

NIKOS KAZANTZAKIS

REPORT
TO
GRECO

Translated from the Greek by
P. A. BIEN



A Touchstone Book
Published by Simon and Schuster

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CONTENTS

Introduction: The Writing of “Report to Greco”

Translator’s Note

Author’s Introduction

PROLOGUE

Chapter 1: ANCESTORS

Chapter 2: THE FATHER

Chapter 3: THE MOTHER

Chapter 4: THE SON

Chapter 5: ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Chapter 6: THE DEATH OF MY GRANDFATHER

Chapter 7: CRETE VS. TURKEY

Chapter 8: SAINTS’ LEGENDS

Chapter 9: LONGING FOR FLIGHT

Chapter 10: MASSACRE

Chapter 11: NAXOS

Chapter 12: LIBERTY

Chapter 13: ADOLESCENT DIFFICULTIES

Chapter 14: THE IRISH LASS

Chapter 15: ATHENS

Chapter 16: RETURN TO CRETE. KNOSSOS

Chapter 17: PILGRIMAGE THROUGH GREECE

Chapter 18: ITALY

Chapter 19: MY FRIEND THE POET. MOUNT ATHOS

Chapter 20: JERUSALEM

Chapter 21: THE DESERT. SINAI

Chapter 22: CRETE

Chapter 23: PARIS. NIETZSCHE THE GREAT MARTYR

Chapter 24: VIENNA. MY ILLNESS

Chapter 25: BERLIN

Chapter 26: RUSSIA

Chapter 27: THE CAUCASUS

Chapter 28: THE PRODIGAL RETURNS

Chapter 29: ZORBA

Chapter 30: WHEN THE GERM OF "THE ODYSSEY" FORMED FRUIT WITHIN ME

Chapter 31: THE CRETAN GLANCE

EPILOGUE

INTRODUCTION: THE WRITING OF “REPORT TO GRECO”

by Helen N. Kazantzakis

NIKOS KAZANTZAKIS asked his God for ten additional years, ten additional years in which to complete his work—to say what he had to say and “empty himself.” He wanted death to come and take only a sackful of bones. Ten years were enough, or so he thought.

But Kazantzakis was not the kind who could be “emptied.” Far from feeling old and tired at the age of seventy-four, he considered himself rejuvenated, even after his final adventure, the tragic vaccination. Freiburg’s two great specialists, the hematologist Heilmeyer and the surgeon Kraus, concurred in this opinion.

The whole of the final month Professor Heilmeyer shouted triumphantly after each visit, “This man is healthy, I tell you! His blood has become as sound as my own!”

“Why do you run like that!” I kept scolding Nikos, afraid that he might slip on the terrazzo and break a bone.

“Don’t worry, Lénotska, I’ve got wings!” he answered. One sensed the confidence he had in his constitution and his soul, which refused to bite the dust.

Sometimes he sighed, “Oh, if only I could dictate to you!” Then, grasping a pencil, he would try to write with his left hand.

“What’s the hurry? Who is chasing you? The worst is past. In a few days you’ll be able to write to your heart’s content.”

He would turn his head and gaze at me for a few moments in silence. Then, with a sigh: “I have a great deal to say. I am being tormented again by three great themes, three new novels. But first I’ve got to finish Greco.”

“You’ll finish it, don’t worry.”

“I plan to change it. Will you get some paper and a pencil? Let’s see if I can manage.”

But our combined labor lasted less than five minutes.

“Impossible! I don’t know how to dictate. I can think only when the pencil is in my hand.”

Ancestors, parents, Crete, childhood years . . . Athens, Crete, travels . . . Sikelianos, Vienna, Berlin, Prevelakis, Moscow . . .

Now I remember another crucial moment in our lives, another hospital, this time in Paris. Nikos was gravely ill again with a temperature of 104, the physicians all in a turmoil. Everyone had lost hope, only Kazantzakis himself remained unperturbed.

“Will you get a pencil, Lénotska? . . .”

Still plunged in his vision, he dictated to me in a broken voice the Franciscan haikai he placed in the saint’s mouth: “I said to the almond tree, ‘Sister, speak to me of God.’ And the almond tree blossomed.”

Before we departed for China, he left the Report in the hands of a young painter, his “midwife” he called him, because he used to come at the crack of dawn, climb up to Nikos’ study, troubled by all the great problems—God, men, art—and begin the interminable *whences, whithers* and *how*

longs, whereupon Nikos, laughing, admiring the youth's passion and his violent love for his art, "delivered." He "dropped" ideas and unburdened himself.

"The house might catch on fire," Nikos told him. "I'd rather leave the manuscript with you. If it is burned at this point, I'll never be able to rewrite it. The great shame is only that I never finished it."

But how could he have ever finished it? What had he left undone in those last few months before the journey?

He began the *Report* in the autumn of 1956, upon our return from Vienna. When he needed a change, he took up the translation of Homer's *Odyssey*, which he and Professor Kakridis were working on together.

"We've got to manage to finish it in time so I won't go down to Hades with a lame leg," he used to say half ironically, half with fear.

During these same months, sections from the English translation of his own *Odyssey* kept arriving at frequent intervals, together with entire pages listing words difficult to translate. How much time and how much labor were consumed, also, by that *Odyssey!* Not to mention the numerous publications of his other works in Greek. There were texts which had to be corrected or supplemented; and Russian manuscripts the manuscript of which had been lost; and Pierre Sipriot of the French radio, who plagued him with his "Colloquies"; and the film; and a trip to India at the invitation of Nehru, which we prepared for but did not take because we feared the many inoculations required.

No, he did not manage to finish the *Report* to Greco in time; he was unable to write a second draft, as was his custom. He did manage, however, to rewrite the entire first chapter and one of the concluding sections: "When the germ of *The Odyssey* formed fruit within me," which he sent before his death to be published in the periodical *Nea Estia*. In addition, he managed to read over his manuscript and to make penciled corrections or additions here and there.

Alone, now, I re-experience the autumn twilight which descended ever so gently, like a smile on a child, with the first chapter.

"Read, Lénotska, read and let me hear it!"

I collect my tools: sight, smell, touch, taste, hearing, intellect. Night has fallen, the day's work is done. I return like a mole to my home, the ground. Not because I am tired and cannot work. I am not tired. But the sun has set. . . .

I could go no further; a lump had risen in my throat. This was the first time Nikos had spoken to me about death.

"Why do you write as though ready to die?" I cried, truly despondent. And to myself: Why, today, has he accepted death?

