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Writing Sample

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"Rhapsody on the Dragoman", "Expecting Nightingales", "Augustan Days", "Life's Weight", and "The Wind Under My Lips"

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Stephanos STEPANHIDES

Poetry and prose

Rhapsody on the Dragoman

For Susan and Harish, υψίστους διδασκάλους

Part I

I am a dragoman
courtesan of the word
I pluck my eyes to hear
with skill and improvisation
wor-l-ds of hard edges,
a treacherous and loyal
exponent of obsessions
not all men know my speech

in the night I go under
in company of dervishes and learn
why cyclamens sprout in pavement cracks
and mutter promises, amidst the dust,
of the beautiful and the unseen
I ask meaning for
fore give fore go fore play
an island warbler
still with no quarrel
or a swallow
in the line of flight
meandering with finality
knowing that the road is lost
in floating debris
of fortuitous choices
precipitous moves

with impulsive sagacity
I swirl and sail away
vexed in my state of grace
daytime dragoman
nighttime dervish

Part II

When hearts hum in the buzz
of morning light so bright it silences,
the lady arrived at the City Gate
and waited for the *tarjuman*
she had requested in a letter sent from Egypt,
someone versed in her language
to accompany her to the Sublime Porte.

Only I among the *rayahs* spoke her tongue
from that island in the northern sea.
Today, following my companion's counsel
I shed my *kufta* and *jubbeh*,
and present myself with *boyunbagi* and waistcoat in a style
after the French.

I bow and before she presumes
to scrutinize the measure of my wisdom
If I am a fool servant or a learned scholar
I do not climb inside the carriage
I swiftly step up to the box instead and take my seat
next to the driver while I instruct the porter boy
if he receive *bakshish* to say "thank you" as her kind expect,
and reveal neither gratitude nor displeasure;
she need not know our measure of her generosity,
only count the day's profit within our own walls;
we do not know
if she desires the sweetness of the sultanina grape
or some other island sweetness.
When heaven wants to speak
it needs few words
to open gateways here, there, and elsewhere.
Trees grow in silence
as do the date-palms lining the river
inside the city wall.

Along the path of Hermes
the wind will track the language down
as we track the dust of love
in the mausoleum smell of mourning
jasmine turning putrid.

When the evening drops stealthily
I will retire to the Dragoman's house
where hot stone will transform my body to vapory waters
absorbing the contours of the cypress
with long shadows of night in a crimson trance
penetrating the skylight of the hamam
yearning neither joy nor melancholy.
Time to appease my traveling consciousness.
On the divan I will translate for my companions
Verses of the *Tarjuman al-ashwaq* of Ibn Arabi
My heart takes on any form ...

Nicosia 2012

Expecting Nightingales

At the smallest hour
I awake and wait
In expectation
The nightingale will sing.
The roar of the sea
Absorbing whistles
Of the passing trains
Hoodwinks me into slumber,
So I do not even sense
The rooster's crowing.
The pink light eludes me
Stealing silently through slats
To soften Kathy's sleep
And I hear a warm smell of fresh focaccia
In Raffaella's buzzing at the door

*

Augustan Days

The First Goodbye for Katerina (After Derek Walcott)

Days as august and as large as the sea
And nights as wide as the rooftops

Here I lie

No use for the shirt on my back
Nor the walls of my house
Spread before a relentless sky
That will brood and puff up
A tease or a promise of rain
The lion raised to the stars
A daze with a spray of fierce light
As Perseus climbs high, or hangs low
In tears, for the days we will lose
For the days - sun burnt red with moon

And the month passes by
The cat slips away
And the marigolds fade
Leaving only a touch
Like tender dust
And a daughter ready to fly

And with Derek I sing
Days I have held
Days I have lost
Days that outgrow like daughters
My harbouring arms

