

October 27, 1948

There are so many thorns here –
brown thorns, yellow thorns
all along the length of the day, even into sleep.

When the nights jump the barbed wire
they leave tattered strips of skirt behind.

The words we once found beautiful
faded like an old man's vest in a trunk
like a sunset darkened on the windowpanes.

People here walk with their hands in their pockets
or might gesture as if swatting a fly
that returns again and again to the same place
on the rim of an empty glass or just inside
a spot as indefinite and persistent
as their refusal to acknowledge it.

October 29

We sleep only a little; – it's not enough.
All night the exiles snore –
tired boys, so tired.

Outside are the stars – enormous stars
shaven-headed stars whose hair sprouts wild
as from the head of St. John the Baptist
or our own Panayiotis.
There are toads in the mint, too.
In the morning a rosy sun hits us smack in the face
reflected by the sea in the most ordinary way
like those cheap paintings they sell on the steps of the Arsakeios School
and it's strange that we actually like this kind of sun.

Alone, in pairs, often in groups
we stop in the yard or on the hill to look at it.
And that sun hits us hard in the face
like a barefoot villager beating his almond trees
to bring down the last of the nuts.

Then we lower our eyes, look at our shoes,
look at the dirt. Nothing has fallen.

October 29

Among the thorns and fallen red leaves
we found the naked head of a donkey –
perhaps the head of summer
left there on the wet stones
and around it some tiny blue flowers
whose name we don't know.

If someone calls out from behind the fence
his voice sinks quickly into the soil
like a paper cone full of raisins.

In the evening we hear them off in the hills
changing the flat tire of the moon.

Later things find their rightful places again
as in the yard you happen to find
a brown button from your coat – and you know:
it's nothing like the buttons on the costumes
of summertime actors – no, not at all –
a perfectly ordinary button you'll have to sew back onto your coat
with that awkward, polite care
of the eternal apprentice.

November I

The mist has black wings like jackdaws
it has no eyes at all
its blindness gropes our eyes our pockets
like an old fortuneteller stroking our palm.

We can't hide anything anymore.
Here things turn inside-out
like a dirty sock we take off before sleep
and our feet are naked and our faces too.

Day by day we now speak in the singular.

Every shadow has the shape of remember
but the shadow of the mother's unseen hand
takes the shape of every voice that doesn't resist you
it becomes the mug, the coffee, a bit of bread, the thermometer
even the shaver beside the bowl in the little mirror.

There are two lamps in the room.
We shine the glass with newspapers
you one, me the other – we're on duty today.

Our movements are nearly identical.
We don't look at one another.

We enjoy this similarity.
We look out the window at a sky lost in mist.
So all things, then, have the look of forever.

November 2

Today Mitsos got a letter from Skopelos.
Antigone writes: “The island autumn
has filled with little yellow lilies.
Poor Mitsos,” she says, “you won’t remember those lilies at all;
you never knew a thing about botany.”

Mitsos

wiped his glasses, read the letter again. At his side
the pharmacology textbook lay forgotten on the rocks.
Mitsos smiles. He puts his glasses back on. He doesn’t wipe them.

I want to write Mitsos a poem
not with words
but with yellow lilies.

November 3

If we try to open a door
the wind shuts it.
And so, locked out
each of us grasps his keys
though the most we have is a pitcher
though none of us has a home.

Today I don't know how to speak.
Today I speak in the first person.
When one of your own hits you it's twice as bitter.

A bus passed by this afternoon.
A stranger greeted me in the fields.
I wanted to thank him. I didn't speak.

I forgot to look at the clouds. Yes, the almond trees
turned a brownish-purple – it must be because fall is here
and the flies have multiplied; they sit on the page where I write.

And what if they did turn brownish-purple? Ants
have their house of dirt – it's warm in there.
I don't fit into my voice. My feet
stick out. I'm cold. And they're watching me.
I must have done something very wrong.

November 3

Panousis is wearing a long overcoat.
A soldier gave it to him.
They dyed it black in his village cauldron.
Now it's green – not even green.

In his pockets he has
five kernels of corn and two leaves of tobacco
and even the gaze of his cow. Panousis
wraps himself in a thick blanket. The blanket
is red and white. And Panousis's sleep
is colored by that blanket. He always sleeps
in his cap, shoes and pants.

If he took off his boots, surely a bird
would lay its eggs in there
and then Panousis would have nowhere to put his feet.

His sleep every afternoon
is like the oak's shade over the water.

Now he has to save up
another five kernels of corn for the game of nines
until his moustache grows back and he goes home to his village.

November 4

Lots of things give us trouble. Lots.
We have to wash our plates, our clothes
carry water from the spring in big pitchers
sweep the room two or three times a day
darn the occasional sock, darn our words –
Yesterday's conversations soon get holes
faces change as you look at them
and perhaps you're changing too – because looking at your hands
you realize they've gotten used to these tasks
to these days, these sheets
they know the wood of the table they know the lamp
they move in the same way with greater certainty
they are never surprised. The fire
needs stirring, it's dying down –
that is what's on our mind.

In the afternoon five old men called me over
made me coffee gave me a cigarette
talked about the monastery of St. Dionysos up in Litochoros
about the saint's watery hand that sent away the bad shepherds –

Five old men with gentle eyes and white moustaches
who make cigarette cases day and night make frames
piece together tiny scraps of colored hay
small as the head of a pin – hard things to work with
and some pots with geraniums, two Greek flags

one for land and one for sea, some five-pointed stars
they want to make a dove, too – they can't do it –
they're good old men – I wasn't listening to what they said
and that is what's on my mind. They called me "child."
I couldn't say "father." Old master Thanasis says
he'll make me a stool: "So you don't have to sit on the ground, son,
and get your pants all dirty."

And now I'm thinking of all the things I, too, should be making
how I should get my pants so dirty
that master Thanasis won't care if I sit on the ground
and I'll be able to call him "father."

Then I figure I'd be worthy of sitting on his stool
as if astride the branch of a plane tree at the monastery
and I'll shrug these troubling things from my shoulders
the way I brush off that little spider creeping along my arm
and I won't be at all cold in winter.

November 5

Our morning passed in quiet conversation.
I read what I'd written yesterday. I liked
that part about the five old men. I found it
simple and real. And I silently wished that's how things
might actually have happened.

Now it's getting dark.
Time for me to add up my spendings and earnings.
I've never been good at accounting. I get confused.
I know that many consider me an enemy.
But those who love me are more
and are better.
I am indebted to both.

But I still can't find the word
that would suffice for both them and me. Which is how
I know my debts are multiplying.
How could my song reach that far
if I didn't get there first?

Fine. Fine. The weather's good.
Tomorrow or the next day we'll talk again. Now
I'm watching the color of the evening change on my page.
A branch scratches my cheek with its nail.
So then, joy still has roots.

The guard's shadow falls on the barbed wire.