"Don't be alarmed, wife, I'm not going to die," he answered without the slightest hesitation. "Didn't we say I'd live another ten years? I need ten more years!" His voice was lower now. Extending his hand, he touched my knee. "Come now, read. Let's see what I wrote."

To me he denied it, but inwardly, perhaps, he knew. For that very same night he sealed the first chapter in an envelope together with a letter for his friend Pantelís Prevelakis: "Helen could not read it; she began to cry. But it is good for her—and for me also—to begin to grow accustomed . . ."

It seems his inner daemon had prodded him to abandon the *Faust: Part Three* which he had desired to write, and to lay the keel of his autobiography instead.

The *Report* is a mixture of fact and fiction—a great deal of truth, a minimum of fancy. Various

dates have been changed. When he speaks about others, it is always the truth, unaltered, exact what he saw and heard. When he speaks about his personal adventures, there are some small modifications.

But one thing is certain: If he had been able to rewrite this *Report*, he would have changed it. Exactly how, we cannot know. He would have enriched it, for each day he recalled new incidents which he had forgotten. Also, he would have poured it (so I believe) into the mold of reality. His actual life was full of substance, of human anguish, joy, and pain—"dignity," to put it in a single word. Why should he have changed this life? Not for lack of difficult moments of weakness, flight, and pain. On the contrary, it was precisely these difficult moments which always served Kazantzakis new steps enabling him to ascend higher—to ascend and reach the summit he promised himself he would climb before abandoning the tools of labor because night had begun to fall.

"Do not judge me by my actions, do not judge me from man's point of view," another struggle he once entreated me. "Judge me from God's—by the hidden purpose behind my actions."

This is how we should judge Kazantzakis. Not by what he did, and whether what he did was of supreme value; but rather by what he wanted to do, and whether what he wanted to do had supreme value for him, and for us as well.

I, for one, believe it did. In my thirty-three years by his side I cannot recall ever being ashamed by a single bad action on his part. He was honest, without guile, innocent, infinitely sweet toward others, fierce only toward himself. If he withdrew into solitude, it was only because he felt the labor required of him were severe and his hours numbered.

His round, round eyes pitch black in the semidarkness and filling with tears, he used to say to me "I feel like doing what Bergson says—going to the street corner and holding out my hand to start begging from the passers-by: 'Alms, brothers! A quarter of an hour from each of you.' Oh, for a little time, just enough to let me finish my work. Afterwards, let Charon come."

Charon came—curse him!—and mowed Nikos down in the first flower of his youth! Yes, dear reader, do not laugh. For this was the time for all to flower and bear fruit, all he had begun, the man you so loved and who so loved you, your Nikos Kazantzakis.

—H.N.J.

Geneva, June 15, 1961.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

THE READER will soon discover that I have retained many Greek terms in this translation. I have done this whenever there is no real English equivalent, especially in cases of food and clothing. Sometimes, even when a reasonable equivalent exists, I retain the Greek original out of respect for the increasing number of English-speaking people who know a little of modern Greek life at first hand. These modern philhellenes would wince if they encountered hors d'œuvres, for instance, as a rendering of *mezédhes*. For their sake, I ask other readers to endure temporary mystification with forbearance.

All the modern Greek terms, as well as certain historical allusions, are explained below. They are listed alphabetically for easy reference. In one or two places I have also added explanatory material to the text, but always in square brackets. My transliterations are deliberately inconsistent. Most often I try to approximate the present-day pronunciation, but in certain cases I give precedence to etymology. As a possible aid to pronunciation I include accents where I think they will be of use. These indicate stress only; they do not change the vowel. Pronounce a as in father, e as in bed, i as in machine.

acrite. During the Byzantine era the acrites guarded the frontiers against inroads by the barbarians. They became symbols of heroism and devotion to country, and their deeds, often magnified to supernatural proportions, were immortalized in epic and song.

amané, pl. amanédhes. Passionate songs, usually about love, so called because the expression *ama* (“alas”) occurs frequently.

antídoro. Bits of consecrated bread distributed to the entire congregation at the end of the service in Orthodox churches. This is instead of communion, literally “instead of the [Lord’s] gift.”

Boule. The Greek legislature, a term used in both ancient and modern times. The modern pronunciation is Voulí.

briki. The special pot used for making Turkish coffee.

Christos anéstakas. This requires some explanation. Greek is rich in expressive suffixes. Adding *áki* to the word *pódhi*, for example, we get *podháki*, or “small foot.” Similarly, we can add a suffix to indicate a large foot: *podhára*. Then, if we have a friend with large feet, we can call him *podharás*. If our friend is a big drunkard, he will be known as a *merhýstakas*. On analogy to the last example, the priest in [Chapter 28](#) who says *Christos anéstakas* instead of *Christos anéstas* (Christ is risen) is simply trying to say that Christ is so tremendous that He did not simply “rise.” He rose in a tremendous way, suitable to His giant stature. He breaks all grammatical rules because he adds the suffix to a verb instead of to a noun.

epitáphios. This is the canopy-like structure, made of flowers, which represents Christ lying in the tomb. It is placed in the church on Good Friday.

foufoúla, pl. foufoúles. The loose, hanging part of the Cretan vraka (q.v.).

Friendly Society. A secret society founded in Odessa in 1816 with the purpose of organizing the Greek War of Independence.

“Hold fast, poor Missolonghi.” A well-known phrase referring to the heroic resistance of Missolonghi while under siege during the Greek War of Independence (1821 ff.).

kalýmmafko. A covering of black material placed over the hat of Orthodox monks and falling down the back as far as the waist. Sometimes it is gathered into a pyramid over the head. It is similar in purpose to the wimple: it prevents the monk from seeing “the world.”

Karäiskakis, Georgios. Important general in the Greek War of Independence. Killed in action, 1821.

katharévousa. The official language of Greece. It is an artificial language constructed by nationalists in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as a compromise between ancient Greek and the so-called “demotic,” the spoken language which evolved naturally during the Hellenistic and Byzantine periods, and the 400 years of Turkish rule. The linguistic nationalists attempted to “purify” demotic of foreign words and to return as far as possible to the vocabulary, syntax, and grammar of the ancient Attic dialect. Though *katharévousa* is employed today for all official documents, scholarly books, university lectures, etc., demotic survives with undiminished vitality. Since *katharévousa* has to be learned at the gymnasium, it can be used in an affected way as a sign that one is educated, i.e., superior. This is the basis of the Tityros anecdote in [Chapter 5](#).