*

Life's Weight

How much does life weigh?
Sometimes as heavy
As the moment you dropped
Your mother's body into the soil
Heavier than that last stony kiss
Before you close her eyes forever
And you bury memory's burden
When you rehearse life's habits
And a voice commands you
Wash the mud off the watermelon skin
Before you slice it
Lay out the tomatoes ripe bottom side up
Throw the greens into the water only after it boils

You remember that someone told you once that all mothers are crazy
And nothing is without solution
If children must have mothers
There should be rituals to bury the umbilical cord
Beat the drum hard and spin the flame
Till the body lifts entranced
And reappears in the world
In a will of the wisp
Unexpectedly grows wings and flies
Feet twirling and rising
You emerge with the abandon of night on your face
As if memory never existed
As if you never belonged to a lost island
Licked her waters dry
Lapped them up from every creek and crevice
An island that no longer exists
Perhaps never was
And all that matters is this moment
In a faraway land
In the gentle sway of the hammock
And you hear a swish in your ribcage
And your heart rises high above the canopy of the coconut trees
And the coolie woman brings you a bowl of rice and dhal
The cage door closes and the coconut drops with a thud
As you hear the labor in her bare feet

Resonate with your grandmother's footsteps
And you think of her house and ask
How much rubble must you pick up
To rebuild it from the discarded limbs
Or just leave it to the strangers who inhabit it
And who in their strangeness resemble your kin
Lying on the terrace on August nights
And flying with the thrill of shooting stars
And it might suffice to feel the hammock
Embrace you like a caul as you watch
The elusive and nomadic clouds
Always ready for an outpour of water
Formless liquid that you want to catch by the bucketful
To remind you of your own torrential nature
And the sweetness of your skin
Finding the balance
Between actuality and memory

Between joy and loneliness
Life is light when it is most unlikely
At the beginning of love's insanity
And when your friends smile and touch you
Opening and filling holes that make you wonder
How many lives you have lived
And if identity is just one life
or many lives watching you with myriad eyes
And we stars burning ourselves out
In our intoxication
And you speculate
Who sees who listens
And you might just close your eyes
And blow it all out
In the abandon of
Flesh without memory

December 2004

**

The Wind Under My Lips

The moon is upon my forehead,
The winds are under my lips.
Ezra Pound, "De AEgypto."

Τὸ μὲν γένος εἰμί, ὧ ξένοι, Κύπριος, ὀρμηθεὶς ἀπὸ τῆς πατρίδος μετὰ παιδός--- ἐπὶ νεῶς
μεγάλῃς, ἦν ἐπὶ στόματι τοῦ κήτους διαλελυμένην

By birth, strangers, he said, I am a Cypriot. I set off from my native land along with my son ---
- on a great ship, and we were gulped down in the mouth of the whale.
Lucian of Samosata: 'A True Story'

The summer of 1957 was the eighth summer of my life and it stands out vividly and fervently in my memory and imagination. It would be my last summer on the island in the Middle Sea for many years to come. It was the year of the beginning of my longest journey of my childhood. I do not know really when journeys end. Journeys become layered with time. Once they begin, you do not know where they are going to take you. They do not end when you step of the ship or the train or the plane, they go on afterward and depends how long you carry the journey with you. Knowing when a journey begins is no less a problem. I could say with uncertainty that my journey began when I appeared on the easternmost island in the Middle Sea, which was when I came into the world in the Fall before the new decade that marked the middle of the century, as a result of the peculiar chemistry between my progenitors. But sometimes there seems something uncanny about how I crossed that threshold. I brought shadows with me, as if I had always been elsewhere. Or some place or no place or always here. But let us say this time round for the sake of the story, I was brand new then when the new century had become middle aged, and my little town was quite ancient or elderly, wise in many things but not in all. It did not have the prognosis, nor did I, to foresee its own violent transition, reincarnation, new name and new inhabitants. For many, or for all, this would come unexpectedly like a sudden turn of the winds. A squall took me away some years before that happened. The symptoms that would bring this sudden change were already there, but no foreboding angel told me anything. I do not know if I always hear them. I hear voices of sibyls but often their messages are enigmatic. Anyway I had already gone and I did not witness its death throes. I am not sure if was death or coma. Whatever it was, I sense its *überleben* claiming me - a metempsychosis that has spread here and everywhere— dark and sticky like *pekmezi*, surreptitious like a virus. I am in need of a methodology to trace it. I tentatively explore houses and habitats, turn over stones and tombstones, smell it out, touching its mildew with my fingertips. The sibyls murmur to me before dawn with their contradictory voices. Which one of them to follow? Which way to go?

