

Tasos Leivaditis (1922 - 1988)

This Star Is For All Of Us

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For Maria

I

Night came quickly.
The wind came from afar, reeking of rain and war.
The trains hurriedly passed by, full of soldiers
whom we just managed to glimpse from the windows.
Great iron helmets barricaded the horizon.
The wet asphalt road glistened. Behind the windows
the women silently cleaned some dried beans.
And the footsteps of the patrol officer
seized the silence from the road and the warmth from the world.

Turn your eyes towards me, then, so that I may see the sky
give me your hands so that I may get hold of my life.
How pale you are, my beloved!

It seemed someone was knocking on our door at night. Your mother,
dragging her thick wooden sandals, went to open.
No-one. No-one, she repeated. It must've been the wind.
We huddled together. Because we knew
we knew, my beloved, that it wasn't the wind.

Thousands of people were dying outside our door.

See how our neighbourhood has been ruined, my beloved.
The wind enters and exits through the crevices of the houses
the walls are soaked, swollen, then collapse.
Where did so many of our neighbours go without saying goodbye
leaving their stone benches half-whitewashed
and their smiles half-finished?
As soon as someone turned the corner we wouldn't see them again.
We'd say "Goodmorning" and all of sudden the evening had arrived.

Where are so many children going?
And that blond umbrella merchant who would sing in the morning
was executed
and the kiosk worker who would hand us the change with a smile
was executed
and the boy who would weigh our coal – remember him?
he was in fact executed.
His cart lay overturned in a corner.

Their loved ones will now look at the night straight in the eye
each will, like a dog, bury their head into their beloved's shirt and smell it.

And the postman who would open the windows with his voice
was executed.
So take your red lips away from me, Maria.
I'm cold.

Today against every wall life is being executed.

My beloved
I love you more than I can say with words
I'd want to die with you, if you were ever to die
and yet, my beloved
I couldn't
I couldn't love you any longer the way I used to.

We closed the door behind us and we were cold
we closed the windows and were colder still
and as I turned to look at your eyes
I saw her eyes: the eyes of my neighbour whose four children were killed
and as I reached out to find your hand
it was as though I were stealing bread from the hands of the hungry.

You embraced me
but I was looking over your shoulder at the road.
And when we wanted to talk we suddenly fell silent.
We could hear from afar through the open window
the steps of those condemned to death.

How can our blanket continue to dispel such bitter cold?
How can our door protect us from all this night?
People cast their great shadows amongst us.
What will become of us, my beloved?

My beloved, are you listening?
No, it's not the wind, it comes from further away
you'd think thousands of feet were descending upon the road
thousands of hobnail boots pounding the asphalt.
Where are they going? How could they be leaving?

How could I live far from you, my beloved?
How could I light a lamp if it wasn't to see you?
How could I look at a wall if your shadow won't pass over it?
How could I lean on a table if your hands won't rest on it?
How could I touch a slice of bread if we won't share it?

But that noise grows louder with time.
There's nowhere to sleep. No place to sit.
No, it's not the wind, it comes from further in the distance.
Tear up our bedsheet, my beloved
cut your dress and stop up the crevices.

People hurriedly toss all their belongings into a sack
because their entire belongings are no more than
some bread, a memento and their love of life.
They then embrace each other and disappear into the night.

We stay behind. Where do we stay? Why do we stay?
How could I open a door if it wasn't to meet you?
How could I pass through a doorway if it wasn't to find you?
No, I couldn't live far from you, my beloved.

But today at every corner people await us.
Give me your lips for a moment. And prepare my sack, Maria.

II

It was as though even the last memory had been extinguished from the
earth.

The wind would blow our tents away
we'd put them up again, only for them to be blown away again.
The fog walked with a limp over the stones.
Large black barbed wire barricaded the sky.
Night was falling across the entire camp. We wanted to see
but it kept getting darker. The world kept moving further away.
We wanted to listen
but the wind kept blowing. The steps of the sentry kept getting nearer.