Kifissió. A suburb of Athens, now very fashionable.

koulouri, *pl. koulouria*. Doughnut-shaped rolls sprinkled with sesame seeds. They are sold in the street by men or boys and are a Greek institution.

kourabiédhes. These are little cookie-like sweets made of flour, sugar, eggs, and mastic. They are baked and then covered with powdered sugar.

kulah. The high round felt hat of the dervishes.

mantinádha, *pl. mantinádhes*. From Italian *mattinata*. Originally a lover’s serenade sung beneath a girl’s window. In Crete the *mantinadha* always takes the form of a rhymed couplet. It is often improvised and is no longer restricted in subject matter.

Megalo Kastro. This is Iraklion, Kazantzakis’ birthplace and the chief city of Crete. *Megalo Kastro* means “great fortress.” Iraklion is famous for its walls, built over the period 1462–1570 by the Venetian conquerors.

mezé, *pl. mezédhes*. Food eaten with wine or raki to prevent intoxication. Usually appetizers such as sardines, olives, cheese, stuffed vine leaves, fish roe, etc.

myzíthra. A soft white cheese somewhat like cottage cheese. “Over the years, in time, she’ll be out once more.” Slogan during the Greek War of Independence, attributed to the archbishop Germanós (Palaion Patron Germanos).

pallikári. A true man, i.e., brave and strong, able to resist pain, etc. The term was originally applied to the foot soldiers accompanying mounted knights, later to any soldier, now to any young man who has soldier-like qualities. In Greece today it is an unqualified term of praise.

papadhiá. Wife of a priest.

Paramythía, *Ktetórisa*, *Bematárisa*, *Antiphonétria*, *Esphagméne*, *Elaiobrótida*. Each of the celebrated icons has a legend associated with it. The *Esphagméne* (“slaughtered one”), for example, is represented with blood flowing from her cheek. The story goes that a certain deacon was so zealous in his desire to tidy the church that he missed his dinner. When he went several hours to the refectory, he was refused even a slice of bread, whereupon he returned to the church and knifed the Virgin in his rage. Blood flowed and the deacon was immediately struck blind, but the Virgin eventually forgave him and restored his sight. The transgressing hand

however, was condemned to be sent to hell at the Second Coming. When the deacon's bones were disinterred, this hand was discovered still intact. A certain pilgrim, assuming that the hand's preservation indicated its holiness, bit off a piece in order to profit therefrom, and straightway fell down dead. The other icons are equally wonderworking.

passatempo. Salted, lightly roasted pumpkin seeds, munched for the purpose indicated in the name.

Prodromos. Theodore Prodromos, called "Prodromos the Poor," was a Byzantine poet (died 1160).

The Comneni patronized him for a time, but then their support was withdrawn, and Prodromos died as a monk in great poverty.

Psiloríti. Mountain not far from Iraklion. The ancient Mount Ida.

Stournaras, Nikólaos. Military leader in the Greek War of Independence. He fell at Missolonghi in 1826.

vrakes. Jodhpur-like trousers worn until recently by Cretan men. They are extremely baggy above the knees, being made from an immense amount of material which hangs down loosely.

Zálongon. A cliff in Epirus, famous in Greek history. It was here, on Dec. 18, 1803, that 57 Greek women chose death rather than capture by the Turks. After hurling their babies over the cliff they formed a circle and danced until each had leaped to her doom.

This translation is in many ways a collaboration, and I wish to record here my indebtedness and sincere thanks to my many fellow workers. Above all to my wife, who with her accustomed patience and good humor answered my endless queries. I am also indebted to Helen Kazantzakis, the author's widow; Nikos Saklambanis of Iraklion, the author's nephew; Pandelis Prevelakis, who carefully checked my rendering of the *Terzina* in the Epilogue; Emmanuel Kasdaglis, who with infinite care and dedication prepared Kazantzakis' original manuscript for publication; Stephen Mavroyiannis, icon painter; Boule Prousalis; Lola Sphairopoulou, and various waiters, fishermen and vineyard keepers of the village of Aghia Triadha. Lastly, I would like to record my thanks here to Professors Kakridís, Kimon Friar, George Sabbides, Mrs. Chatzidakis of the Benaki Museum, Theodoros Koumvakali, Alexander Segkopoulos, Evro Layton, Dr. and Mrs. Atlas, the Yian-nakoses, Katherina Kakouri, Michael Antonakis, and Jeff Amory, all of whom in one way or another made my stay in Greece more enjoyable than it otherwise would have been.—P.A.B.

August 28, 1906

Aghia Triadha, Macedonia

AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

My *Report to Greco* is not an autobiography. My personal life has some value, extreme relative, for myself and no one else. The sole value I acknowledge in it was its effort to mount from one step to the next and reach the highest point to which its strength and doggedness could bring the summit I arbitrarily named the Cretan Glance.

Therefore, reader, in these pages you will find the red track made by drops of my blood, the track which marks my journey among men, passions, and ideas. Every man worthy of being called a son of man bears his cross and mounts his Golgotha. Many, indeed most, reach the first or second step and collapse pantingly in the middle of the journey, and do not attain the summit of Golgotha, in other words the summit of their duty: to be crucified, resurrected, and to save their souls. Afraid of crucifixion, they grow fainthearted; they do not know that the cross is the only path to resurrection. There is no other path.

The decisive steps in my ascent were four, and each bears a sacred name: Christ, Buddha, Lenin, Odysseus. This bloody journey from each of these great souls to the next is what I shall struggle to mark out in this Itinerary, now that the sun has begun to set—the journey of a man with his heart in his mouth, ascending the rough, unaccommodating mountain of his destiny. My entire soul is a cry, and all my work the commentary on that cry.

During my entire life one word always tormented and scourged me, the word *ascent*. Here, mixing truth with fancy, I should like to represent this ascent, together with the red footprints I left as I mounted. I am anxious to finish quickly, before I don the “black helmet” and return to dust, because this bloody track will be the only trace left by my passage on earth. Whatever I wrote or did was written or performed upon water, and has perished.

I call upon my memory to remember, I assemble my life from the air, place myself soldier-like before the general, and make my Report to Greco. For Greco is kneaded from the same Cretan soil as I, and is able to understand me better than all the strivers of past or present. Did he not leave the same red track upon the stones?

THREE KINDS OF SOULS, THREE PRAYERS:

1] I AM A BOW IN YOUR HANDS, LORD. DRAW ME, LEST I ROT.

2] DO NOT OVERDRAW ME, LORD. I SHALL BREAK.

