.

Φαντάζομαι πὼς ἔρχεται νὰ μ' ἀρμηνέψῃ πὼς νὰ φτιάξω κι ἐγὼ ἓνα
ξύλινο ἄλογο γιὰ νὰ κερδίσω τὴ δική μου Τροία.

Γιατὶ μιᾶ ταπεινὰ καὶ μὲ γαλήνη, χωρὶς προσπάθεια, λὲς μὲ γνωρίζει
σὰν πατέρας

εἶτε σὰν κάτι γέρους θαλασσινούς, ποὺ ἀκουμπισμένοι στὰ δίχτυα
τους, τὴν ὥρα ποὺ χειμώνιαζε καὶ θύμωνε ὁ ἀγέρας,

μοῦ λέγανε, στὰ παιδικὰ μου χρόνια, τὸ τραγούδι τοῦ Ἐρωτόκριτου, μὲ
τὰ δάκρυα στὰ μάτια·

τότες ποὺ τρόμαζα μέσα στὸν ὕπνο μου ἀκούγοντας τὴν ἀντίδικη μοίρα
τῆς Ἀρετῆς νὰ κατεβαίνει τὰ μαρμαρένια σκαλοπάτια.

Μοῦ λέει τὸ δύσκολο πόνος νὰ νιώθεις τὰ πανιὰ τοῦ карабиоῦ σου
φουσκωμένα ἀπὸ τὴ θύμηση καὶ τὴν ψυχὴ σου νὰ γίνεται τιμόνι.

Καὶ νὰ ἴσαι μόνος, σκοτεινὸς μέσα στὴ νύχτα καὶ ἀκυβέρνητος σὰν τ'
ἄχερο στ' ἁλώνι.

Τὴν πίκρα νὰ βλέπεις τοὺς συντρόφους σου καταποντισμένους μέσα
στὰ στοιχεῖα, σκορπισμένους: ἕναν-ἕναν.

Καὶ πόσο παράξενα ἀντρειεύεσαι μιλώντας μὲ τοὺς πεθαμένους, ὅταν
δὲ φτάνουν πιά οἱ ζωντανοὶ ποὺ σοῦ ἀπομέναν.

Μιᾶ... βλέπω ἀκόμη τὰ χέρια του ποὺ ξέραν νὰ δοκιμάσουν ἂν ἦταν
καλὰ σκαλισμένα στὴν πλώρη ἢ γοργόνα
νὰ μοῦ χαρίζουν τὴν ἀκύμαντη γαλάζια θάλασσα μέσα στὴν καρδιὰ τοῦ
χειμῶνα.

Reflections on a foreign line of verse²

For Elli, Christmas 1931

Fortunate he who's made the voyage of Odysseus.

Fortunate if on setting out he's felt the rigging of a love strong in his
body, spreading there like veins where the blood throbs.

A love of indissoluble rhythm, unconquerable like music and endless
because it was born when we were born and when we die
whether it dies too neither we know nor does anyone else.

I ask God to help me say, at some moment of great happiness, what that
love is;
sometimes when I sit surrounded by exile I hear its distant murmur like
the sound of sea struck by an inexplicable hurricane.

And again and again the shade of Odysseus appears before me, his eyes
red from the waves' salt,
from his ripe longing to see once more the smoke ascending from his
warm hearth and the dog grown old waiting by the door

A large man, whispering through his whitened beard words in our
language spoken as it was three thousand years ago.

² From *Book of Exercises, I (1928-1937)* (1940). Translation by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard.

He extends a palm calloused by the ropes and the tiller, his skin weathered by the dry north wind, by heat and snow.

It's as if he wants to expel from among us the superhuman one-eyed Cyclops, the Sirens who make you forget with their song, Scylla and Charybdis:

so many complex monsters that prevent us from remembering that he too was a man struggling in the world with soul and body.

He is the mighty Odysseus: he who proposed the wooden horse with which the Achaeans captured Troy.

