



REHEARSING FOR DEATH

Memory has no end here and no beginning . . .

The fever was a crown of scarlet roses around my forehead, a crown so tightly fixed I could not take it off, and a holy delirium had risen up inside me, when You, in the shadow's sacred gateway, in the haze where my eyelids were immersed, half-opened the door, Your hair loose, arriving not as a bitter mourner, all lamentation, to weep in early spring over my body where it lay stretched out corpse-like on my bed, but as Astarte, who days ahead prepared her body so that she might enter Hades with it, might bring her body's light to Hades, to make all Hades radiant with her body;

and serenely she reviewed the days of her great, her godlike trial: three days to fast, three more to wash herself completely in the sacred springs, to wash her hair, bring her head delight, to comb and brush it, paint her lips; and when she'd dressed herself in seven robes, the one over the other slowly revolving like planets around her divine nakedness, she would then go down step by step into the Darkness, throwing off a robe at each gate until, in the depths, in the ultimate holy depths, she brought her never-setting light to Hades so that her nakedness would abolish Hades; You too came down to me like this, prepared, and lay down close to me, mute, motionless, and Hades was abolished in my heart, Hades became a resurrection and a triumph, I held the great pearl in my hand, took spring into my heart, and felt the scarlet roses of my fever suddenly become a crown, felt my black bed become a ship, the unhurried ship of God, and my struggle the navigator of my mind among the stars.

Even the Shunammite did not lie like this in David's bed to warm his frozen limbs, David the prophet and king whose spirit now no longer knew the psalms and in whose heart was spent that holy virile heat which roused the king and prophet in him, the fighter, the dancer, the first defender of God's ark; even the Shunammite did not lie down beside David as You lay beside me that time my heart was sinking into Hades.

Because You did not come to mingle with the treasures of my pain from streets where mortals walk; but as two stars circling for countless ages mingle suddenly, the one beside the other, and earth and heaven are full at their mating, so You lay down beside me, and I stretched out one hand to touch the sky and with the other gently I held Your head, and the whole earth filled with our embrace, the earth sailed among

the stars, the earth sang psalms, and my bed's prow climbed toward the pole, crushing the waves of time, and beginning, voyage, end, were all a cataclysm of celestial light before me.

And there, from my being's depths, from the depths where a god lay hidden in my mind's shadow, the holy delirium was now set free, and from the obscurity of my silences powerful verses suddenly engulfed my brain, quick verses, and they spoke these words:

"For You this bed is not a sick man's bed but the mystical trirème of Dionysus that flies above the waves of time, above the closed Rhythms of Creation, flies swiftly, like an arrow, flies with great force.

Listen to Your freedom's sound; if only now the whole of You was burning with a fever and if Your body flamed like pine kindling, it was so that You could discover how to burn. Because now You are coming near the fire that is not in creation but in the mind of the Creator Himself. The star that shines beside You is Hebe's, eternal Hebe's, the star that pierces through the light of day.

You are no longer with what the sun illumines but seem to be a fire-enkindled soul in the sun's depths, You seem inside the sun, and the flames that light the other stars, that light the world, are now outside, outside of You. You see the stars; the stars do not see You. You see the world; the world does not see You. You seem all hidden in Your passion's sun and from there You aim Your arrows where creation's stubbornness has not yet dawned. For You this passion is a rehearsal for death: rehearse it as is worthy of the holy fire deep inside You, that Your mind encloses not as created but as Creator.

It is a rehearsal for death, a great beginning, height and depth are one now: Your mind is on Olympus, Your heart gently illumines Hades. A great beginning, a great bow has been placed in Your hands, and do not be afraid to bend it, so that the arrow of Your longing wings far beyond all obstacles, until You join the living god who rises in one resurrection after another, striving to create one flesh above all else, flesh out of his flesh: the living god, striving always to shape, not in marble or in verse, but in a deathless body, a soul and stature worthy of his breath; sleepless Artificer, seeking through fire to make the clay statue of man at last incandescent. Listen to Your freedom's sound . . .

Death for You is now the shape of longing: nourish it until it rises to the height of its deliverance, crushing death with death.

I no longer say to You: to emerge from the ages You must Yourself become an age. Behind You the world burns like Troy, and its burning is reflected deep in things past as in the sunset the windows of a city blaze with reflected flames, then suddenly sink into the coming night.

And beyond—smoke, clouds from the same fire—what man regards as things to come dissolve slowly and end in nothing. But You, release Yourself continually from time. Leave the ignorant and coarse-cut generation to its thinking: nothing but lies and debris; plunge wholly into the immortal shudder that floods Your mind, where the stubbornness of creation has not yet dawned, plunge so that the whole radiance of Thought, the total "Let there be . . ." lights up Your mind and body."

This way the God who hides deep inside me set free for me the holy delirium with his sudden verses, at the moment when, like Astarte entering Hades—even the Shunammite never entered David's bed like that—You suddenly drew the blood and spirit from the fever burning my forehead, drew it into this mystical fever, into the perfect rehearsal for death that, piercing through the day's deception locked until yesterday inside my heart, now shatters the barriers of time, breaks the barriers of fate and the world; and enthroned above time and fate, above the world, where the stubbornness of creation has not yet dawned, from there releases

(O star of Youth, star of eternal Youth), for a divinely rejuvenated universe.

(Memory has no end here and no beginning)

the oceanic sound of my freedom!

—Angelos Sikelianos

Angelos Sikelianos Selected Poems Translated and Introduced by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard

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