3] OVERDRAW ME, LORD, AND WHO CARES IF I BREAK!

PROLOGUE

I COLLECT MY TOOLS: sight, smell, touch, taste, hearing, intellect. Night has fallen, the day's work is done. I return like a mole to my home, the ground. Not because I am tired and cannot work. I am not tired. But the sun has set.

The sun has set, the hills are dim. The mountain ranges of my mind still retain a little light at the summits, but the sacred night is bearing down; it is rising from the earth, descending from the heavens. The light has vowed not to surrender, but it knows there is no salvation. It will not surrender, but it will expire.

I cast a final glance around me. To whom should I say farewell? To what should I say farewell? Mountains, the sea, the grape-laden trellis over my balcony? Virtue, sin? Refreshing water? . . . Futile, futile! All these will descend with me to the grave.

To whom should I confide my joys and sorrows—youth's quixotic, mystic yearnings, the harsh clash later with God and men, and finally the savage pride of old age, which burns but refuses until the death to turn to ashes? To whom should I relate how many times I slipped and fell as I clambered on all fours up God's rough, unaccommodating ascent, how many times I rose, covered with blood, and began once more to ascend? Where can I find an unyielding soul of myriad wounds like my own, a soul to hear my confession?

Compassionately, tranquilly, I squeeze a clod of Cretan soil in my palm. I have kept this soil with me always, during all my wanderings, pressing it in my palm at times of great anguish and receiving strength, great strength, as though from pressing the hand of a dearly loved friend. But now that the sun has set and the day's work is done, what can I do with strength? I need it no longer. I hold the Cretan soil and squeeze it with ineffable joy, tenderness, and gratitude, as though in my hand I were squeezing the breast of a woman I loved and bidding it farewell. This soil I was everlastingly; this soil I shall be everlastingly. O fierce clay of Crete, the moment when you were twirled and fashioned into a man of struggle has slipped by as though in a single flash.

What struggle was in that handful of clay, what anguish, what pursuit of the invisible man-eating beast, what dangerous forces both celestial and satanic! It was kneaded with blood, sweat, and tears; it became mud, became a man, and began the ascent to reach—To reach what? It clambered pantingly up God's dark bulk, extended its arms and groped, groped in an effort to find His face.

And when in these very last years this man sensed in his desperation that the dark bulk did not have a face, what new struggle, all impudence and terror, he underwent to hew this unwrought summit and give it a face—his own!

But now the day's work is done; I collect my tools. Let other clods of soil come to continue the struggle. We mortals are the immortals' work battalion. Our blood is red coral, and we build an island over the abyss.

God is being built. I too have applied my tiny red pebble, a drop of blood, to give Him solidity lest He perish—so that He might give me solidity lest I perish. I have done my duty.

Farewell!

Extending my hand, I grasp earth's latch to open the door and leave, but I hesitate on the luminous threshold just a little while longer. My eyes, my ears, my bowels find it difficult, terribly difficult, to tear themselves away from the world's stones and grass. A man can tell himself he

satisfied and peaceful; he can say he has no more wants, that he has fulfilled his duty and is ready to leave. ~~But the heart resists. Clutching the stones and grass, it implores, "Stay a little!"~~

I fight to console my heart, to reconcile it to declaring the Yes freely. We must leave the earth not like scourged, tearful slaves, but like kings who rise from table with no further wants, after having eaten and drunk to the full. The heart, however, still beats inside the chest and resists, crying, "Stay a little!"

Staying, I throw a final glance at the light; it too is resisting and wrestling, just like man's heart. Clouds have covered the sky, a warm drizzle falls upon my lips, the earth is redolent. A sweet, seductive voice rises from the soil: "Come . . . come . . . come . . ."

The drizzle has thickened. The first night bird sighs; its pain, in the wetted air, tumbles down even so sweetly from the benighted foliage. Peace, great sweetness. No one in the house . . . Outside, the thirsty meadows were drinking the first autumn rains with gratitude and mute well-being. The earth, like an infant, had lifted itself up toward the sky in order to suckle.

I closed my eyes and fell asleep, holding the clod of Cretan soil, as always, in my palm. I fell asleep and had a dream. It seemed that day was breaking. The morning star hovered above me, and certain it was about to fall upon my head, trembled and ran, ran all alone through the arid, desolate mountains. Far in the east the sun appeared. It was not the sun, it was a bronze roasting tray filled with burning coals. The air began to seethe. From time to time an ash-gray partridge darted out from a ledge, beat its wings, and cackled, mocking me with guffaws. A crow, the moment it saw me, flew up from a declivity on the mountain. It had doubtlessly been awaiting my appearance, and followed behind me, bursting with laughter. Bending down angrily, I picked up a stone to hurl at it. But the crow had changed body, had become a little old man who was smiling at me.

Terror-stricken, I began to run again. The mountains whirled and I whirled with them, the circles continually contracting. Dizziness overcame me. The mountains pranced around me, and suddenly I felt that they were not mountains but the fossil remains of an antediluvian cerebrum, and that high above me, on my right, an immense cross was embedded in a boulder, with a monstrous bronze serpent crucified upon it.

A lightning flash tore across my mind, illuminating the mountains around me. I saw. I had entered the sinuous, terrifying ravine which the Hebrews, with Jehovah in the lead, had taken thousands of years earlier in their flight from the rich, prosperous land of Pharaoh. This ravine constituted the fire-smithy where the race of Israel, hungering, thirsting, blaspheming, was hammered out.

I was possessed by fear, fear and great joy. Leaning against a boulder so that my mind's whirling might subside, I closed my eyes. All at once everything around me vanished, and a Greek coast line stretched before me: dark indigo-blue sea, red crags, and between the crags the squat ingress to a pitch-dark cave. A hand bounded out of the air and wedged a lighted torch into my fist. I understood the command. Crossing myself, I slipped into the cave.

I wandered and wandered, sloshing through frozen black water. Blue stalactites hung damp above my head; huge stone phalli rose from the ground, flashing and laughing in the torch's glare. This cave had been the scabbard of a large river which, changing course over the centuries, had abandoned it and left it empty.

The bronze serpent hissed angrily. Opening my eyes, I saw the mountains, ravine, and cliffs again. My dizziness had abated. Everything drew to a standstill and filled with light. I understood: Jehovah, in the same way, had tunneled out a passage in the blazing ranges surrounding me. I had entered God's terrifying scabbard and was following—stepping in—His tracks.

"This is the road," I cried in my dream, "this is man's road. The only road there is!"