I imagine he's coming to tell me how I too may build a wooden horse to capture my own Troy.

Because he speaks humbly and calmly, without effort, as though he were my father

or certain old sailors of my childhood who, leaning on their nets with winter coming on and the wind raging,

used to recite, with tears in their eyes, the song of Erotocritos;

it was then I would shudder in my sleep at the unjust fate of Aretousa descending the marble steps.

He tells me of the harsh pain you feel when the ship's sails swell with
memory and your soul becomes a rudder;
of being alone, dark in the night, and helpless as chaff on the threshing
floor;

of the bitterness of seeing your companions one by one pulled down
into the elements and scattered;
and of how strangely you gain strength conversing with the dead when
the living who remain are no longer enough.

He speaks . . . I still see his hands that knew how to judge the carving of
the mermaid at the prow
presenting me the waveless blue sea in the heart of winter.

Ἄστυάναξ

Τώρα πού θὰ φύγεις πάρε μαζί σου καὶ τὸ παιδί
 πού εἶδε τὸ φῶς κάτω ἀπὸ ἐκεῖνο τὸ πλατάνι,
 μιὰ μέρα πού ἀντηχοῦσαν σάλπιγγες καὶ ἔλαμπαν ὄπλα
 καὶ τ' ἄλογα ἰδρωμένα σκύβανε ν' ἀγγίξουν
 τὴν πράσινη ἐπιφάνεια τοῦ νεροῦ
 στὴ γούρνα μὲ τὰ ὑγρά τους τὰ ρουθούνια.

Οἱ ἐλιές μὲ τὶς ρυτίδες τῶν γονιῶν μας
 τὰ βράχια μὲ τὴ γνώση τῶν γονιῶν μας
 καὶ τὸ αἷμα τοῦ ἀδερφοῦ μας ζωντανὸ στὸ χῶμα
 ἦτανε μία γερὴ χαρὰ μία πλούσια τάξη
 γιὰ τὶς ψυχές πού γνώριζαν τὴν προσευχή τους.

Τώρα πού θὰ φύγεις, τώρα πού ἡ μέρα τῆς πληρωμῆς
 χαράζει, τώρα πού κανεὶς δὲν ξέρει
 ποιὸν θὰ σκοτώσει καὶ πῶς θὰ τελειώσει,
 πάρε μαζί σου τὸ παιδί πού εἶδε τὸ φῶς
 κάτω ἀπ' τὰ φύλλα ἐκείνου τοῦ πλατάνου
 καὶ μάθε του νὰ μελετᾷ τὰ δέντρα.

³ Από το *Μυθιστόρημα* (1935).

XVII⁴

*Astyanax*⁵

Now that you are leaving, take along with you also the child
that saw the light beneath the plane-tree yonder,
on a day when trumpets sounded and weapons flashed
and sweating horses bent down to touch
the pale-green surface of the water
in the trough with their moist nostrils.

The olive-trees that bore the wrinkles of our forefathers
the rocks that bore the wisdom of our forefathers
our brother's life-blood spilt upon the earth –
these things were a healthy joy, a rich array
to those souls that knew how to say their prayers.

Now that you are leaving, now that the day of reckoning
is dawning, now that no one knows
whom he will kill and how he will die,
take along with you the child that saw the light
beneath the leaves of yonder plane-tree
and instruct him in the lore of trees.

⁴ From *Novel* (1935). Translation by Roderick Beaton (George Seferis, *Novel and Other Poems*, Aiora Press, 2016).

⁵ The young son of Hector and Andromache, and potential heir to the throne of Troy, put to death by the victorious Greeks at the end of the Trojan War.

Ἔγκωμη⁶

Ἦταν πλατύς ὁ κάμπος καὶ στρωτός· ἀπὸ μακριὰ φαινόνταν
τὸ γύρισμα χεριῶν ποὺ σκάβαν.

Στὸν οὐρανὸ τὰ σύννεφα πολλὲς καμπύλες, κάπου-κάπου
μιὰ σάλπιγγα χρυσὴ καὶ ρόδινη· τὸ δεῖλι.

