

The wildcat from Petalioi - Nikos Xydakis



The wild-cat from Petalioi
For Peris



They were sharing a meal, surrounded by paintings. Goat cooked in the oven and sturdy Nemea wine. The old two-storey Athenian house on the slope of an ancient hill, was embracing the men in the calm after lunch, embracing their light words, their work, the dust of life, and the comforting company. Saints, beasts, masonry walls, faces, TV sets and cars, curly basil, ochres and dark reds, greys and blues, paper and wood all come alive, break out of their frames and hover amid narration and clinking of glasses. They eat, become jolly and tell stories. It is springtime in Attica.

The host tells the story of his encounter with the wildcat of Petalioi. He was reclining in the shade in high noon, listening to the cicadas and Summer noises. And there he was. He approaches without a sound, proud, annoyedly examines the superfluous human. Slowly not to chase him away, the man opens a sardine box and leaves it a little further aside. When he turned to look at the wild-cat it was gone. It had turned behind him. He approached the tin, ate the offering and left as he had come. From then on he would come only at nighttime, take the food, canned fish and bread dipped in oil, and disappear in the dark. A real wild one, I'm telling you, independent and self sufficient, not like the frightened street-cats.

There we go: The wild-cat visits an Athenian house, after taking the highway, passing toll stations, drive-in markets, avenues and roundabouts. He enters peoples' tales, bringing with him the earth's shiver, helping them reflect on myth and peace. That's how the paintings surrounding the gathering take on their meaning: Saints, beasts, masonry walls, curly basil bushels, decorative motifs, together with cars and television sets and with written words. The paintings need stories in order to be accomplished.

The hosts tells more stories. He tells them with few words, colours the characters and their deeds, measures the sentiment. After the wildcat of Petalioi come strange people who are strong as well, who roam about Europe, shaped for non-profit exploits, for mishaps with a good ending. Forgotten, yet close worlds, come to the table with red wine and halva. The grandfather grinds chick-peas in the mortar and then adds sugar, cloves and cinnamon. The smallest things grow big. People speak about people.

I can see the scene: The meal amidst the paintings, within the stories. The art of telling stories. The art of living. The paintings of our host are a standing invitation to the art of living. The work that's being lived there is exactly the one described by the philosopher Merleau Ponty: the painter fuses with the world, becomes one with the world. Along with the artist, the leader and shaman, Stalker, the other participants are carried along by the breath of the event and they, too, merge with the world.

The room with the high ceiling manages to shelter everything in its warm embrace: the wildcat of Petalioi, the cool night, Karagiozis in Petralona, the red soil from Penteli, the Nemean St. George's wine, the Athenian hum coming in discretely from outside, a Gargantuan Bulgarian, some shepherd's dogs from central Europe, a photograph of Emmanuel Lambakis from Euboea, a church on Aigina, Matisse, Bracque, Kontoglou, Papadiamantis, the aura of grandfather Anastasis from Costanza, as well as the metal foundries in Piraeus, Magdalen's prayers and the church bells of the vespers.

How much can fit into one room...

Someone asked the painter later to talk about his work in public. He couldn't; he excused himself 'being at war at the framer's', his mobile's battery was dead, he had many errands. He didn't have anything to say, period. Can one talk about painting? And so on. How to make any unsuspecting innocent person understand the world's pain, able to 'split a pigeon's chest deep'?

I return home exhausted but relieved. Art reveals itself to you when you want to see it, when you're ready, in absence of cares. Like life itself. 'Life's business engulfed me like bees swarm around wax, my Virgin...'

Nikos Xydakis, Kathimerini, Athens, April 2006.