And as these audacious words flew from my lips, a whirlwind wrapped me round, fierce wind lifted me, and I suddenly found myself at the summit of God-trodden Sinai. The air smelled brimstone, and my lips tingled as though pricked by numberless invisible sparks. I raised my eyelids. Never had my eyes, never my entrails, enjoyed a sight so cruelly inhuman and so completely harmony with my heart—waterless, treeless, without a human being, without hope. Here the soul of a proud or despairing man could find ultimate bliss.

I glanced at the boulder on which I was standing. Two deep cavities were gouged out of the granite; they must have been the footprints of the horned prophet who waited for the famished Lion to appear. Had He not commanded the prophet to wait here on Sinai's peak? He had waited.

I waited too. Leaning over the precipice, I listened intently. Suddenly I heard the muffled thunder of footsteps far, very far, in the distance. Someone was approaching; the mountains shook. My nostrils began to quiver. The air all about smelled like the head goat that leads the flock. "He is coming, He is coming," I murmured, tightly girding my loins. I was making myself ready to fight.

Oh, how I had yearned for that moment when I would confront the ravenous beast of the celestial jungle—confront Him face to face, without the brazen visible world intervening and leading me astray! When I would confront the Invisible, the Insatiable, the simple-hearted Father who devours His children and whose lips, beard, and nails drip with blood.

I would speak to Him boldly, tell him of man's suffering and the suffering of bird, tree, and rock. We were all resolute in our desire not to die. In my hand I held a petition signed by all the trees, birds, beasts, and humans: "Father, we do not want you to eat us!" I would give Him this petition, I would not be afraid.

I talked and implored in this way, girding my loins and trembling.

And while I waited, the stones seemed to shift. I heard great breaths.

"Behold Him!" I murmured. "He has come!"

I turned with a shudder. But it was not Jehovah. It was not Jehovah, it was you, grandfather, from the beloved soil of Crete. You stood before me, a stern nobleman, with your small snow-white goatee, dry compressed lips, your ecstatic glance so filled with flames and wings. And roots of thyme were tangled in your hair.

You looked at me, and as you looked at me I felt that this world was a cloud charged with thunderbolts and wind, man's soul a cloud charged with thunderbolts and wind, that God puffed above them, and that salvation does not exist.

Lifting my eyes, I glanced at you. I was about to ask, Grandfather, is it true that salvation does not exist? But my tongue had stuck to my throat. I was about to go near you, but my knees gave way beneath me.

At that point you held out your hand as if I were drowning and you wished to save me.

I clutched it avidly. It was spattered with multicolored paints. You seemed to be painting still. The hand was burning. I gained strength and momentum by touching it, and was able to speak.

"Give me a command, beloved grandfather."

Smiling, you placed your hand upon my head. It was not a hand, it was multicolored fire. The flame suffused my mind to the very roots.

"Reach what you can, my child."

Your voice was grave and dark, as though issuing from the deep larynx of the earth.

It reached the roots of my mind, but my heart remained unshaken.

"Grandfather," I called more loudly now, "give me a more difficult, more Cretan command."

Hardly had I finished speaking when, all at once, a hissing flame cleaved the air. The indomitable ancestor with the thyme roots tangled in his locks vanished from my sight; a cry was left on Sinaia peak, an upright cry full of command, and the air trembled:

“Reach what you cannot!”

I awoke with a terrified start. Day had already begun. I rose, went to the French doors, and issued onto the balcony with the grape-laden trellis. The rain had abated now, the stones were gleaming and laughing, the leaves on the trees were weighted with tears.

“Reach what you cannot!”

It was your voice. No one else in the world could have uttered such a masculine command—on you, insatiable grandfather! Are you not the desperate, unyielding general of my militant race? Are we not the wounded and starving, the numskulls and pigheads who left affluence and certain victory behind us in order to assault the frontiers, following your lead, and smash them?

God is the most resplendent face of despair, the most resplendent face of hope. You are pushing me beyond hope and despair, grandfather, beyond the age-old frontiers. Where? I gaze around me. I gaze inside me. Virtue has gone mad, geometry and matter have gone mad. The law-giving miracle must come again to establish a new order, new laws. The world must become a richer harmony.

This is what you want; this is where you are pushing me, where you have always pushed me. I heard your command day and night. I fought as well as I could to reach what I could not. This I have set as my duty. Whether I succeeded or not is up to you to tell me. I stand erect before you, and wait.

General, the battle draws to a close and I make my report. This is where and how I fought. I fell wounded, lost heart, but did not desert. Though my teeth clattered from fear, I bound my forehead tightly with a red handkerchief to hide the blood, and ran to the assault.

Before you I shall pluck out the precious feathers of my jackdaw soul, one by one, until it remains a tiny clod of earth kneaded with blood, sweat, and tears. I shall relate my struggle to you—in order to unburden myself. I shall cast off virtue, shame, and truth—in order to unburden myself. My soul resembles your creation “Toledo in the Storm”; girded by yellow thunderbolts and oppressive black clouds, fighting a desperate, unbending battle against both light and darkness. You will see my soul; you will weigh it between your lanceolate eyebrows, and will judge. Do you remember the grave Cretan saying, “Return where you have failed, leave where you have succeeded”? If I failed, I shall return to the assault though but a single hour of life remains to me. If I succeeded, I shall open the earth to you that I may come and recline at your side.

Listen, therefore, to my report, general, and judge. Listen to my life, grandfather, and if I fought with you, if I fell wounded and allowed no one to learn of my suffering, if I never turned my back to the enemy:

Give me your blessing!

ANCESTORS

I LOOK DOWN into myself and shudder. On my father's side my ancestors were bloodthirsty pirates on water, warrior chieftains on land, fearing neither God nor man; on my mother's, drab, goodly peasants who bowed trustfully over the soil the entire day, sowed, waited with confidence for rain and sun, reaped, and in the evening seated themselves on the stone bench in front of the homes, folded their arms, and placed their hopes in God.

Fire and soil. How could I harmonize these two militant ancestors inside me?

I felt this was my duty, my sole duty: to reconcile the irreconcilables, to draw the thick ancestral darkness out of my loins and transform it, to the best of my ability, into light.

Is not God's method the same? Do not we have a duty to apply this method, following in His footsteps? Our lifetime is a brief flash, but sufficient.