Στὸ λιγοστὸ χορτάρι καὶ στ' ἀγκάθια τριγυρίζαν
ψιλὲς ἀποβροχάρισσες ἀνάσες· θά 'χε βρέξει
πέρα στὶς ἄκρες τὰ βουνὰ ποὺ ἔπαιρναν χρῶμα.

Κι ἐγὼ προχώρεσα πρὸς τοὺς ἀνθρώπους ποὺ δουλεύαν,
γυναῖκες κι ἄντρες μὲ τ' ἀξίνια σὲ χαντάκια.

Ἦταν μία πολιτεία παλιά· τειχιὰ δρόμοι καὶ σπίτια
ξεχώριζαν σὰν πετρωμένοι μυῶνες κυκλώπων,
ἢ ἀνατομία μιᾶς ξοδεμένης δύναμης κάτω ἀπ' τὸ μάτι
τοῦ ἀρχαιολόγου τοῦ ναρκοδότη ἢ τοῦ χειρουργοῦ.
φαντάσματα καὶ ὑφάσματα, χλιδὴ καὶ χεῖλια, χωνεμένα
καὶ τὰ παραπετάσματα τοῦ πόνου διάπλατα ἀνοιχτά
ἀφήνοντας νὰ φαίνεται γυμνὸς κι ἀδιάφορος ὁ τάφος.

Κι ἀνάβλεψα πρὸς τοὺς ἀνθρώπους ποὺ δουλεύαν
τοὺς τεντωμένους ὠμούς καὶ τὰ μπράτσα ποὺ χτυποῦσαν

⁶ Ἀπὸ τὸ *Ἡμερολόγιο Καταστροφῆς*, Γ' (1955).

μ' ἓνα ρυθμὸ βαρὺ καὶ γρήγορο τούτη τὴ νέκρα
σὰ νὰ περνοῦσε στὰ χαλάσματα ὁ τροχὸς τῆς μοίρας.
Ἐξαφνα περπατοῦσα καὶ δὲν περπατοῦσα
κοίταζα τὰ πετούμενα πουλιά, κι εἶταν μαρμαρωμένα
κοίταζα τὸν αἰθέρα τ' οὐρανοῦ, κι εἶτανε θαμπωμένος
κοίταζα τὰ κορμιὰ πού πολεμοῦσαν, κι εἶχαν μείνει
κι' ἀνάμεσό τους ἓνα πρόσωπο τὸ φῶς ν' ἀνηφορίζει.
Τὰ μαλλιά μαῦρα χύνουνταν στὴν τραχηλιά, τὰ φρύδια
εἶχανε τὸ φτερούγισμα τῆς χελιδόνας, τὰ ρουθούνια
καμαρωτὰ πάνω ἀπ' τὰ χεῖλια, καὶ τὸ σῶμα
ἔβγαινε ἀπὸ τὸ χεροπάλεμα ξεγυμνωμένο
μὲ τ' ἄγουρα βυζιὰ τῆς ὀδηγήτρας,
χορὸς ἀκίνητος.

Κι ἐγὼ χαμήλωσα τὰ μάτια μου τριγύρω:
κορίτσια ζύμωναν, καὶ ζύμη δὲν ἀγγίζαν
γυναῖκες γνέθανε, τ' ἀδράχτια δὲ γυρίζαν
ἄρνια ποτίζουνταν, κι ἡ γλῶσσα τους στεκόταν
πάνω ἀπὸ πράσινα νερὰ πού ἔμοιαζαν κοιμισμένα
κι ὁ ζευγᾶς ἔμενε μ' ἀνάερη τὴ βουκέντρα.
Καὶ ξανακοίταξα τὸ σῶμα ἐκεῖνο ν' ἀνεβαίνει·
εἶχανε μαζευτεῖ πολλοί, μερμήγκια,
καὶ τὴ χτυποῦσαν μὲ κοντάρια καὶ δὲν τὴ λαβῶναν.
Τώρα ἡ κοιλιά της ἔλαμπε σὰν τὸ φεγγάρι

καὶ πίστευα πῶς ὁ οὐρανὸς ἦταν ἡ μήτρα
ποῦ τὴν ἐγέννησε καὶ τὴν ξανάπαιρνε, μάνα καὶ βρέφος.
Τὰ πόδια τῆς μείναν ἀκόμη μαρμαρένια
καὶ χάθηκαν· μιὰ ἀνάληψη.

