

Yannis Ritsos

SECONDS

1988-1989¹

Translated from the Greek by Antigone Kefala

The poems were written in the last few years of Ritsos' life. They describe everyday experiences in an immediate, seemingly simple language, but they are essentially a meditation on death. Their tone lacks heroics, and returns again and again to the things of life – the sun, birds, flowers, memories. I hope I have managed to convey in English the tone and immediacy of the language, as well as the meditation at the core of the poems. I should like to thank Dennis Dinopoulos, Yota Krili and Helen Nickas for reading the translations and for their suggestions.

Antigone Kefala, March 2005

1
At night, the old blind man
passed down the street.
He was holding a daisy –
my last undertaking.

2
And the amphora, sometimes,
when dusk falls,
looks at itself in the mirror,
Faces grow rosy.

3
In the centre of the room
a large table,
on top, the empty case

of a cello.
Do you remember?

4
As she was coming down
the stairs
a rose fell from her hair.
I did not pick it up.

5
It would be better then
to remain silent.
If you said “tomorrow”
you would be lying.
The night cannot hide you.

Karlovasi, 20.VIII.88

6

The sirens of ships criss-cross
the ringing of church bells. The boats
have come on land. The churches
have moved into the sea. And only a dog,
all alone, barks on the moon.

7

This year the sunflowers
Don't turn towards the sun,
stooped, they look at the dry earth.

8

What do birds really think
at the beginning of autumn
when in the garden, the wheelbarrow
with the empty flower pots
focuses on its shadow
and the naked stones
are the first to speak?

9

The white feather
of a passing bird
fell on the thistles –
an insubstantial world,
the whole world.

10

Some left on ships
and others on trains.
The old woman was left
with her distaff and her pitcher.
The map on the wall remains empty.

11

They searched all night with oil lamps,
They left the drowned at the harbor.
They loaded the horses on the boat.
The large clock of the Customs House
had no hands.

12

Yesterday's soldiers have grown old.
Little by little, the words are dying too.
On the table
one solitary egg.

13

Painted stones.
Beautiful faces, beautiful bodies.
You are not moved.
Only a cigarette burning in the ashtray-
smoke in the roof of a lost Ithaka,
and Penelope, in front of her loom,
dead.

14

Most of your gold coins
you have hidden in the gaps of the wall.
Maybe they will find them
when the house collapses.

15

The many coloured roses have bloomed again.
White butterflies are visiting them.
Why then, must we die?

16

The drowned they laid on the quay,
Young, handsome, naked.

On his left wrist, the watch
is still ticking.

17

At times, and even now,
at night a nightingale bids me
to say "yes" again.

18

If death had not existed
what sculptor, what poet
would work for immortality.

19

Immutable, austere darkness
stresses the star.
"Ah! You, my cunning one."

20

If I lied to you,
I wasn't trying to deceive you,
It was to protect you
from your shadow.

21

All his gold medals are
hanging on the walls.
And he in the ground
with only a bare set
of gold dentures.

22

Who left this flower
next to my cigarette?
Maybe, so that I can believe again.

23

The door opened by itself.
There was no one there.
Time then to learn
not to expect.

24

He places a stone on top of the other,
He is not building a house.
Words. Solitary words.
Not a poem.

25

He remembered, almost moved
the potato eaters,
the steam rising
from the hot potatoes.
And yet
on the misty windows
he wrote with his finger
a NOUGHT.

26

The houses opposite are white.
Behind the houses
the mountain is blue.
Now, no colour tells you: "I love."

27

The words, once proud
are they, I wonder, sad now
that you are abandoning them?
Do they also grow old?

28

You had a pure white horse.
 Now its bridle
 around your neck.
 Who and where does it take you?

29

These intimate, simple objects
 became his friends, they trusted him.
 He sits silently in their company,
 he lights a cigarette –
 his only star.

Athens 28.IX.88

30

What more to say? What to do?
 Bones, bones, bones.
 And amongs them
 the smallest yellow flower.

31

It was very cold those nights,
 They made a fire to warm up.
 They had nothing else.
 They invoked futility.

32

Everything abandons you little by little,
 Each morning, under your door, you find
 the mournful notice of the death
 of an old friend.

33

And yet, the sunset
 colours the page rose again
 and your fingers all golden.

34

A blue butterfly
 on a white daisy.
 It convinced me.

35

He holds the wind by the hand.
 The two of them can go wherever they like,
 They don't go anywhere.
 They sit silent, motionless
 each hiding the other.

36

Did you see the bird that sat
 on the forehead of the cow?
 This is why I insist.

37

The words die out with the years,
 The word "mother" remains
 with her secret smile
 and her black kerchief.

38

His wings have grown too big.
 He would have to cut them
 in that small barber shop of the
 neighborhood
 without looking in the mirror.

39

Wherever you go, death
follows you.

You turn for a second and show him
a small flower, a poem
and death leaves.
But for how long?

40

The candle melts slowly, slowly,
drops of wax stain my papers –
if only they could extinguish
my black words.

41

He does not lay down his arms.
He tries to counteract the night
that is coming with something beautiful.
But each beauty is transparent and
behind it the meadow with the asphodels
appears.

4. X. 88

42

By the time I count on my fingers
up to ten,
night has come.
We have been left without dreams
without bread.

43

He tried again to go up
the great staircase.
He did not last.

He came down again leaning
on his tiredness.

44

The time of concealments,
of ambiguous smiles.
The wine in the eleven glasses has grown old,
The twelfth is empty.

45

Unarmed. Yes.
With only a feather
from his big wings
he still writes, a sad bloom,

46

The dancer who used to jump
out of the window like an Angel
now on his knees
he begs God
for an orange.

