

## Catullus, Dafydd ap Gwilyn & Yannis Ritsos

*Translated from the Latin, the Greek and the Welsh by Paul Merchant*

**Paul Merchant** lives in Oregon, where he is director of the William Stafford archives. One of his collections of poetry, *Bone from a Stag's Heart*, was a 1988 (British) Poetry Book Society Recommendation. His poetry collection *Some Business of Affinity*, containing translations from Catullus, Dafydd ap Gwilym, and Yannis Ritsos, will be published in 2006 by Five Seasons Press in England. The complete Ritsos *Monochords* will appear in early 2006 from Trask House Press in Portland.

**Catullus** (84-54 BCE) was a provincial from Verona, in Cisalpine Gaul, but seems to have been most happy in his villa by an Alpine lake, Benacus (now Lago di Garda), on whose treacherous waters he and his brother learned to sail and fish. He may have been a less than dutiful son, showing a vigorous contempt for Julius Caesar, a family friend, whom he skewered (along with other members of his party) in a number of scurrilous epigrams. The two momentous events in his life were the meeting with "Lesbia" (Clodia Metelli) and the death of his brother.

Thrown in promiscuously among the famous poems of adoration and hatred is an outpouring of witty squibs, translations from Greek, odes, obscene libels, and long meditations. Catullus died at the age of thirty, having already found a personal voice as vivid as Sappho's. He left to all the Romance languages the Celtic word for a kiss.

“Flourishing in Wales between the lives of Dante and Chaucer, **Dafydd** overturned the conventions of courtly love, while bestowing immortality on his delight and torment, Morfydd.

“Ironic, self-mocking, intricate, his poems satirize the European inheritance from Catullus, Ovid, and the troubadours, in complex patterns of alliteration and rhyme (called in Welsh *cynghanedd*), whose rules he did much to codify. As with the poems of François Villon in the next century, only the bare shadow of his sardonic brilliance can be caught in English.”

- PM

**Yannis Ritsos** was born in 1909 in Monemvasia in the Greek Peloponnese, and lived a productive life, working as a theater director, dancer, calligrapher, and painter. Frequently imprisoned for long periods by right-wing regimes, he remains Greece's best-loved poet, known for his lyrics and epic meditations, plays, novels, and translations. His most popular long poem, *Romiosini* ('Greekness'), was set to music by Theodorakis.

Ritsos is perhaps most often read in this country as a master of the captured moment, like one of his small paintings, drawn on stones and fragments of wood, the only materials available to him in the island prisons. The sequence of 336 *Monochords*, of which a selection appears here, were written in a single month, August 1979, in exile on the island of Samos. As he says in the last monochord, they can be read as keys to his whole work, as a dictionary of his images and themes. Yannis Ritsos died in Athens in 1990.

## Catullus

*Translated from the Latin by Paul Merchant*

### I

Who'll handle this fresh little book, this  
smart, scrubbed, polished little book?  
My friend, you liked these jottings, so  
you said. And you put all of history  
into three fat tomes. Good god, who else  
in Rome would try a stunt like that?  
It's your turn, make what you can  
of this collection.  
And Lady Muse,  
keep it alive at least one generation.

[...]

### III

Come see my new girlfriend, said Varus  
in mid Forum, so I kept him company.  
For a tart, I saw at first glance, she wasn't  
without intelligence, and she was easy  
on the eye, so we got to talking about  
this and that, but mostly about Bithynia,  
how well we all made out back there  
and how many perks brought home.  
No need to wrap up the truth, I said,  
none of us, governor or staff, did well  
out of it, mostly on account of the boss,  
about whom the less said the better,  
treating all his staff like dirt. But surely,  
chimed in the others, at least you formed  
a squad of litter-bearers, Bithynia  
being the place for litter-bearers?  
She was a good-looking girl, I couldn't  
resist a small untruth. Pickings were slim,  
I said, but I managed to find myself  
eight upright men to carry me around.  
The truth is, I couldn't hire a beggar  
with either strength or inclination  
to hoist a broken bed leg. But she,  
the little vixen, piped up again:  
Darling, dear Catullus, do me a favor,  
let me borrow your men. I need a ride

to the festival of Serapis. Hold it  
right there, I said, my memory's not  
what it was, they're not mine, they're  
Cinna's, my old pal Gaius Cinna. But  
what the hell, mine or his, we share  
and share alike. But as for you,  
You tactless slut, isn't a man allowed  
to make a mistake occasionally?

