

hers

Maria Laina

Translated from the Greek by

Karen Van Dyck

WORLD POETRY BOOKS

Translator's Note

My translation of Maria Laina's *Δικό της* (*Hers*, 1985) originally appeared in *The Rehearsal of Misunderstanding*, a bilingual anthology of three collections by Greek women poets published by Wesleyan University Press in 1998. The aim of the anthology was to introduce readers in the United States to a new style of elliptical poetry written in the wake of the Dictatorship (1967–1974) by women who had grown up under the colonels' censorship. In the hands of these women, the use of cinematographic sequences of images formerly employed to evade the censors became a feminist strategy for undermining patriarchy. *Hers* was a search for a place where *her* story could spread out over pages and take up the space it needed. It was a pivotal piece that teased out the relation between censorship, gender, and poetry in Greece.

I remember meeting the poet in the late 1980s at her apartment on Tydeos Street in Athens. I had brought a list of questions for her to answer. What struck me then and sticks with me to this day was her lack of interest in my being there. An accomplished translator herself, she valued translation. But why this need to meet? Surely my translation was my business. To me her blank whiskey stare came right out of the pages of *Hers*—the same quiet insularity, the same unwillingness to express expectation or to believe

without elbows
or knees.

References to other literary works, from Shakespeare to modern Greek poetry, are everywhere in the collection. The vexed issue of finding room is clearer if we recall another “Maria” poem by Milto Sachtouris, a surrealist poet of the post-WWII generation who greatly influenced the poets of Laina’s generation through his visual vocabulary and plain language. While Sachtouris’s “Maria” is a single page, Laina’s fills a whole collection. While his Maria is still trapped within the traditional four walls of the domestic sphere, Laina’s takes off, flies away, drifts into the space of other pages. The poetry of Cavafy also comes into play, not only as a utopian signpost for a more perfect society, but in the use of typography to create a space for such desire. In his poem “In the Same Space,” referred to in *Hers*, Cavafy describes how love is demarcated by the locations where desire is felt—in the café, the bedroom, the taverna—but also by the page where desire is manifested through line and stanza breaks as well as spelling. Another important link is across media, to Peter Handke’s film *The Left-handed Woman*, which offers Laina a way to make Maria “staring out,” frame after frame. Like Handke’s protagonist, Maria doesn’t fit in and has trouble communicating with others. There is no attempt to socialize the misfit as the traditional *bildungsroman* would. Instead, the collection, like the film, provides a place where the reader must acknowledge her, and the language in which she emerges, as her own.

At times this collection suggests that Maria’s escape to this other place dates back centuries—to an ancient matriarchy in the period of the fresco, before metal and cotton. At other times, it is still to come, in the future, when the soft stone has crumbled and writing has been wiped away. More than anything, *Hers* insists, it is a place right now, right here, “out in the light,” in the book we, her readers, are holding.



So why republish this collection now? One reason is that it never had its own audience since it came out with two other collections as part of a larger argument about contemporary Greek women’s poetry. The translation needed space to speak for itself without the other collections, without the Greek. Also, it seemed to me that its minimalist feminist poetics might have more traction now in the US after L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, the ensuing elliptical turn that included such women poets as Matthea Harvey, Susan Wheeler, and C.D. Wright, and translations like Anne Carson’s *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho*. But perhaps the most important reason was my sense that in this faster, busier millennium we might all profit from spending time in the quiet, interstitial space of *Hers*. It is a book that teaches us to slow down and wait.

In preparing this new edition I was concerned whether the interpretation I had developed regarding the narra-

In everything she did she sought herself;
no one should trust her.

Τοιχογραφία

Σώζεται ή αρχή απ' τούς μηρούς
σὲ ἄτονο γαλάζιο
τμήμα ποδίου ἀκόσμητο πρὸς τὰ ἀριστερὰ
καὶ τμήμα ἀπολήξεως φορέματος.
Στὸ δέρμα διακρίνονται γραμμὲς
κυρίως ὀξυκόρυφες.
Ὁ χῶρος τοῦ λαιμοῦ διακόπτεται
ἀπ' τὸν ἀριστερὸ βραχίονα
ποὺ φέρεται πρὸς τὰ ἐπάνω
ἐνῶ μονάχα τὸ δεξιὸ στῆθος δηλώνεται
μὲ ἑλαφρὰ καμπύλωση.
Ἀπὸ τὸ κάτω μέρος τοῦ προσώπου
λείπει τὸ μεγαλύτερο κομμάτι.
Κόκκινα τρίγωνα ἢ τόξα
σ' ὄλο τὸ ἄσπρο τοῦ βολβοῦ.
Σώζεται ἐπίσης ἡ κορδέλα τῶν μαλλιῶν
καὶ ἡ στροφή τοῦ σώματος
ποὺ ἀσφαλῶς προϋποθέτει
ἀνάλογες κινήσεις τῶν χεριῶν.

Λείπει τὸ ἔδαφος τοῦ ἔρωτα.

Fresco

The beginning of the thighs remains
a dull blue
to the left a section of foot unadorned
and a section from the hem of the dress.
On the skin lines are visible
mainly sharp angles.
The neck area is interrupted
by the left arm
which is raised up
while only the right breast is registered
by a slight curve.
Most of the lower part
of the face is missing.
Red triangles or arcs
cover the white of the eye.
The hair ribbon also remains
and the body's twist
which surely presupposes
similar movements in the hands.

