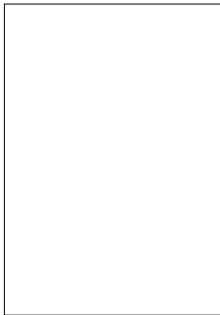


Broken Statues



Yannis Ritsos, *Monochords* (Prototype) £15
Reviewed by Rowland Bagnall

One of the most prominent Greek poets of the twentieth century, Yannis Ritsos (1909–90) was exiled to Samos in the late 1970s. Under house arrest during the summer of 1979, he composed a sparse sequence of 336 one-line poems, combining diaristic observations with evocative reflections. Enigmatic and fragmentary, *Monochords* stands both as an interior and exterior archive, ‘a surrealist calendar’, writes Thurston Moore, measuring the passing days, ‘seeking hope in the real’. Translated by Paul Merchant with quiet authority, Prototype presents the sequence with linocuts by Chiara Ambrosio, who responded to the poems through a period of lockdown.

Written over a month (an average rate of ten per day),

the monochords pick out minor details: ‘A long Sunday with cypresses, with birds and water jars’, ‘Each moment a tree, a bird, a smokestack, a woman’. They aim for ‘The physical *fact* of things and situations’, writes Gareth Evans, a quality of truthfulness, mining for the essence of experience and landscape. Ritsos captures a world of ‘Things that are themselves’, to borrow a phrase from the poet Jack Gilbert, ‘Waves water, the rocks / stone’, discovering ingredients that we can be certain of: ‘A white horse in a yellow field’, ‘a basket of tomatoes’.

These specks are sifted from a damaged environment; the Greece of Ritsos’s poems bears traces of political and civil unrest, from handcuffs, soldiers and broken glass to ‘rocks from a stoning’, ‘a drowned woman’, even ‘Corpses on the pavements’. ‘I create lines to exorcise the evil that has oppressed my country’, he writes, the poems both a witness and response to national turbulence. At the same time, they begin the slow work of repair, their language summoning the world anew, speaking it into existence: ‘Sweet corn, grapes, a donkey, the sky’. Their sparseness compels us into a process of collaboration. The poems ‘stir up a world’, inviting us to flesh it out, drawing colour from our own lives, our experience and memories.

For all his observational precision, Ritsos also drifts into moments of oblique and cryptic meditation, hinting at ‘The meaning outside meanings’, encouraging interrogation. Ambrosio brings this quality of the poems out beautifully in her linocuts, in which objects, scenes and animals are tinged, slightly, with magic. Beside her prints, Ritsos’s poems inherit the texture of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, a world in which everyday trees and buildings, birds and pistachios, rub happily alongside supernatural transformations. ‘A lemon on the bare table. It glows’, suggests one poem; ‘In the field I found Yesenin’s cow observing a small cloud’, reports another. This is a Samos of magical acts, ‘as if a miracle were the most natural of things’.

The endless interplay of text and image here holds something of the emblematic. Indeed, as Lucy Mercer writes in *Emblem* (Prototype, 2022), her debut collection, the two constantly ‘reinterpret and reinforce each other, inducing murky contemplation as we move from one part to another and back again’. David Harsent draws attention to the poems’ interpretive potential in his introduction: the words and images may be simple, but ‘there’s always more to it than that’.

Ritsos attunes us to a double present, to the world as it happens and as we interpret it. Gareth Evans is right to point us to John Berger: ‘to read a poem means to be transported [...] to a place where future and past fall away and there is only here and now’, he writes, ‘a here and now which sings and includes everything’. *Monochords* invites us in, acknowledging its constant passing, making each note all the more significant: ‘You know? In a while it’ll be over’.