Where is the smile that will assure us that we exist?
Where is the voice that will prevent us from getting lost in the night?
We wanted to remember
but we had many dead to bury.

After fatigue duty it was lights-out.
And then came the flashlights, the machine guns, the screams
then came fear
from the outposts we could hear them shouting in the night:

Halt!
and our hearts beat faster as they shouted again:
Halt!

You thought you'd die
perhaps you were already dead
so engulfed were we by night and rain
by the wind
and the wounded
you suddenly sensed a hand fumbling in the dark
and clasping your hand.

And it was as though the first hope had been born on earth.

The southerly drives us mad every day.
Pales are broken by the wind
– you'd think they were exhumed bones.
We carry large stones from the mountain
we carry on our backs the large grooves made by rifle butt blows
in the evening we sit in the tent and mend our singlets
we say a joke or two
we scoop out with our eyes the bottom of the mess tin.
And we're surprised that our arms have become strong like a heavy pair of
boots.
The sentry stood outside for a moment and yawned.
Peter smiles as he rips out the lining from his jacket and binds our wounds
old Matt has two calm eyes and three murdered sons
and Elias says: "I'll find a way to play the harmonica"
thus says Elias: "I'll find a way to play the harmonica"
even though they've cut both of his arms.

We then change topic.
And you feel that the world cannot fit in this tent that's full of holes
but how will your heart manage to fit within the world?

In this way each night the lamp would wipe away our day.

In this way the rain wipes away each day our footsteps from the ground.

Whenever they take one of our comrades
we get his clothes ready and give him our hands.
We then place his mess tin to one side.
It's growing dark.
The empty mess tins quickly multiply in the corner.

One man would've liked to cough, simply because he doesn't know what to say
while another stands for an hour looking at the footprints
left by the shoes of that man
who will never return.

Truly so many comrades
beside the same lamp and the same hope
before the same bread and the same death
when we were cold they cloaked us with their eyes
when we were hungry they apportioned us their heart.
And when we were about to die they spoke to us of life.

Then, we too were able to die.

That comrade of ours had a brown beanie
and they brought him to us wounded when night was falling
when his mother would be lighting the lamp
and the crickets would be singing in the hedges of his country.

They had tortured him for days. When we took off his boots
they were full of blood. We sat next to him
without speaking
we ran our fingers through the earth, without speaking
we could only feel our hearts puncturing
as though from a fork forgotten in a coat pocket.

Then it began to rain and we felt that he would die.

He turned and looked at us. One by one. Farewell Thomas!
And that which your eyes seek from us, we pledge it to you, Thomas.
We will never betray your eyes.

And suddenly in the eyes of our comrade who was departing so simply
I rediscovered your eyes, my beloved.

Yes, my beloved
I could now find you everywhere.
I lit the lamp and trembled, just like when I lit it for you
I shared the bread with my neighbour as though I were sharing it with you
and as I reached out to grasp someone's hand, I found your hand
and as I stooped to listen to some voice, I found your voice.

Those who separated us are the same ones now returning you to me.

And I found you in the silence, in a star, in our resolution
in that battered calendar left me by my neighbour before passing away
in a flask whose meagre water chirped like your laughter
I found you in our lit cigarettes which glowed in the dark like your tears
I found you in our despair, in our hope, in a short scarf
one half of which was worn by a comrade the moment he was executed.

I found you again all those nights when I didn't know if I'll see you again.
And when in the evening I'd lie down in the freezing tent
and listen to the rain
I would dream
and I'd find you.

I found you, my beloved, in the smile of all future people.

III

Yes, my beloved. Long before I met you
I was waiting for you. I was always waiting for you.