Now I sometimes feel more ancient than the century and the little town. I am not always sure what it means to be old or to be young. And beginnings are just glimpses in darkness. Sometimes I am still fresh, light, and airy with the body of the boy of the summer of 1957, and sometimes I am heavy with the burden of millennia. The date remains in my memory.

Some times dates brand you and mark you like complex clusters. When I would wade through muddy water in a faraway land to gather lotuses and place them at the feet of the goddess, the elders and sages would tell me that my beginning was not as new as I thought, and they would set me on wonderings into prenatal memory. Anyway perhaps I should stop speculating for now on how to find my way from beginnings to centres in labyrinthine journeys. I will speculate on crossroads for a while, not paths. I will contemplate the crossroad of 1957.

My progenitors were still quite young then, or let me say they were, because they still had the freshness and verve of the young. In fact, they had both been married before they came together, so that makes them a little less than young. And in fact Demosthenes was a widower, a dozen or so years older than Katerina, so perhaps that does make him a bit old, but he still had sparks of impetuous daring, which would eventually mellow with age. When they came together, he was in grief from his bereaved first wife and she in anger over her first misguided marriage, arranged, as was the norm in those days. A quasi-mail bride, she had left her husband behind in Charring Cross Road, where she lived with him for less than year. She returned to the island bringing with her a scar on the chin. When I was a teenager, she showed it to me as a kind of memento of her past.

I wondered why she was so hasty in accepting this suitor. Marriages were usually arranged but suitors were not scarce for Katerina. Many came and more would come. She didn't have much of a dowry, but she was eighteen and beautiful and educated in the elite school for the Greek speakers of the island, and would attract suitors who were wealthy enough not to be looking for a dowry. Many remembered her as she shone forth standing tall as one of the caryatides holding up the Parthenon on a float in the school parade celebrating the national day, on March 25, 1946. Kypris Aphrodite playing Athena for the day, someone said. Just for the occasion. She was not quite eighteen. Her father took the family to the village after the outbreak of the Second World War, leaving her, his eldest daughter, to continue as a boarder in her school in the capital. When she graduated in 1946, and returned to the village, she had the prospect of becoming a teacher and to begin with she would be sent to schools in remote villages, but it seems that marrying and sailing off held more promise, for a while at least. The village after the war was too grim a cage for her spirit unfolding like the wings of a bird ready to fly. She did not know where she was going but she was going some place – not there. The idea of Charring Cross road seized her mind like the wind. And so she agreed to marry this *nouveau riche* peasant from Karpassia who had become wealthy in the restaurant business in London, and in his middle age decided to go fetch a bride from his home island. On the road to his home village of Tavrou, everyone came out on the road to see the young and beautiful catch he was displaying, before taking her away from this island colony to the capital of the empire where she found another kind of postwar grimness, seen through another prism, and she began to discover the expansion and contraction of the world.

At the time of Katerina's departure from the island, Demosthenes was burying his first wife, Kassiani. Her heart ceased to beat suddenly, at the age of thirty, while she was carrying something on a mule from one part of the village to another. No sooner had Katerina reached London, when she discovered her husband had a child with his English lover and moreover she became subject to his jealousy and violence. She was not the kind of plumed bird to be kept in a cage, and she decided to return to her father's roost. A little damaged but still full of verve. Once back on the island colony in the Middle Sea, her father sent her to her mother-in-law's house as the mores of the time demanded. She was too much of a princess to stay in this small and shabby Karpassia village for too long, and within a few

weeks she returned angrily to her father's house determined to divorce, and scorning her mother-in-laws lifestyle and cuisine: "landed peasantry who lived on boiled squash covered with oregano, with raw onions, bread and olives on the side."