[...]

Yesterday, Calvus, nothing to do, we  
played lazy day blues on the keyboard,  
two cool customers doing their thing  
giving each other poem starts, a game  
of pitch and toss with metrical schemes,  
passing the bottle, having the last laugh.  
I came away high as a kite, Calvus,  
lit with your wit, your quick ripostes.  
Now I'm off my feed, no appetite,  
not a bite, no respite for weary eyes,  
tossing and turning all over the cot,  
white-hot, awaiting day's light, ready  
to start all over the whole palaver.  
Dawn. Worn to a shred, half dead,  
spread supine on my little bed,  
came to me, dear flame, this riff,  
a whiff of my despair, a prayer.  
Take care, light of my life, don't dare  
ignore this love-note shipped to you.  
Nemesis will whip you black and blue,  
and she's a boss you'd best not cross.

[...]

#### IV

Furius and Aurelius, old mess-mates,  
try these brochures: 'Farthest India'  
(sunset, the eastern ocean thudding  
on a long shoreline)  
Or 'Overland with a Camel Caravan'  
(run the gauntlet of warring tribes)  
or 'Back to the Med' (its waters  
reddened by Nile floods)  
North, perhaps? 'An Alpine Scramble

In the Footsteps of Caesarî (across  
Germany to Britain, lost in the ocean  
right off the worldís rim)  
Any of these you said, with godís help,  
youíd sample. Take then, if you dare,  
this message (short but not sweet)  
meant for my darling:  
Long life and health! Happy adulteries!  
(all three hundred in a single clutch  
like a vampire, loveless, methodical  
sucking them bone-dry)  
I adored her. Forget that. She destroyed  
my love. (It was a flower blossoming  
touched it and went on.

[...]

## The Mist

*Dafydd ap Gwilyn, translated from the Welsh by Paul Merchant*

Yesterday (Thursday, my drinking day)  
was a red-letter mark in the calendar.  
I recovered my faith in women. Worn  
wafer-thin with love, I was invited  
to a love-tryst in the green cathedral,  
a meeting made at my girl's choosing.

No man alive, under blaze of heaven,  
knew of my pact with the shapely girl.  
At sun's rising that Thursday morning  
I leapt from bed brim full of laughter  
and set my course to the small cottage  
where the slim one was expecting me.

But now like a thief on the empty moor  
a mist came creeping, a black cortege,  
a parchment scroll, rain's manuscript,  
clotted curds, a slippery hindrance,  
a tin colander starting to rust through,  
a fowling net on the swarthy soil.

A dark gate blocking a narrow path,  
a winnowing sieve tossed up carelessly,  
a monk's grey cowl shading the land,  
darkening every vale and hollow,  
a thorn fence bestriding the sky,  
a purple bruise on the fogbound hill.

It was like wool, a thin veil of fleece  
flimsy as smoke, a straw bonnet,  
a hedge of rain barring my progress,  
a coat of armour, a storm to soak me,  
blinding my eyes so I was lost utterly,  
a coarse cloak thrown over the county.

Then it was a castle right in my path,  
hall of the fairy king, wind's territory,  
a pair of fat cheeks chewing the earth,  
torchbearers searching a pitchy sky  
for its three pallid constellations,  
a poet's blindfold, a bard's penalty.

A length of expensive cambric

thrown over the heavens, a halter  
of spidery gossamer, French fabric,  
on the moorland, fairiesí realm,  
a filmy breath of piebald smoke,  
forest mist on a May morning.

Film on the eyes, a barking kennel,  
ointment smeared on Hellís witches,  
sodden dew become oddly sinister,  
a discarded suit of damp chain-mail.  
Íd sooner walk the pitch dark heath  
than navigate this mist at noon.

At midnight stars light up the sky,  
candles aflame in a dark chancel,  
but this morning (bitter memory)  
no moon, no stars, only a mist,  
a prison door slammed behind me,  
this mist, a misery past endurance.

Thus was my path curdled by clouds  
leaving a stupefied stone-blind lover  
stood stock-still, bereft of the sight  
of Morfyddís elegant arching brows.

from *Monochords* (1983)

*Yannis Ritsos, translated from the Greek by Paul Merchant*

[...]

145

Work teaches you what you should do, and the skills you'll need.

146

What you want to suggest, the words will tell you.

147

Anyway, words come from deeds.