Without knowing it, the entire universe follows this method. Every living thing is a workshop where God, in hiding, processes and transubstantiates clay. This is why trees flower and fruit, why animals multiply, why the monkey managed to exceed its destiny and stand upright on its two feet. Now, for the first time since the world was made, man has been enabled to enter God's workshop and labor with Him. The more flesh he transubstantiates into love, valor, and freedom, the more truly he becomes Son of God.

It is an oppressive, insatiable duty. I fought throughout my life and am fighting still, but the sediment of darkness continues to remain in my heart, and the struggle continually recommences. The age-old paternal ancestors are thrust deep within me; they keep fluctuating, and it is very difficult for me to discern their faces in the fathomless darkness. The more I proceed in my search for the first terrifying ancestor inside me, piercing through the heaped up layers of my soul—individuality, nationality, human species—the more I am overcome by sacred horror. At first the faces seem like brother's or father's; then, as I proceed to the roots, out of my loins bounds a hairy, heavy-jawed ancestor who hungers, thirsts, bellows, and whose eyes are filled with blood. This ancestor is the bulky, unwrought beast given me to transubstantiate into man—and to raise even higher than man. I can manage in the time allotted me. What a fearful ascent from monkey to man, from man to God!

One night I was walking on a high snow-covered mountain with a friend. We had lost our way and been overtaken by darkness. Not a cloud in the sky. The moon hung mute and fully round above us; the snow glistened, pale blue, all the way from the saddle of the mountain, where we found ourselves, down to the plain below. The silence was congealed and disquieting—unbearable. For thousands of eons the moon-washed nights must have been similar, before God likewise found such silence unbearable and took up clay to fashion man.

I preceded my friend by a few paces, my mind enveloped in a strange dizziness. I stumbled like a drunkard as I advanced; it seemed to me that I was walking on the moon, or before man's coming to some age-old uninhabited—but intensely familiar—land. Suddenly, at a turn in the terrain, I spied some tiny lights shining palely in the far distance, near the bottom of a gorge. It must have been a small village whose inhabitants were still awake. At that point an astonishing thing happened to me. I still shudder when I recall it. Halting, I shook my clenched fist at the village and shouted in a furious voice, "I shall slaughter you all!"

A raucous voice not my own! My entire body began to tremble with fright as soon as I heard the voice. ~~My friend ran up to me and anxiously grasped my arm.~~

“What’s the matter with you?” he asked. “Who are you going to slaughter?”

My knees had given way; suddenly I felt inexpressible fatigue. But seeing my friend in front of me, I came around.

“It wasn’t me, it wasn’t me,” I whispered. “It was someone else.”

It was someone else. Who? Never had my vitals opened so deeply and revealingly. From that night onward I was at last certain of what I had divined for years: inside us there is layer upon layer of darkness—raucous voices, hairy hungry beasts. Does nothing die, then? Can nothing die in this world? The primordial hunger, thirst, and tribulation, all the nights and moons before the coming of the man, will continue to live and hunger with us, thirst and be tormented with us—as long as we live. I was terror-stricken to hear the fearful burden I carry in my entrails begin to bellow. Would I never be saved? Would my vitals never be cleansed?

Now and then, sporadically, a sweet voice sounds in the very center of my heart: “Have no fears. I shall make laws and establish order. I am God. Have faith.” But all at once comes a heavy growl from my loins, and the sweet voice is silenced: “Stop your boasting! I shall undo your laws, ruin your order, and obliterate you. I am chaos!”

They say that the sun sometimes halts in its course in order to hear a young girl sing. Would that were true! If only necessity, spellbound by a songstress down below on earth, could change its course! If only we, by weeping, laughing, and singing, could create a law able to establish order over chaos! If only the sweet voice within us could cover over the growl!

When I am in my cups, or angry, or when I touch the woman I love, or when injustice is strangling me and I raise my hand in rebellion against God, the devil, or the representatives of God or the devil on earth, I hear these monsters bellowing within me and charging against the trap door in order to smash it, rise again into the light, and take up arms once more. I am the latest and most beloved grandchild, after all; aside from me they have no hope or refuge. Whatever remains for them is to avenge, enjoy, or suffer, only through me can they do this. If I perish, they perish with me. When I topple into the grave, an army of hairy monsters and aggrieved men will topple into the grave with me. Perhaps this is why they torment me so and are in such a hurry, perhaps this is why my youth was so impatient, unsubmissive, and wretched.

They killed and were killed without respecting the soul, either their own or others’. They loved life and scorned death with the same extravagant disdain. They ate like ogres, drank like calves, did not soil themselves with women when it was a question of going to war. Their torsos were bare in summer, wrapped in sheepskins in the winter. Summer and winter they smelled like animals in rut.

I feel my great-grandfather still fully alive in my blood; of all of them, he, I believe, lives most vibrantly in my veins. His head was shaven above the forehead, with a long braid behind. He kept company with Algerian pirates and flailed the high seas. They established their hideout on the deserted islands of Grabousa at the western tip of Crete. From there they packed on the black sails and rammed the vessels that passed. Some were sailing toward Mecca with a cargo of Moslem pilgrims, others toward the Holy Sepulcher with a cargo of Christians on their way to become hadjis. Whooping, the pirates threw their grapnels and leaped onto the deck, cleavers in hand. Showing no favor either to Christ or Mohammed, they slaughtered the old men, took the young ones as slaves, keeled over the women, and burrowed into Grabousa again, their mustaches full of blood and female exhalations. At other times they swooped down upon the rich spice-laden caiques which appeared from the east. The old men still remembered hearing it said that the entire island of Crete had once

smelled of cinnamon and nutmeg because my ancestor, the man with the braid, had plundered a vessel loaded with spices. Not having any way to dispose of them, he had sent them to all the villages of Crete as gifts for his godsons and goddaughters.

I was deeply stirred when a centenarian Cretan informed me of this incident not so many years ago, for without knowing why, I had always liked to keep a tube of cinnamon and several nutmeg seeds with me on my travels, and also in front of me on my writing desk.

Whenever, by listening to the hidden voices within me, I succeeded in following the blood instead of the mind (which quickly pants and halts), I arrived with mystic certitude at my remote ancestral beginnings. Afterwards, in time, this mysterious certitude was strengthened by palpable signs from everyday life. Although I thought these signs accidental at first and did not pay attention, I was finally able, by blending the voice of the visible world and my hidden inner voices, to penetrate the primordial darkness beneath the mind, lift up the trap door, and see.