So I came about in this concoction of grief and anger, and of love without foresight. Both Katerina and Demosthenes were quick witted, independent of will, determined and swift in their decisions, but it seems unlikely that at the time they had foreseen their future journeys or even had any expectation of moving anywhere beyond the floating and turbulent island at the time they fell in love. Although he was a meticulous accountant and she was a sharp player at chess and bridge, they had not reflected deeply about the stuff their dreams were made on, nor did they think insubstantial pageant of that world would fade, and the legacy I would inherit from their time together would all quickly dissolve into the stuff of memory. Or perhaps one side of their brain did not communicate with the other half, a syndrome of the culture in which they lived, I don't know. Or they were mere humans with no control over their own transience falling out of love as quickly as falling in: "Est-ce un crime de changer? Si l'Amour porte des ailes, N'est-ce pas pour voltiger? That's how it must have been, since I can hardly remember them together at all. The town-folk tell me their love broke all conventions like new ground. While Katerina waited for her divorce, they lived together for two years in the house with the green balcony, overlooking the square with the coffee shops and the tiny renowned medieval church of Ayios Iakovos. People did not censure them for this as one would expect in that rural island world of the time. Perhaps it was a certain grace or exceptional charisma that helped them carry off with ease the defiance of mores and their story was told to me with some colour and romance like the stuff of folksongs and popular theatre. Or perhaps, like them, the town was not altogether conformist as it seemed. The populace seemed sometime to stand stolid like the overshadowing mountains of Kantara, but their passions were sometime inflammable like the dry shrubbery in midsummer heat. Sometimes they could swallow fire like fakirs and other times they would not escape singeing or burning, and would take off in sudden flight searching for water.

Katerina and Demosthenes families frequented different coffee shops. He belonged to the left and her family to the right, but they didn't make it an issue. Demosthenes had already gained notoriety when he fell in love with Kassiani, the niece of the General. The General's family had strong objections. Demosthenes's father Stephanos came 'de Aegypto' around 1912 saying with his poet contemporary: I, even I am he who knoweth the roads, /Through the sky and the wind thereof is my body." He was a polyglot and brought with him a cosmopolitan liberalism that he invested into the "New Century Association," of which he was one of the founders. He was glad to be a thorn in the flesh for the General's family ethos deeply steeped in Hellenism and the king. So the Alexandrian delighted at the flirtations going on between his son and the General's niece, and the General's family only gave permission for their marriage after Demosthenes and Kassiani had run off on their bicycles to the nearby village of Ayios Sergis. No one knew where they were until they returned two days later. They quickly married. They were scarcely out of High School.

There was science in his socialism, Demosthenes would have claimed, but his love affairs with women of the families of the right did not seem to be inspired in his rationalism, but by some other part of his brain, full of a brio admired by some and resented by others. He had loved them with sincerity it appears and would have claimed that the families they belonged to were mere coincidence or chance. He had read Zola but evidently did not know Borges and the Argentines, although he loved to dance the tango with Kassiani. With me he was always laconic about his past, but all the villagers loved to talk and tell me stories, and I

knew much more about his life than he ever suspected or he remained silent even if he did suspect. After Kassiani and Katerina, he left the island. I carry the legacy in the mystery of KA. I still pursue it. Astrologers and mythographers have given me some clues.