148

You gather pearls. They tell you nothing. Throw them back. They'll speak to you.

149

It's life above all, not thought, that gives you the right to speak.

150

If I can't make you see it as well, it's as if it's not mine.

151

For the string and the body to resonate, don't wear gloves.

152

Tell me again, my friend-so you start over.

153

I wish you good morning and mean it.

154

On the dark red curtain the horse's immense shadow.

155

Did you manage to say thank you? Nothing got left out.

156

All alone with their exhaustion, climbing the same slope.

157

It's not a single line, the road to the future.

158

To find the past, you have go ahead a long way.

159

A good relationship with your mirror? With the world, too.

160

Sunday bells for children and old men.

161

At dusk, the colors' brilliance keeps you from seeing the end.

162

No love. The world intact.

163

In handcuffs: and playing the violin so beautifully.

164

Much later you see what you saw.

165

Hidden under the white pebble, the red one.

166

The pregnant woman on her way to church goes through the olive grove.

167

Mountain, ocean, and a naked girl the other side of the sunflower.

168

To know a man, you need to carve his statue.

169

With her blue eyes she gives color to the world.

170

Every second a tree, a bird, a smokestack, a woman.

171

He speaks about the poor. His hand becomes a river.

172

You'll have to drill a number of holes in a reed before it will play a song.

173

The cross tells us other climbers reached this far.



174

In the mirror I see the swimmers and myself.

175

Mountain, bell tower, cypress, travelers.

176

Ah, summer of plump grapes, outside the monastery.

177

Old man, my friend, how youthfully you swing your stick at pebbles.

178

Grape harvesters and horses in the ocean. Bravo, comes the call from the balconies.

179

I go back naked to those places.

180

In the field I found Yesenin's cow observing a small cloud.

181

Our Lady dressed in black, in the golden corn.

182

Summer winds buffet the carts on the bridge.

183

Night of pleasure. Abandoned poems.

184

They hauled down the flags. Went back to their homes. They're counting their money.

185

This bird, how will it teach its song to the fish?

186

I completely erase the shadow with this golden pencil.

187

How well he impersonates himself, like someone else.

188

Darkness always behind my pages. That's why my letters shine so brightly.

189

I never understood how I got up here. All the way on foot.

190

The anchor, embroidered on your sleeve, took hold in your heart.

191

In your old age, the child you were, you still are.

192

My old house had nine windows. All were open to the world.

193

The handsome boatman put a rose in Polydora's apron.

194

Setting sun, your golden roses imprinted themselves on my page.

195

All the words are not enough to get anything said.

196

Ah, that biker in Luna Park, deep in the wooden well.

197

Breath of youth: the girl's breast wet from the ocean.

198

Deep well water, slaking the statues' thirst.

199

The sun still hasn't set, but they've lit the harbor lights.

200

Poetry. A lost pleasure-craft, says Elytis.

201

In young people's hands banners are singing.

202

I create lines to exorcise the evil that overcame my country.

203

A Greek, I say, naked with a basket of grapes.

204

Hairy masculine mountains with a delicate white chapel.

205

Arethusa, holding the lyre on her Cretan lap.

206

Some here with horses, others with trains and umbrellas.

207

Naked body-a greeting to the whole world.

208

You'll do fine with the dream; it doesn't ask for proof.

209

A pale sleepwalker, wearing a red chrysanthemum.

210

The tangible body, more elusive than its shadow.

211

Outside the shuttered house, the four winds, smoke, chairs.

212

With one moment of hope, they mortgaged our whole future.

213

Friend cloud, looking for your reward from humans: not from the clouds.

214

Sweet corn, grapes, a donkey, and the sky.

215

For everything you did, and didn't do, the same repentance.

216

Every so often a transparent leaf shades the whole city beautifully for me.

217

But what are you looking for, finally, as you drown in words?

218

There, where a cuckoo and a nightingale crossed, is my crucifix.

219

Smashed marbles, restored with cement and plaster.

220

I closed my books. The hill entered my room.

221

Beautiful dancer, don't say a word; dance.

222

It's raining, and I open my umbrella so my statue will stay dry.

223

The garden with its pistachios, Chryse, my poems, the piano, Niobe.

224

Up on the mountain I call out my name. It's really well known.

225

You know, in a little while it'll be gone.

226

A star tumbled into the thorn-bushes. I look for it. Don't find it.

227

The August moon, full of seaweed.

