

CONSTANTINE CONTOGENIS

At Nine

Twelve-thirty. It's gone quickly
since nine when I lit the lamp
and sat here. Just sitting here together, not reading,
not talking—who could I have talked to
by myself in this house?

The young image of the body I had
appeared to me at nine as I
lit the lamp, possessing my memories
of latched . . . scented rooms,
past pleasure—yes, taken pleasures!
He let me see in front of my eyes:
avenues become unrecognizable,
bars, filled with action, that have closed,
theaters and *kafenia* that were once there.

The image of the young body I had
came back to me, gave me my sad stories
—partings, family grief—
feelings of my own, feelings
of the dead, less and less in my awareness.

Twelve-thirty. The hours go.
Twelve-thirty. The years go.

Their Beginning

Auden says pity the second character.

The transaction of unlawful pleasure
was completed. They got off the mattress
and quickly dressed without talking.

He says Cavafy failed that unpoetical one.

They slipped from the building separately; and as
they ambled uneasily up the road, they seemed
to guess that something about them showed
the kind of bed they'd just spread out on.

But so far there is no second or first.

But for the artists how much life wins.
Tomorrow and tomorrow they will put it down
with strong lines. Here was their beginning.

To that non-artist they are still in it together.

Ithaka

Let's say you've finally set out for Ithaka;
you'll want to take the long way round,
stuffed with action and surprises.
The Lestrygonians and the Cyclopes . . .
angry Poseidon . . . Well, don't be afraid,
you'll never find their like on the way
if your thoughts aim high, if the recommended
feelings of mind and body move you.
The Lestrygonians and the Cyclopes . . .
far-gone Poseidon . . . You won't bump into them
if you haven't let them ride along with you,
if you don't set them up yourself before you.

You'll want to take the long way round.
Let there be a lot of summer mornings
with the particular pleasure, the particular joy
of entering an undiscovered harbor.
Stop at Phoenician trading ports,
all those fine things—go ahead—
mother-of-pearl and coral, amber and ebony,
and all kinds of voluptuous perfume
—more, as much as you can—such voluptuous perfume.
And visit Egyptian cities, lots of them,
go learn and keep learning from those who know so much.

All this time fix Ithaka in your mind.
To arrive there is your destiny.
But don't rush the getting there.
Let it last years and years;
dock at the island an old man,
rich with what you took along the way,
not expecting Ithaka to hand you riches.

It's Ithaka has given you the good voyage;
without her you never would have set out.
She doesn't have to give you more.

And if you find that she looks shabby, Ithaka won't have fooled you.
You'll have become such a wise man, with all that experience,
you'll already have figured out what this Ithaka means.

Constantine Contogenis: His poetry collection *Ikaros* (Word Press, 2004) won a First Prize "Open Voice Poetry Award" from the Writer's Voice. He co-translated *Songs of the Kisaeng: Courtesan Poetry of the Last Korean Dynasty* (BOA Editions, 1997). His work has appeared in numerous magazines including *Paris Review*, *Literary Imagination*, *New York Quarterly*, *New Orleans Review*, *Chicago Review*, *TriQuarterly*, *Zone 3*, *Pequod*, *Grand Street*, *Speakeasy*, *Meridian Anthology of Contemporary Poetry*, and *Cimarron Review*. In 2000-2001, he was poet-in-residence at Purchase College, S.U.N.Y.