Anyway, Demosthenes and Katerina managed to marry with the blessing of the church but without white bridal dress just a few months before I was born, and so it came to be that Katerina's body was my threshold into that room in the house with the green balcony. Perhaps it was my first coming into the world. I am not altogether certain. I doubt it. I often wonder. I have the tendency to go round in circles as I have a difficulty with beginnings and ends, so perhaps my entrance into the house with a green balcony was just another crossroads. My memory is not always that clear about comings and goings. I do know I am still coming and becoming. And not yet ready to go, though I am always going somewhere -- -- even when I stay still. I had no recollection of the inside of the room with the green balcony as we moved out when I was still an infant. I entered again in 2003 after the check points dividing this island in the Middle Sea, partially opened and I crossed with many others for the first time in nearly thirty years. I went into the coffee-shop and spoke to two old Cypriot Turkish men -- Mehmet and Hussein. They had resettled there a year after the war when the Greek inhabitants had fled. "We came from Skala," they told me gesturing the other place with the music echoing my ancestral Cypriot Greek speech.

I pointed to the green balcony and told them I wanted to go inside that room. They were keen to accommodate my desire and we wandered around the village looking for the person with the key. As we went from house to house, I was offered freshly squeezed lemonade and sweets-- all were curious as to what claims and kinship I might have with the house and asked questions about whether I had the title deed and whether my relatives were artists or musicians as they found a piano and painted canvases when they opened up the abandoned house after the war. While I was saying no to all of the above and I was trying to find words to explain my preternatural or natural instincts that drew me to that room, the stranger with the key came and let me in, following me in discreetly as my eyes surveyed the wooden floors and high beamed ceilings. I stepped out on to the balcony and looked over the village skyline and the road outward lined with acacias that would eventually reach the sea and would wind along the coastline to Salamis. The stranger with the key kept his distance so as not to disturb my communion with whatever revenants I had come to find. As we exited he gave me a key ring with the initials of the name of his political party and gestured with words of appreciation for my visit, kissed me on each cheek as he bid me "güle güle," and a wish for peace. With this message and wish, I wondered away in my spectral reverie contemplating whether love might be just a rehearsal for departure to some unknown other place --- a place we don't know when love begins.

Katerina and Demosthenes disappeared from me and each other so soon that I hardly remember when it happened. I became an early apprentice on the nature of arrivals and departures, welcomes and farewells. I only have one recollection of all of us together. Just a vague image of the three of us on a rocky beach. All looking one way -- to paraphrase the New England poet -- turning our back on the land and looking at the sea all day. Yet paradoxically, in the only photo I have of all of us together, we are looking the other way. You might say we are looking the wrong way, at the camera, toward the land, with the sea behind. This photo was probably taken in the early 50s, but I did not see it until the end of 2000, after both Katerina and Demosthenes had died as the century was also passing away. Lalla the Light-footed gave it to me, pulling it out like a shadowy revelation, from a box she kept under her bed in her house in Brookman's Park. She was also in the picture, looking on while standing over with her winged sandals. She would be the first to take off across the

sea. Perhaps this was our last look together at the land, the past, and our back to the sea and the wavering breeze, the future that we could not see, and which would take us in different directions, and to other islands. I am sitting on the rock between them like a birdling, not yet able to fly, to swim or sail away. Lalla would be the first to take off across the sea. Within a decade Katerina and Demosthenes would each be living on a different island. He in the Cold Northern Sea, and she in the South China Sea, and I would be shuttling between them, only sometimes I would hop and drop off into the Middle Sea, onto the island from which we all departed. And so it turned out that in my coming-of age, I was moving between three islands, and the three of us would become three islands, just as augured in that black and white photograph with Lalla watching over.

Even before we all left the island, the two of them had moved apart and I was caught in the ebb and flow of journeys. They were here there elsewhere sometimes with me and sometimes without me and my horizons were forever shifting, in the mirror of the sea, in the sounds of secret beaches, in the echoes of ruined cities, the spirals of medieval castles, and landscape unfolding endlessly up and around winding roads. Mountains turned inside out like my grandmothers' quilts with roads alluring us with its high vistas to come down the other side and wait the see too enticingly reappear. The island never stood still. I was floating with it as it revealed its contours to me anew on every journey and as Katerina and Demosthenes came and went. When neither Katerina nor Demosthenes was there, it was no big issue for me as I knew one or the other would come. In between, I was everybody's child and there was space for me on any journey for harvest, feast, pilgrimage, always ready to be lifted on any donkey, bicycle, ox-drawn cart, camel caravan, village bus, or water melon truck. I had not yet been inside an airplane or a ship. Only in motor boats that moved toward the horizon and on clear days we would discern the silhouette of mountains of Syria and Turkey, but we only reached Anatolia or the Levant with the imagination. These other places were like mirages for me as I would float on my back on the sea wandering if when I looked around I would be on the yonder shore. Or perhaps these places were always already within us – implosions in our imagination, like islands exploding in the sea floating here and there.