When I was a small boy and my mother would see me sad
she'd bend down and ask, "What's wrong, my boy?"
I wouldn't respond. I would only look over her shoulder
at a world bereft of you.
And when I was practising with a slate pencil
it was in order to learn how to write you songs.
I would lean against the window when it was raining because you were run-
ning late
I would gaze at the stars at night because I was missing your eyes
and when there was a thump at my door and I opened it
there was no-one there. Somewhere in the world, however, was your heart
and it was thumping.

That's how I lived. Always.
And when we met for the first time – remember? – you opened your arms
to me so tenderly
as though you had known me for years. Well of course
you had known me. Because before you came into my life
you had lived for a long while in my dreams,
my beloved.

Do you remember, my love, "our first big day"?
That yellow dress suited you
a simple and cheap dress, and such a pretty yellow.
Its pockets embroidered with large brown flowers.
The sunshine upon your face suited you
that pinkish cloud at the end of the road suited you
and that faraway voice of the itinerant tool-grinder– it suited you.

I'd put my hands in my pockets, I'd take them out.
We walked without talking. What could one say anyway

when the world is so bright and your eyes so large?
A boy on the street corner was hawking his lemonades.
We shared one between us. And the swallow that suddenly brushed past
your hair,
 what did it say to you?
Your hair is so beautiful. The swallow must've said something to you.

The hotel was small and located in an old suburb near the station
where in the glare of the sun we saw them shunting the trains.

Truly that spring, that morning, that plain room of happiness
your body which I held naked for the first time
the tears which I couldn't in the end hold back
– how they suited you!

Ah, our home was warm back then
our lamp was joyful
the world was vast.
The smell of fried oil emanated from the kitchen.
I bent down, my love, to kiss your flour-coated hands
and my lips became covered in flour. I then kissed you on the mouth
and your lips became covered in flour too.
We looked at each other and laughed.
Spring bade us good evening from the open window. A girl in the house op-
posite was singing.
How lovely it was to be alive!

Then came the rain. But I'd write your name on all the frosted windows
and so our room was clear and cloudless. I held your hands
and so there was always sky and trust in life.
Do you remember when I'd kneel down in the evening to take off your shoes?
How embittered I was by your shoes! always sorrowful they were and worn
at the edges
maybe they were even letting in water, my love
but you'd never say anything. You'd only smile.
You'd then silently look down to mend my old jacket.

Your bowed neck: a blooming almond tree branch.

No, the wind won't take you from my arms
nor will the night
no-one will take you. Do you hear? Do you hear?

That was when the days knew nothing of the mist
when the sunset would empty an apron full of oleanders into our yard.

Do you remember one evening when I was combing your hair
and you were looking at me in the mirror and softly singing something?
Your hair is as black as a night sky, through your mouth breathes the whole
of spring
in your hands I always laid my heart.
Your eyes
oh, what can I say, my love, about your eyes
when your eyes are as beautiful as all the songs of the world put together
when your eyes are as big as the biggest hope?
Your eyes.

Whenever you smiled a dove would fly through our darkened room
a golden cloud would journey through the sky whenever you smiled.
Whenever you smiled I forgot about the leaking roof, I forgot about the
holes in the floor
I'd even say: look, any moment now
from these holes great red roses will sprout.

Everything was possible in the world, my love
back then
when you smiled at me.

Do you remember that night when we were looking at the sky for hours?
I felt you trembling in my arms.
"Oh stars," I said, "make our love luminous
make my beloved happy.
Oh stars, oh fair stars, see to it that she and I die together."

And so that night
amongst the stars we were joined forever in wedlock.

Ah, I'd like to kiss your father's hands, as well as your mother's lap which
gave birth to you for my sake
to kiss all the chairs you touched with your dress as you passed by
to hide like an amulet on my breast a small piece of the bedsheet you slept
in.
I could even smile
at the man who saw you naked before I did
I'd smile at him, seeing that he was granted such limitless joy.
Because I, dear, owe you something more than erotic desire
I owe you song and hope, tears and again hope.