Athens 5.X.88

47

He does not offer his hand
in greeting any more
to a bird, a cloud, a tree.
But see, a flower opens
urging him
to say 'thank you' again.
Say it.

48

He sits alone on the park bench
with a bucket and a big brush

like a tired painter waiting
for some order (but from whom?)
to whitewash the ancient,
dark post office.

49

The birds have gone, the leaves, the stars,
Now,
in a drop of water
what journey can you undertake.

50

With three coloured papers
white, red and black,
he makes an artificial flower,
pins it on his lapel –
does not go out.

51

Earlier, the moon protected you
from her own melancholy.
Now she pays no attention,
indifferent in her passing,
proud in her silence,
solitary.

52

No road in front of you.
If you could at least
turn back,
maybe a sparrow
would have waited for you
in the old garden.

53

If the sequence was not cut,
if the child at the window
wet his small finger
in the glass of the moon –
If, if, – Nothing.

54

This quiet man
how he enriched the world
with small tables at outdoor cafes
with leaves, birds and umbrellas.

55

In the yellow field a black hen,
in the garden a peacock with his fanned tail,
in the mud a rose petal,
a poem in the void.

56

With lyrical tricks you are trying to escape.
You look at yourself in the water and feel a
stranger.
Ah! Yes, you are still handsome.
These wrinkles on your broad forehead
are the reflections of the water
that trembles with emotion.

57

With the great certainty of the desperate
he is hiding behind his smile,
he gives lollies to the children
and ballons to the old.

58

In the telephone book
 the numbers go out one by one,
 the names of friends disappear
 and you are still here
 holding tightly between your teeth
 the golden coin of the moon.

59

Why should you look beyond?
 The three very cunning women
 hide half of their faces
 behind their fans.

60

Old now, very tired
 he still seeks to lean
 on the shoulder of a rose.

61

How did that time pass?
 What small chats with a sparrow
 or with a little moon
 that traced on the moving water
 your name, a thousand times
 and you knew it, and you were.

62

You look at the sea from the mountain
 a small white sailing boat
 as if a page
 on which to write a childish poem.
 Well, aren't you going to write it?

63

Even now, from time to time
 you can unlock the world
 with the smallest trefoil.

64

Did you notice the smile of statues?
 My last coin fell on
 the white pebbles.
 I don't pick it up.

15.X.88

65

The pipes of the stove have rusted.
 The mirror has broken.
 Who is this sleeping in our bed?
 On his forehead
 a black bird.

66

Up there where you climbed
 (didn't you know it?)
 where can you find companions now.

67

A blind man in the museum
 hits lightly the tiles
 with his walking stick.
 The statues watch him
 full of sorrow.

68

Maybe the voice of a bird
 will still defend us,
 a star that shows us its partiality,

the blue line of the mountains in the
golden dusk
and the word which ripens in the deepest
silence.

69

The facades of the houses opposite shine.
The children are playing in the school yard.
A plane flies low,
its shadow falls on the terrace,
covers for a moment two pigeons that are kissing.
And you alone with your unwritten papers.

20.X.88

70

The mirror went blind where
the ghosts of beautiful women passed.
In the corridor, the silver candlestick
lies on the floor, extinguished.

71

The morning landscapes no longer come in
through the windows, nor the starry nights.
Only the black comes totally wrapped
in broad, white bandages.

72

He wouldn't like to leave dressed
as for some formal occasion
but with a light shirt, open at the neck,
with a carefree smile,
among many coloured paper flags
of a children's feast-day.

21.X.88

73

The white is the emptiness.
I write a word on the white paper,
I make a hole in the emptiness
from where I see the movements of cars
and the girl flower seller who
leaves bunches of jasmine on the tables
of popular restaurants.

74

The sick acrobat tries
to maintain his balance, counting
his swings, one by one, accurately.
At any rate, there are four windows
near the skylight.

75

A small, fleeting butterfly
has taught me again to read blueness.
On the opposite balcony two young girls
how beautifully they sing.

76

The sound of galloping horses in the night.
I opened the window.
Stars and more stars.
If I whistle, you will come;

22.X.88

77

It rains the whole day.
Wet children wait at bus stops.
And you
behind the window pane

strive
to transform a rain drop
into a diamond.

78

Very cold in those days.
Neither fire place nor cigarette.
With a match they set fire to their manuscripts
and their death – shone.

79

The house has filled with the scent
of naphthalene and autumn.
The rain beats on top of the taxi.
The old weather vanes have died in the poems
and the marble girls wet with tears
wait under the cypress trees.

27.XI.88

80

He is no longer touched by events
nor by dreams.
He takes off one shoe
but does not take off the other.
He lies down on his bed.
He pretends to be asleep
with a burnt out cigarette in his mouth.

20.XII.88

81

Little by little, names no longer
fit things. The smoke of cigarettes
fills the house. The nicotine

embitters the lips of silence.
Tomorrow, I shall have to buy an umbrella.

20.XII.88

82

We return to the things we have abandoned,
to the things that have abandoned us.
In our hands a lot of keys that don't
open neither door, drawer, nor suitcase –
we tap them against each other and smile
we no longer have to deceive anyone
not even ourselves.

Athens 1.I.89

Note (by Yannis Ritsos)

*The first five SECONDS were
written in Karlovasi of Samos, the
20th August 1988. The rest were
written in Athens from the 28th
September 1988 to the 1st January
1989. All were re-worked and re-
written in Karlovasi in July 1989.*

1 A group of 82 very short poems –
published in 1991, after Ritsos' death,
in a volume titled: *Late, very late, into
the night* (Kedros Publications,
Athens).