And from the moment I saw, my soul began to solidify. It no longer flowed with constant fluctuation like water; a face began to thicken and congeal now around a luminous core, the face of my soul. Instead of proceeding first to the left, then to the right, along ever-changing roads in order to find what beast I was descended from, I proceeded with assurance, because I knew my true face and my sole duty: to work this face with as much patience, love, and skill as I could manage. To “work” it? What did that mean? It meant to turn it into flame, and if I had time before death came, to turn this flame into light, so that Charon would find nothing of me to take. For this was my greatest ambition: to leave nothing for death to take—nothing but a few bones.

Helping me more than anything else to reach this certainty was the soil where my paternal ancestors were born and raised. My father's stock derived from a village called Barbári, two hours from Megalo Kastro. When the Byzantine emperor Nicephorus Phocas retook Crete from the Arabs in the tenth century, he penned those Arabs who survived the slaughter in several villages, and these villages were called Barbári. It was in such a village that my paternal ancestors put down their roots. All of them have Arab traits. They are proud, obstinate, tight-lipped, abstemious, anti-social. The anger or love they store for years within their breasts, never saying a word, and then suddenly the devil straddles them and they explode in a frenzy. The supreme benefit for them is not life but passion. They are neither good nor accommodating; their presence is insufferably oppressive, not because of others, but because of themselves. An inner demon strangles them. Suffocating, they become pirates or stab their arms in a drunken stupor in order to shed blood and find relief. Or else they kill the woman they love, lest they become her slave. Or like me, their marrowless grandsons they toil to alter the dark weight and turn it into spirit. What does this mean: to turn my barbarian ancestors into spirit? It means to obliterate them by subjecting them to the supreme ordeal.

Still other voices have secretly marked the road to my ancestors. My heart bounds with joy whenever I encounter a date tree. You would think it were returning to its homeland, to the arid, dust-filled Bedouin village whose one precious ornament is the date tree. And once when I entered the Arabian Desert on camelback and gazed out over the waves of boundless, hopeless sand extending before me—yellow and rose, mauve toward evening, without a trace of a human being—I was carried away by a queer intoxication. My heart cried out like a she-hawk returning to a nest she had abandoned years, thousands of years, before.

Then there was this: Once I lived all alone in an isolated hut near a Greek village, “shepherding the winds” as a Byzantine ascetic used to say; in other words, writing poetry. This little cottage was buried among olive trees and pines, and the boundless, deep blue Aegean was visible between the branches far below me. No one passed except Floros, a simple grease-stained shepherd with a blond

beard. He came with his sheep every morning, brought me a bottle of milk, eight boiled eggs, and some bread, then left. Seeing me bent over my paper and writing, he always shook his head. "Saints preserve us! What do you want with all that letter-writing, boss? Don't you ever get tired?" This was followed by peals of laughter. One day he passed in a great hurry, so sullen and enraged that he did not even say good morning. "What's wrong, Floros?" I called to him. He brandished his huge fist. "Damn it, boss, leave me alone! I couldn't sleep a wink last night. But didn't you hear it yourself? Where are your ears? Didn't you hear that shepherd on the mountain over there, devil take him! He forgot to tune the bells of his flock! How could I sleep! . . . I'm going!"

"Where to, Floros?"

"To tune them, of course. So I can calm down."

As I was saying, one day at dinnertime when I went to the cupboard to get the saltcellar for my eggs, a little salt spilled on the dirt floor. My heart stood still. Lying down hastily, I began to pick the salt up grain by grain; whereupon I suddenly realized what I was doing and grew frightened. Why all this chagrin over a little salt fallen on the ground? What value did it have? None.

Afterwards, on the sands, I ferreted out still other markers which would enable me to reach my ancestors if I followed them. These were fire and water.

I always jump up with concern when I spy a fire burning uselessly, for I do not want to see it perish; I always race to turn off a tap when I see it running without a jug to be filled or a person to drink or a garden to be watered.

I experienced all these strange things, but never combined them with clarity in my mind in order to discover their mystic unity. My heart could not bear to see water, fire, or salt being squandered; I exulted each time I saw a date tree; when I entered the desert I did not want to leave—but my mind proceeded no further. This lasted many years. In the dusky workshop within me, however, the concern apparently kept working away in hiding. All those unexplained happenings were being secretly joined inside me. As they came to stand one next to the other, they began little by little to take on meaning, and one day, abruptly, as I was ambling idly in a large city without thinking of their meaning at all, I found it. Salt, fire, and water were the three all-precious possessions of the desert. Surely, therefore, it must have been some ancestor inside me—a Bedouin—who jumped to his feet and dashed to the rescue when he saw salt, fire, and water perishing.

A gentle rain was falling on that day in the large city. I remember seeing a little girl who had found shelter beneath the canopy of a doorway. She was selling small bouquets of drenched violets. I stopped and looked at her, but my mind—far away, eased now, extremely happy—was vagabonding in the desert.

All this may be fancy and autosuggestion, a romantic yearning for the exotic and remote; all the strange events I have enumerated may not be strange at all, or may not have the meaning I give them. Yes, this is possible. Nevertheless, the influence of this organized, cultivated hoax, of this delusion (if it is a delusion) that twin currents of blood, Greek from my mother and Arab from my father, run in my veins, has been positive and fruitful, giving me strength, joy, and wealth. My struggle to make a synthesis of these two antagonistic impulses has lent purpose and unity to my life. The moment the indeterminate presentiment inside me became certainty, the visible world round about fell into order and my inner and outer lives, finding the double ancestral root, made peace with each other. Thus, many years later, the secret hatred I felt for my father was able, after his death, to turn to love.

THE FATHER

MY FATHER spoke only rarely, never laughed, never engaged in brawls. He simply grated his teeth or clenched his fist at certain times, and if he happened to be holding a hard-shelled almond, rubbed it between his fingers and reduced it to dust. Once when he saw an aga place packsaddle on a Christian and load him down like a donkey, so completely did his anger overcome him that he charged toward the Turk. He wanted to hurl an insult at him, but his lips had become contorted. Unable to utter a human word, he began to whinny like a horse. I was still a child. I stood there and watched, trembling with fright. And one midday as he was passing through a narrow lane on his way home for dinner, he heard women shrieking and doors being slammed. A huge drunken Turk with drawn yataghan was pursuing Christians. He rushed upon my father the moment he saw him. The heat was torrid, and my father, tired from work, felt in no mood for a brawl. It occurred to him momentarily to turn into another lane and flee—no one was looking. But this would have been shameful. Untying the apron he had on, he wrapped it around his fist, and just as the colossal Turk began to raise the yataghan above his head, he gave him a punch in the belly and sprawled him on the ground. Stooping, he wrenched the yataghan out of the other's grip and strode homeward. My mother brought him a clean shirt to put on—he was drenched in sweat—and I (I must have been about three years old) sat on the couch and gazed at him. His chest was covered with hair and steaming. As soon as he had changed and cooled off, he threw the yataghan down on the couch next to me. Then he turned to his wife.