In the briefest moment with you, I lived all of life.

You knew how to surrender yourself, my love. You would surrender yourself
completely
and you would retain nothing for yourself
other than the worry as to whether you had completely surrendered yourself.

As you undressed the leaves in a distant forest rustled
the sky cleared in a flash as you undressed.
Like an armful of white flowers were your underwear on the chair.
And then nothing else but our love
nothing but you and I
nothing but the two of us
and neither yesterday
nor tomorrow
nothing but the present
nothing but you and I
now, now
together
now together
always together
two together...

Afterwards I placed the bedsheet on you.
 "I'd like our child to take after you," I said.
 "No," you replied. "I'd like our child to take after *you*."

Then they broke our door down.
 We had to go our separate ways, Maria,
 to separate so that people separate no more.

I placed my hand on your belly to farewell our child.
 Goodbye. Goodbye.

Our child, Maria, must take after all the people
 who vindicate life.

IV

Now night will arrive abruptly.
 People on the streets will be in a hurry. Women
 will shut their doors in fear and will embrace their children.
 But the famished faces of the children will cast a black shadow on the wall
 like the shadow of bread.
 You will be sitting on that same low bench of ours
 the roof always leaking
 from an old bedsheet you'll stitch together the little clothes of our child
 you will patch with your bitterness the emptiness of separation.

I wonder if the sky we'd look at from the window still shines.
 Does the small peach tree in the yard continue to blossom?
 Workers would now disappear one-by-one from the nearby machine shop.

But when there's a knock on our door at night
 your mother will no longer be afraid.
 She will simply light the lamp so that those condemned to death don't lose
 their way
 she will then blow on the fire so that the dead keep warm
 and you will open the door with sure hands and hear in the night

that loud noise
 that relentless marching in the distance.
 Because now, dear, you know
 because we know.

Thousands of people defend the world
 and our love.

Yes, my beloved,
 it is for these few and simple things that we fight
 so that we might have a door, a star, a bench
 a joyful journey in the morning
 a peaceful dream at night.
 So that we have a love they can't defile
 a song that we can sing.

But they break down our doors
 they trample upon our love.
 Before we begin our song
 they kill us.

They're afraid of us and kill us.
 They're afraid of the sky we look upon
 they're afraid of the stone bench we rest upon
 they're afraid of our mother's spindle and of our child's primer
 they're afraid of your arms that know how to embrace so tenderly
 and how to toil in so manly a way
 they're afraid of the words the two of us say in hushed tones
 they're afraid of the words we all together will say tomorrow
 they're afraid of us, my love, and when they kill us
 as corpses they're afraid of us even more.

I love you more than words can say.
 All joy lies in your eyes, the whole of life in your hands
 all the world lies on a wall upon which your shadow falls in the evening.
 No, I couldn't live far from you, my beloved.

But we have a capacity to love and to part ways
that will forever remain ours
that is something no-one can take from us.

That is love, that is war, that is our faith in life.

Goodbye, then, goodbye.
So that your eyes may always be cheerful
goodbye
so that the beautiful times we had are not forgotten
goodbye
so that the night doesn't frighten us, so that the sky is not stolen from us
goodbye.
So that injustice in the world finally comes to an end.

We might also be killed, my love. But who will notice?
Thousands of people die every day
without a name
thousands of women suddenly awoke in the morning
and found themselves forever alone.
Children are given neither caress nor bread. Goodbye.

Perhaps I won't return.
Someone else will lock his arms around your warm body.
Don't forget me.
But no, no, my love, you must forget me.
You must completely surrender yourself to him
just as you once surrendered yourself to me.
Only when both of you happen to hear battle cries and stand in the middle
of the road
looking at our flags unfolding in the sun
then
oh, then, remember me – remember me for a moment – one moment only.

And then grab his hand and set out
advancing towards the future.

