

James Collins

DAYS OF 1931

Of course no statue or painting was ever done of him.

—C. P. Cavafy

A ritual, he thinks, is something you continue to do long after it has lost the power to transform, or even interest you. He can picture the café, the same table, his spot saved, the friends already gathered there. How dull it must be before he arrives—no one wanting to waste their best lines until the audience settles.

But perhaps that's too unkind. Perhaps a ritual is what you turn to when your own gestures have become vague, half-hearted. The way, for example, we evoke Oedipus when all we really have to say is that life seems to pile one riddle atop another.

Walking slowly (they will wait) through the afternoon glare, he mumbles:

These are unfortunate days for Thebes.
That strange beast—they call it the Sphinx—
for whom killing is not enough but asks riddles as well.

Or

It's hardly a riddle, really. "Why does every youth
I let pass imagine that he is correct,
entitled to kingdoms?"

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It is out of character for the doctor Stefanou to remain so remote. While the others push their witticisms, his only response is an indifferent, tired smirk; a raised eyebrow his only exchange in argument. With the second cups nearly

drained, he watches the doctor studying the grains. As though they told him, "You should say it," he begins at last.

"I was thinking, Cavafy, how you remind me of a more fortunate Orpheus. Like him, you find nothing in this world of interest. Only the past and its dead tempt you. Like Orpheus your passion, or labor, is to bring back to this world the things or people you have lost, and like him, you almost succeed. But the dead are too beautiful, and you can't keep yourself from turning. Maybe you know that as much as you desire them, we are most beautiful in the half-light? But I say 'more fortunate' because it does seem that sometimes when you turn, they remain there gazing back at you.

"I don't know how many of you have heard. To be honest, I am surprised that no one's mentioned him. It was Balthazar who told me only this morning. Our friend Amaril is dead. He took his own life, it seems. There was a question of money. Apparently his business, the one we'd all heard so much about, was bankrupt. And there is also a rumor that that boy, the actor, had left him."

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How many times has he walked these same streets, at this very hour, while a white quarter moon rose in the sky? Passed the taverns, the cafés, the alleys, the closed up shops, the lit windows, the glimpse of sea between two facades. Now, he has no need to whisper:

For a time, we thought everything would be all right.
Another king appeared and chased the beast away.
But then there were locusts, and that horrible business
with the queen. They say he really didn't know.

What does discovery mean when repetition is your way of life? It is one thing to learn that your wife is your mother, that you've murdered your father, but something else to find a simple gesture or pose that has somehow escaped from the past, to find it and say, Yes, that is what I've been searching for. He remembers his verse:

“ . . . I brought to art
desires and feelings— some things half seen,
faces or lines; some indistinct memories.”*

Repetition, he assures himself, is the essence of song. Yes, but are all songs worth singing?

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Nearly dusk, it takes the faces longer to pass through the smoke they blow, for mouths and their words to weave together. He watches them from the corner of his eye, so that the faces form like a puzzle, feature by feature. For an instant, each one is only an unpossessed curve of jaw, a teasing smile. But how is he to mistake one of the living for Amaril? That is how it works, isn't it? Something so familiar—a strand of hair that twists lazily across its eye—turns a lock, and memory opens her door. And behind it, something finer than all this flesh, something further back. He can hear the doctor, “but more fortunate.”

Poor Amaril. How long since they'd spoken? Like my Oedipus, he thinks, remembering Amaril as he was so long ago: handsome, confident, simple. As though everything had been promised to him. As though everything had already been answered. And when each thing was offered—a business, a wife, a reputation, a lover, why not call it a kingdom—he took it without any fear of what lurked inside. Which one held the knife?

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Back at his desk, he opens the window wide, inviting both sea and city in. Taking up a pen, he begins to write.

*From Cavafy's poem “I Brought to Art,” the Rae Dalven translation.

IN THEBES

There is so much talk of the scandal now,
its violent end. He really didn't know, it seems,
that she was his mother. With his own hands,
he gouged out his eyes. And yet (while the others talk on),
I can still see him coming down from the pass:
smiling despite the blood, his dark eyes daring us
not to call him king. His swagger—how it unsettled
the queen—as though he really did believe
there is only one riddle and he'd answered it.
Not one of us had the nerve to tell him
he was wrong. Not one had that desire.