Ὁ κόσμος

ξαναγινόταν ὅπως ἦταν, ὁ δικός μας
μὲ τὸν καιρὸ καὶ μὲ τὸ χῶμα.

Ἀρώματα ἀπὸ σκίνο

πῆραν νὰ ξεκινήσουν στὶς παλιές πλαγιές τῆς μνήμης
κόρφοι μέσα στὰ φύλλα, χεῖλια ὑγρά·
κι' ὅλα στεγνῶσαν μονομιᾶς στὴν πλατωσιὰ τοῦ κάμπου
στῆς πέτρας τὴν ἀπόγνωση στὴ δύναμη τὴ φαγωμένη
στὸν ἄδειο τόπο μὲ τὸ λιγοστὸ χορτάρι καὶ τ' ἀγκάθια
ὅπου γλιστροῦσε ξέγνοιαστο ἓνα φίδι,
ὅπου ξοδεύουνε πολὺ καιρὸ γιὰ νὰ πεθάνουν.

Engomi⁷

The plain was broad and level; from a distance could be seen
the wheeling arms of people digging.

In the sky the clouds with many curlicues, here and there
a trumpet golden and rosy; dusk.

Among the sparse weeds and thorns wandered
light breezes after rain; it must have been raining
over there where the tops of the mountains were taking on colour.

And I went forward towards the people who laboured,
women and men with pick-axes in trenches.

It was an old city; fortifications streets and houses
stood out like petrified muscles of giants,
the anatomy of a spent power beneath the eye
of archaeologist anaesthetist or surgeon.

Phantasms and fabrics, luxury and lips, swallowed up
and the curtains of pain thrown open wide
to reveal naked and indifferent: the grave.

And I looked up towards the people who laboured

⁷ From *Logbook, III* (1955). Translation by Roderick Beaton (George Seferis, *Novel and Other Poems*, Aiora Press, 2016).

the stretched shoulders and arms that struck
in a rhythm heavy and rapid at this dead thing
as though it was the wheel of fate that passed above those ruins.

Suddenly I was walking and not walking
I was watching the birds in flight, and they were turned to marble
I was watching the brightness of the sky, and it was dimmed
I was watching the bodies' effort, and they were stilled
and in their midst a figure rising, riding the light.
Hair black and loose to the shoulders, eyebrows
arched above the lips, then the torso
emerging from the throes of labour stripped naked
with the unripe breasts of the Virgin,
dance without movement.

And I lowered my eyes to look around me:
girls were kneading, and no dough did they touch
women were spinning, and no spindle did turn
lambs were drinking, and their tongues were still
above green water that seemed lulled into sleep
and the ploughman had stopped, his goad in mid-air.
And again I looked at that body rising;
many had gathered, like ants,

and struck at her with lances but did not wound her.

Now her belly shone like the moon

and I believed that the sky was the womb

that had given birth to her and was taking her back, mother and child.

Her legs remained marble still

and disappeared: an Ascension.

The world

was becoming once again as it had been, our own

with time and earth.

Scents of lentisk

began to stir upon old hillsides of memory

bosoms among foliage, moistened lips;

and everything became dry at once in the flatness of the plain

in the stone's despair the eroded power

in the empty land of sparse weeds and thorns

where carefree on its way glides a snake,

and where much time is taken up with dying.