228

The Greek line of the hill. Its missing temple floating in the air.

229

O ship without a crew, as the sun sets where are you taking me?

230

Night insects tangled in women's hair and voices in the corridors.

231

Under that arrogance, a great wound.

232

Shouts from the vineyard: the fields are brimming with grape juice.

233

These fish speak only in the lower depths.

234

The whistles of sunken ships have taken over those houses.

235

What amazing discovery is the fishmonger calling out, this Tuesday morning, by the garden?

236

You need to enlarge your mirror-it doesn't fit you: it cuts off your head and feet.

237

Tears are manly, too. That's right. But complaints aren't.

238

Eleven brothers and a daughter. The house is empty; it's sunk, that ship.

239

In the darkness sometimes mirrors whisper the most important truths.

240

You open the window. Didn't I tell you? It's worth the trouble.

241

Dawn. Myself and the sentry on the long bridge.

242

And when you come it's as if you were running away. But perhaps I'm gone.†

243

He borrows colors from the sunset to decorate his corpse.

244

At night, the ocean and its ships enter my room.

245

How the deep blue islands of cloud hover above the golden evening.

246

Your clothes, thrown down on the chair, still smell of the ocean.

247

Is your wound speaking? It's telling the truth.

248

Yet another medal on your chest: yet another wrinkle on your brow.

249

The more you wound them, the more distant they become. They're running away.

250

What are you talking about? The sky. Even if there is none.

251

This man has become hoarse from silence.

252

Evening. So the maid in the customs house is gossiping with a star.

253

This brawny hand holding a flower.

254

How elegantly the coalminer combs his wet hair.

255

The hour when the grape harvesters go home and turn on the lights.

256

Would you use the same gesture to peel an artichoke and a star?

257

I enter a marble temple whenever I speak your name, my country.

258

A profound Karlovasi moon over the croaking of the love-besotted frogs.

259

He strikes the earth, draws water, offers a drink to the dead and to his horses.

260

The lantern in the barracks where tired soldiers are asleep.

261

Shuttered house. Outside, the moon, and a sentry pissing in the colonnade.

262

How far away. And it was yesterday. Hardly any time at all.

263

Which words and how many to speak my silence, so it can at last fall silent?

264

Poetry didn't always have the first word. It always had the last.

265

If you stay awake, the things you lose come back double. But only those.

266

The flags' long strides, up high, above the young men's shoulders.

267

I'd have liked to say something Greek, and for it to get away.

268

The murderer's clothes were worn by the sheep. It bleated to the stars.

269

You who know what is hidden among statues and words, should bear witness some day.

270

Mounted on hazardous scaffolding, we are cleaning our temples' pediments.

271

A huge proletarian moon over the sleeping city.

272

Conscious of his importance, he always speaks softly.

273

Anyway, there's what doesn't exist.

274

In the place where an embarrassed silence falls, I put a candlestick or a water glass.

275

The big dog comes at dusk into the children's empty rooms and whines.

276

To meet pointlessness we wore a golden mask.

277

How precisely these free days guarantee they'll continue.

278

Some things they took from him, some they gave. Now he grows rich on loss.

279

On the marble floor the loop of the horse's bridle.

280

Admirers multiplied. Friends disappeared. Not one was left.

281

He goes for walks in his head. He treads the clouds with his feet. Applaud him.

282

A body hedged about-the modesty of inexperience.

283

To speak constantly about wrongs is like being wrong.

284

He stretched the noose into a tightrope and walked it with a yellow umbrella.

285

An insatiable desire for visibility, his hiding-place.

286

How quietly time collapses in a poem.

287

The things they called him, he called them in return, as a favor.

288

Afterwards, in Oedipus' name, I ordered blue glass eyes.

289

Up in the belfry I smoke a cigarette beside the evening star.

290

Slowly, the evening rested its builder's trowel on my pages.

291

The headless statue may be waiting for my head.

292

Poem, don't abandon my body to the wolves.

293

Himself by the window. Himself in the mirror. A space. And the lamp.

294

I've been waiting here an hour. And the boatman has launched out to sea.

295

The slightest offerings of sleep strengthen you in the daytime.



296

Underneath the words there's always a naked man, pretending to sleep so we can see him.

297

Out of ideas, my city, after midnight I play at traffic cop.

298

A fiery sunset, kindling a purple blaze on Orestes' windows.

299

The ship leaves. I stay behind with the streetlight.