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Kostas Karyotakis



Kostas Karyotakis (1896-1928) is considered by many Greeks to be one of their most important writers during the years after the First World War and, in particular, after the Greek catastrophe in Asia Minor. He was born in Tripoli in the Peloponnesian peninsula, but spent his childhood in various provincial towns around Greece. After studying law at the University of Athens, he became a civil servant, subject to the whims of his bureaucratic superiors. As a poet, he was influenced by the French symbolists and became the leading Greek example of post-Romantic despair, although his work has a uniquely satirical edge. He published three collections of poems before his suicide in the town of Preveza. The formal precision of his poetry, his dark vision, and his tragic end were enormous influences on later Greek poets. His work has seldom been translated into English.



KOSTAS KARYOTAKIS

Joy

I hope for flowers even on junipers.
The green clearing laughs like my love.
The soft pine plays with the sun's ray.
Even graves will smell sweet, like marriage beds.

Heartbeat of the forest, a doe darts away.
And next to where we had lain
wild lilies exude their fragrance
and a crimson rose opens, my joy.

I see the breeze—it blows in your hair.
Your eyes are profound, the road
of my life, discovered in April.

I no longer feel sorry for the anemone,
which our love-wrestling crushes on the ground,
as I give myself to the elixir from your lips.



▲ KOSTAS KARYOTAKIS

To an Old College Friend

Friend, now it's as though my heart
has gotten old. My life in Athens is over;
it zipped by like candy both with parties
and the occasional bitterness of hunger.

I'll come no more to the place my country
dedicated to the celebration of youth,
except I come as passer-by, with my hope
and my dream extinguished, a traveler.

As a pilgrim I'll go to your house
and they'll say they don't know what's become of you.
I'll see your Aphrodite with another man,
and other people will be living at Irene's.

I'll go to the taverna to order again
the Samian wine we used to drink.
You won't be there, their wine will be different,
yet I'll drink it and I'll get drunk.

Staggering and singing I'll stumble up
to the Zappeio where we hung out together.
All around there'll be a grand sweeping vista,
and my song will sound like sobs.

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Carnival ■

Carnival

With breasts bared, with faces hidden
behind masks, milkmaids
and countesses mill about and bestow
their dreamy smiles everywhere.

Pierrots and harlequins, their eyes
on fire, glimpse the naked girls
and—laughing in response—wet
their painted lips with sweetness,

the sweetness of a kiss. A knight
strolls around with a woman dressed
as a bishop—a peculiar pair.

And when the devil in his satin cowl
exchanges kisses with an angel,
he wags his black tail and howls.

If Only Grief

If only grief had come, or joy; I simply wished
my heart had broken and fallen lightly on the ground,
like a rose petal caught by a storm
or even like one heavy with the morning dew.

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▲ KOSTAS KARYOTAKIS

Only

Agh, everything had to happen the way it did!
Hopes and roses had to wilt.
Years, like small boats, had to slip away,
to slip off from me, to ebb away.

Like that, as casually as we used to part in the evening,
close friends had to be lost forever.
On some afternoon I had to leave
the place where I grew up.

Like a round of dancing, life had to take from me
the beautiful simple girls — O my little loves!
Though once I did well, that sterile
pain still had to weigh on me.

Everything had to happen. Only the night
didn't have to be the way it is now — sweet.
The stars didn't have to sparkle there
like eyes laughing at me.

Translated from the Greek by William W. Reader and Keith Taylor