The opportunity to float here and there was not to be missed. Sometime Phoevos the charioteer would take me sidesaddle on his bicycle. He was like my teenage big brother but I called him uncle, because he was Katerina's little brother. He would race the bike over bumpy dusty trails through the aroma of lentisk bushes, pines, cypresses, and eucalyptus groves and the intense buzz of insect life until we reached the sea and we would run hopping like birds over the hot sand so as not to scorch our feet. There were no tourists in those days and the villagers spent their time in the fields and had no time for the sea. It was different for my kin, whether of the left or of the right, the sea was illumination and renewal like the harvest. And for some of them, as for many others, it was a would-be exit mostly without return.

And there were other journeys on the cinema screen. There were two cinemas in the village with their own electric generators before the village had electricity. Many villages did not even have one cinema. We were a cosmo-polis we would say. In the summer when they were open air, we would look from above like gods from the terraces and balconies of our houses that overlooked the world of the cinema screen below emitting lights and shadows and sound that would echo towards us. I would love to sit glaring at the wavering sensuality of a big screen under an open sky, Melina with her sultry voice and Sophia with her sultry face and the largesse in the ebb and flow of their bodies on a screen wavering with the evening breeze like the sea, sprinkling water under our feet to settle the dust, if only

temporarily, while we chewed on *passatempo* and drank our classic cokes. We watched in anxious anticipation as they displayed the audacious sensuality of the mid-century always threatened by a fatal end that might or might not be overcome. I sobbed desperately when Melina Mercouri was stabbed to death at the end of *Stella*. Why did Melina have to die? It took me a long-time to be comforted and it needed an old sibyl to convince me it was all illusion, just a film, and that next summer Melina would come back in another film and we would all leave the cinema laughing not crying. I soaked in these images and they stayed with me like visions that transformed the world around me -- both a spectacle and intimate participation as were the activities and ritual festivities that came and went with the sacred rhythms in the cycles of the seasons spilling over and out with the excess of ripe pomegranates bursting open their skins to reveal the fruit inside.

The big turn in the journey came in October 1957. I went from a familiar and joyous state of unsettlement to a strange alien state of unsettlement by the end of the year. I had lost my bearings. I had never imagined I would end up on another island inside a whale before the year would end.

The unsettlement was a constant factor but the circumstances and surroundings had changed. My life on the island in the Middle Sea had become quite unpredictable. It did not take much cunning to take me away on a ship without forewarning. My life and movements were already a sequence of ellipses and then Demosthenes suddenly took me on a journey that I would not forget from the Middle Sea to another island in the North Sea. Katerina seemed to have vanished. I know this sounds paradoxical, since in fact I was the one who disappeared or made to disappear, but my perspective was that progenitors do not disappear. If you disappear, they are supposed to come and find you. For years to come her voice and face haunted me as if she were a ghost. And according to Demosthenes it was her fault that I disappeared, although it seemed to me he was the one that made me disappear without warning. Demosthenes did not put me in the predicament of choosing whether to go with him or not. I still don't know if he was saving him self or my self from the predicament. If he had asked me I don't know what I would have said. Perhaps he was afraid to ask. He probably knew he would not have solicited an easy yes. Not that I didn't love him, but I also loved many people and places on the island, and especially the sibyls of Trikomo who always had a story to tell and something sweet or fresh to put in my mouth, and send me on a little mission as if I was their little Hermes and prince.