The ground of love is missing.

Ἡ Μαρία μέσα στὸν καθρέφτη
ὀλόσωμη
στρώνει τὸ φόρεμά της στὸ λαιμό.
Δὲν ἔχει σημασία τώρα ποῦ ξαπλώνει τὸ κορμί της
ἂν ἔγινε σημύδα ἢ χορτάρι
ἢ Μαρία μέσα στὸν καθρέφτη
στρώνει τὸ φόρεμά της στὸ λαιμό.

Maria in the mirror
full-length
straightens her dress at the neck.
It does not matter now where her body lies
whether she turned to birch or grass
Maria in the mirror
straightens her dress at the neck.

Ἡ Μαρία στέκεται
σωπαίνει ἀμίλητη.

Ὡραῖο φῶς τῆς μέρας.

Maria stands
grows silent.

Fair daylight.

Χαμογελάει τις περισσότερες φορές.
Αυτή ή Μαρία
από την άποψη αυτή—

Most times she smiles.
This Maria
from this perspective—

Τρία δλόκληρα λεπτά προτοῦ οὐρλιάξει—
Καθισμένη στὸ κίτρινο φῶς
ένος προχωρημένου ἀπογεύματος
οἱ θάμνοι χρυσοὶ
ὅ,τι δὲν ἀγαποῦσε ἔλειπε
ἔμειν' ἐκεῖ ἀκίνητη
τρία δλόκληρα λεπτά προτοῦ οὐρλιάξει.
Ὅταν τὴν ταρακούνησαν ἀπάντησε:
Τὴν ἐπόμενη φορὰ
θὰ μποροῦσα νὰ μιλήσω μὲ κάποιον
καὶ ν' ἀγαπήσω, ἂν χρειαστεῖ.

Three whole minutes before she howled—
Seated in the yellow light
of an advancing afternoon
the bushes were golden
what she did not love was missing
she stayed there motionless
three whole minutes before she howled.
When they shook her she replied:
Next time
I will be able to talk with someone
and to love, if necessary.

Ἐπίλογος

Epilogue

Εἶμαι στὴν ἀρχὴ τῆς ζωῆς μου καὶ εἶμαι ἔξω στὸ φῶς. Ἔχουν περάσει χρόνια ἀπὸ τότε καὶ προσπαθῶ νὰ ρουφήξω τὸ ἄσπρο. Μόνο τὸ φῶς χρειάζομαι. Ὑστερα, σκέφτηκα, θὰ σταματήσω νὰ κάνω αὐτὸν τὸ θόρυβο. Ἄν σταματήσω νὰ κάνω αὐτὸν τὸ θόρυβο, θ' ἀκούσω κάτι πολὺ ὁμορφο. Δὲν ξέρω ἀκόμα, ἀλλὰ εἶμαι σίγουρη, κι αὐτὸ μοῦ συμβαίνει συχνά. Μοῦ συμβαίνει συχνὰ ἐκεῖ πού κάθομαι καὶ σκέφτομαι, ἀλλὰ δὲν εἶναι καθόλου αὐτό. Καθόλου κάτι πού σκέφτομαι, ἀλλ' αὐτὸ μὲ βοηθάει. Μὲ βοηθάει νὰ μὴν ἔχω τὸ νοῦ μου, νὰ μὴν περιμένω τίποτα. Γιατὶ τότε τίποτα δὲ θὰ μπορούσε νὰ συμβεῖ, ἐκτὸς ἀπὸ κάτι πού ἤδη τὸ ξέρω. Καὶ τί ξέρω ἐγώ; Τί ξέρω;

I am at the beginning of my life and I am out in the light. Many years have passed since then and I am trying to suck in the white. I only needed light. Later, I thought, I will stop making that noise. If I stop making that noise, I will hear something very beautiful. I do not know yet, but I am certain, and that happens to me often. It happens to me often when I sit and think, but it is not at all that. Not at all something which I think, but it helps. It helps if my mind is elsewhere, if I am not waiting for anything. Because then nothing can happen, except for something I already know. And me, what do I know? What do I know?

About the Author

Born in 1947 in Patras, Maria Laina is widely regarded as one of Greece's most important living poets. Her work includes nine poetry collections, eleven plays, five books of prose, four critical studies, and an anthology of twentieth-century poetry in Greek translations. She is the recipient of several awards, including the Greek National Prize for Poetry (1994), the Maria Callas Award (1998), the Cavafy Award (2006), and the Athens Academy Prize (2015) for her book of collected poems. A recent collection, *Ότι έγινε: Άνθρωποι και φαντάσματα* (Whatever Happened: People and Ghosts), received the Reader's Prize in 2021.

About the Translator

Karen Van Dyck's books include *Kassandra and the Censors*, *The Rehearsal of Misunderstanding*, *The Scattered Papers of Penelope*, *Austerity Measures: The New Greek Poetry*, and the co-edited Norton anthology, *The Greek Poets: Homer to the Present*. Her essays, translations and poetry have appeared in *The Paris Review*, *The Guardian*, *LARB*, *Poitiiki* and *Tender*. She is founding director of Hellenic Studies at Columbia University where she teaches courses on translation, gender and Modern Greek literature.