Οί Γάτες τ' Ἄι-Νικόλα⁸

Τὸν δ' ἄνευ λύρας ὅμως ὕμνωδεῖ
θρῆνον Ἐρινύος
αὐτοδίδακτος ἔσωθεν
θυμός, οὐ τὸ πᾶν ἔχων
ἐλπίδος φίλον θράσος.

ΑΓΑΜΕΜΝΩΝ, 990 ἔπ.

«Φαίνεται ὁ Κάβο-Γάτα...», μοῦ εἶπε ὁ καπετάνιος
δείχνοντας ἓνα χαμηλὸ γιαλὸ μέσα στὸ πούσι
τ' ἄδειο ἀκρογιάλι ἀνήμερα Χριστούγεννα,
«... καὶ κατὰ τὸν Πουνέντε ἀλάργα τὸ κύμα γέννησε τὴν Ἀφροδίτη
λένε τὸν τόπο Πέτρα τοῦ Ρωμιοῦ.

Τρία καρτίνια ἀριστερά!»

Εἶχε τὰ μάτια τῆς Σαλώμης ἡ γάτα ποὺ ἔχασα τὸν ἄλλο χρόνο
κι ὁ Ραμαζὰν πῶς κοίταζε κατάματα τὸ θάνατο,
μέρες ὀλόκληρες μέσα στὸ χιόνι τῆς Ἀνατολῆς
στὸν παγωμένον ἥλιο
κατάματα μέρες ὀλόκληρες ὁ μικρὸς ἐφέστιος θεός.
Μὴ σταθεῖς ταξιδιώτη.

«Τρία καρτίνια ἀριστερά» μουρμούρισε ὁ τιμονιέρης.

...ἴσως ὁ φίλος μου νὰ κοντοστέκουνταν,
ξέμπαρκος τώρα

⁸ Από το *Τετράδιο Γυμνασμάτων*, Β' (1975).

κλειστός σ' ἓνα μικρὸ σπίτι μὲ εἰκόνες
γυρεύοντας παράθυρα πίσω ἀπ' τὰ κάδρα.

Χτύπησε ἡ καμπάνα τοῦ караβιοῦ
σὰν τὴ μονέδα πολιτείας ποὺ χάθηκε
κι ἦρθε νὰ ζωντανέψει πέφτοντας
ἀλλοτινὲς ἐλεημοσύνες.

«Παράξενο», ξανάειπε ὁ καπετάνιος.

«Τούτη ἡ καμπάνα-μέρα ποὺ εἶναι-
μοῦ θύμισε τὴν ἄλλη ἐκείνη, τὴ μοναστηρίσια.

Διηγότανε τὴν ἱστορία ἓνας καλόγερος
ἓνας μισότρελος, ἓνας ὄνειροπόλος.

«Τὸν καιρὸ τῆς μεγάλης στέγνιας,

- σαράντα χρόνια ἀναβροχιά -

ρημάχτηκε ὅλο τὸ νησι

πέθαινε ὁ κόσμος καὶ γεννιοῦνταν φίδια.

Μιλιούνια φίδια τοῦτο τ' ἀκρωτήρι,

χοντρά σὰν τὸ ποδᾶρι ἄνθρωπου

καὶ φαρμακερά.

Τὸ μοναστήρι τ' Ἁι-Νικόλα τὸ εἶχαν τότε

Ἄγιοβασιλεῖτες καλογέροι

κι οὔτε μποροῦσαν νὰ δουλέψουν τὰ χωράφια

κι οὔτε νὰ βγάλουν τὰ κοπάδια στὴ βοσκὴ

τοὺς ἔσωσαν οἱ γάτες ποὺ ἀναθρέφαν.