Come, then, wipe your eyes, don't cry. My God, what beautiful eyes!
Remember, by the way, one night when we were sitting by the window
in the distance a gramophone was playing and we listened without talking?
You said: "Even though we don't have a gramophone, and even though they
didn't put that record on for us,
that slow song is ours. And this night is ours.
And that star over there is our captive." That's what you said.
Taken aback, I said: "You speak like a poet, my love."
You put your lovely arms around my neck
and kissed me. In the way only you know how to kiss.

Come, then, don't cry.
That's the spirit, that's how I like you – smiling.
We will live, my beloved, and we will win. Whatever they do
we will win.

One day we will meet again.
We will then buy a gramophone of our own
and we will have it playing all the time. Yes, my love,
we will also sit by the window, close to one another.

We will meet again one day.
And then
all the nights and all the stars and all the songs
will be ours.

V

I'd like to shout your name, my love, at the top of my voice
so that the builders on the scaffolds hear it and kiss the sun
so that the stokers in ships learn of it, so that all the roses draw breath
so that spring hears it and arrives more quickly
so that the children learn of it and have no fear of the dark
so that it's spoken by the reeds on riverbanks and the turtle doves on fences

so that the capital cities of the world hear it and repeat it with every one of their bells
so that it's talked about by washerwomen in the evenings as they massage their swollen hands.

I want to shout it so loud
that no dream in the world will sleep again
and no hope will die any longer.

So that time hears it and never touches you, my love.

And see,
it's no longer the two of us within our love.

Within our love my deceased mother ascends a white hill
and gathers in her apron the morning rays
within our love pass all of our neighbourhood's murdered children singing serenades
within our love all the withered maidens no longer sigh
they too boast a smile, a flower and a young man to whom they will give themselves
and that neighbour's mute child is able within our love to sing
within our love a lamp shines upon the humble
within our love a loaf of bread steams up for all the hungry
within our love lies a dewy branch
a sparrow
a harmonica
within our love all the dead are no longer unknown
indeed we call out to them as their mothers did by their first names
within our love thousands of people march with flags
one man falls down, others instantly rush to raise his flag
and they are forever marching, forever advancing, forever moving with battle cries
– within our love.

And suddenly, my beloved,
it's as though we never parted.
Who could possibly part the two of us!
Even with this great sea between us
we are near one another
so that even if I were to move slightly over this entire sea
I would touch your hair. I would find your lips.
It's as though we are before an open window
in our home, on a bright morning in May.
Look, look, my beloved,
the women of the neighbourhood have come out to whitewash their stone benches.
Why are they whitewashing them? What are they waiting for? They await something.
We await too.
And Spain awaits.
Good morning women!

And over there, my love, there in the corner, behold the arrival of spring
behold those young men beckoning us with sickles
and the young women behind them tying in bundles the rays of the sun
look, they're beckoning us. Everything beckons us. Good morning!
And those people down there at the horizon, hoisted on a huge building site
perhaps they're constructing a new dam wall or maybe a memorial to our dead.
Perhaps they also want to collect an armful of stars for their lovers.
Good morning!

And there, in the distance, very far away
behold that little old woman knitting while sitting on a doorstep in Asia.
Do you know what she is knitting, my love? She is knitting the small socks
our daughter will wear tomorrow.
Good morning to all you distant brothers of mine!
Come along and I'll introduce you to my beloved. Tell me, isn't she beautiful?
I love her, my brothers, like life and like song. Even more so.

Good morning sky! Good morning sun! Good morning spring!
Come, then, and I'll introduce you to my beloved.
Good morning happiness!

And when we die, my beloved, we will not die.
Seeing as people will behold the same star we beheld
seeing as they will sing the song we loved
seeing as they will be drawing breath from a world that you and I
dreamed up
well then, my love, we will be more alive than ever.

Seeing as people will find us every moment
in peaceful bread
in just hands
in eternal hope,
how, my beloved,
could we ever have died?