Τὴν κάθε αὐγὴ χτυποῦσε μία καμπάνα
καὶ ξεκινούσαν τσοῦρμο γιὰ τὴ μάχη.
"Ὅλη μέρα χτυπιούνταν ὡς τὴν ὥρα
ποῦ σήμαιναν τὸ βραδινὸ ταγίни.
Ἄποδειπνα πάλι ἡ καμπάνα
καὶ βγαῖναν γιὰ τὸν πόλεμο τῆς νύχτας.
"Ἦτανε θαῦμα νὰ τὶς βλέπεις, λένε,
ἄλλη κουτσή, κι ἄλλη στραβή, τὴν ἄλλη
χωρὶς μύτη, χωρὶς αὐτί, προβιὰ κουρέλι.
"Ἐτσι μὲ τέσσερεις καμπάνες τὴν ἡμέρα
πέρασαν μῆνες, χρόνια, καιροὶ κι ἄλλοι καιροί.
"Ἄγρια πεισματικὲς καὶ πάντα λαβωμένες
ξολόθρεψαν τὰ φίδια μὰ στὸ τέλος
χαθήκανε, δὲν ἄντεξαν τόσο φαρμάκι.
Ὡσὰν καράβι καταποντισμένο
τίποτε δὲν ἀφῆσαν στὸν ἀφρὸ
μήτε νιαούρισμα, μήτε καμπάνα.
Γραμμή!

Τί νὰ σοῦ κάνουν οἱ ταλαίπωρες
παλεύοντας καὶ πίνοντας μέρα καὶ νύχτα
τὸ αἷμα τὸ φαρμακερὸ τῶν ἔρπετῶν.
Αἰῶνες φαρμάκι γενιὲς φαρμάκι».
«Γραμμή!» ἀντιλάλησε ἀδιάφορος ὁ τιμονιέρης.

Τετάρτη, 5 Φεβρουαρίου 1969

The Cats of Saint Nicholas⁹

But deep inside me sings
the Fury's lyreless threnody;
my heart, self-taught, has lost
the precious confidence of hope . . .

Aeschylus, "Agamemnon"

"That's the Cape of Cats ahead," the captain said to me,
pointing through the mist to a low stretch of shore,
the beach deserted; it was Christmas day —
". . . and there, in the distance to the west, is where
Aphrodite rose out of the waves;
they call the place 'Greek's Rock.'
Left ten degrees rudder!"
She had Salome's eyes, the cat I lost a year ago;
and old Ramazan, how he would look death square in the eyes,
whole days long in the snow of the East,
under the frozen sun,
days long square in the eyes: the young hearth god.
Don't stop, traveller.
"Left ten degrees rudder," muttered the helmsman.

. . . my friend, though, might well have stopped,
now between ships,

⁹ From *Book of Exercises, II* (1975). Translation by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard.

shut up in a small house with pictures,
searching for windows behind the frames.
The ship's bell struck
like a coin from some vanished city
that brings to mind, as it falls,
alms from another time.

“It's strange,” the captain said.
“That bell — given what day it is —
reminded me of another, the monastery bell.
A monk told me the story,
a half-mad monk, a kind of dreamer.

It was during the great drought,
forty years without rain,
the whole island devastated,
people died and snakes were born.
This cape had millions of snakes
thick as a man's legs
and full of poison.

In those days the monastery of St. Nicholas
was held by the monks of St. Basil,
and they couldn't work their fields,
couldn't put their flocks to pasture.
In the end they were saved by the cats they raised.

Every day at dawn a bell would strike
and an army of cats would move into battle.
They'd fight the day long,
until the bell sounded for the evening feed.
Supper done, the bell would sound again
and out they'd go to battle through the night.
They say it was a marvellous sight to see them,
some lame, some blind, others missing
a nose, an ear, their hides in shreds.
So to the sound of four bells a day
months went by, years, season after season.
Wildly obstinate, always wounded,
they annihilated the snakes but in the end disappeared;
they just couldn't take in that much poison.
Like a sunken ship
they left no trace on the surface:
not a miaow, not a bell even.
Steady as you go!
Poor devils, what could they do,
fighting like that day and night, drinking
the poisonous blood of those snakes?
Generations of poison, centuries of poison."
"Steady as you go," indifferently echoed the helmsman.

Wednesday, 5 February, 1969