“When your son grows up and goes to school,” he said, “give him this as a pencil sharpener.”

I cannot recall ever hearing a tender word from him—except once when we were on Naxos during the revolution. I was attending the French school run by Catholic priests and had won a good many examination prizes—large books with gilded bindings. Since I could not lift them all by myself, my father took half. He did not speak the entire way home; he was trying to conceal the pleasure he felt at not being humiliated by his son. Only after we entered the house did he open his mouth.

“You did not disgrace Crete,” he said with something like tenderness, not looking at me.

But he felt angry with himself immediately; this display of emotion was a self-betrayal. He remained sullen for the rest of the evening and avoided my eyes.

He was forbidding and insufferable. When relatives or neighbors who happened to be visiting the house began to laugh and exchange small talk, if the door suddenly opened and he came in, the conversation and laughter always ceased and a heavy shadow overwhelmed the room. He would say hello halfheartedly, seat himself in his customary place in the corner of the sofa next to the courtyard window, lower his eyes, open his tobacco pouch, and roll a cigarette, without saying a word. The guests would clear their throats dryly, cast secret, uneasy glances at one another, and after a discreet interval, rise and proceed on tiptoe to the door.

He hated priests. Whenever he met one on the street, he crossed himself to exorcise the unfortunate encounter, and if the frightened priest greeted him with a “Good day, Captain Michael,” he replied, “Give me your curse!” He never attended Divine Liturgy—to avoid seeing priests. But every Sunday when the service was over and everyone had left, he entered the church and lighted a candle before the wonder-working icon of Saint Minas. He worshiped Saint Minas above all Chris-

and Virgin Marys, because Saint Minas was the captain of Megalo Kastro.

~~His heart was heavy, unliftable. Why? He was healthy, his affairs were going well, he had no~~ complaints regarding either his wife or children. People respected him. Some, the most inferior, rose and bowed when he passed, placed their palms over their breasts, and addressed him as Captain Michael. On Easter Day the Metropolitan invited him to the episcopal palace after the Resurrection along with the city's notables, and offered him coffee and a paschal cake with a red egg. On Saint Minas's day, the eleventh of November, he stood in front of his house and said a prayer when the procession passed.

But his heart never lightened. One day Captain Elias from Messará dared to ask him, "Why there never a laugh on your lips, Captain Michael?" "Why is the crow black, Captain Elias?" my father replied, spitting out the cigarette butt he was chewing. Another day I heard him say to the verger of Saint Minas's, "You should look at my father, not at me, at my father. He was a real ogre. What am I next to him? A jellyfish!" Though extremely old and nearly blind, my grandfather had taken up arms again in the Revolution of 1878. He went to the mountains to fight, but the Turks surrounded him, caught him by throwing lassos, and slaughtered him outside the Monastery of Savathianá. The monks kept his skull in the sanctuary. One day I looked through the tiny window and saw it—polished, anointed with sanctified oil from the watch lamp, deeply incised by sword blows.

"What was my grandfather like?" I asked my mother.

"Like your father. Darker."

"What was his job?"

"Fighting."

"And what did he do in peacetime?"

"He smoked a long chibouk and gazed at the mountains."

Being pious when I was young, I asked still another question: "Did he go to church?"

"No. But on the first of every month he brought a priest home with him and had him pray that Crete would take up arms again. Your grandfather fretted, naturally, when he had nothing to do. Once when he was arming himself again I asked him, 'Aren't you afraid to die, Father?' But he neither answered nor even turned to look at me."

When I grew older, I wanted to ask my mother: Did he ever love a woman? I was ashamed to ask, however, and never found out. But he surely must have loved many women, because when he was killed and the family opened his coffer, a cushion was found there, stuffed with black and brown tresses.

THE MOTHER

MY MOTHER was a saintly woman. How was she able to feel the lion's heavy inhalations and suspirations at her side for fifty years without suffering a broken heart? She had the patience, endurance, and sweetness of the earth itself. All my forebears on my mother's side were peasants—bent over the soil, glued to the soil, their hands, feet, and minds filled with soil. They loved the land and placed all their hopes in it; over the generations they and it had become one. In time of drought they grew sickly black from thirst along with it. When the first autumn rains began to rage, the bones creaked and swelled like reeds. And when they ploughed deep furrows into its womb with the share, in their breasts and thighs they re-experienced the first night they slept with their wives.

Twice a year, at Easter and Christmas, my grandfather set out from his distant village and came to Megalo Kastro in order to see his daughter and grandchildren. Always calculating carefully, he came and knocked on the door at an hour when he knew for sure that his wild beast of a son-in-law would not be at home. He was a juicy, vigorous old man, with unbarbered white hair, laughing blue eyes, and great heavy hands covered with calluses—my skin was flayed when he reached out to caress me. He always wore black boots, his Sunday foufoúla, which was deep indigo in color, and a white kerchief with blue spots. And in his hand he always held the same gift: a suckling pig roasted in the oven and wrapped in lemon leaves. When he laughingly uncovered it, the entire house filled with fragrance. So completely has my grandfather blended and become one with the roast pig and the lemon leaves, that ever since those days I have never been able to smell roast pork or step into a lemon orchard without having him rise into my mind, gay and undying, the roast suckling pig in his hands. And I am glad, because although no one else in the world remembers him now, he will live inside me as long as I live. We shall die together. This grandfather was the first to make me wish not to die—so that the dead within me should not die. Since then, many departed dear ones have sunken not into the grave, but into my memory, and I know now that as long as I live they shall live too.

As I recall him, my heart is fortified with the realization that it can conquer death. Never in my life have I met a man whose face was circled by such a kindly, tranquil resplendence, as though from a watch lamp. I cried out the first time I saw him enter the house. Dressed as he was in his wide vrakos and red cummerbund, with his luminous moonface and merry manner, he seemed to me like a water sprite, or like an earth spirit who at that very moment had emerged from the orchards smelling of wild grass.

Removing a leather tobacco pouch from beneath his shirt, he rolled a cigarette, reached for the flint and punk, lighted the cigarette, and smoked, gazing contentedly at his daughter, his grandchildren, and the house. At rare intervals he opened his mouth and spoke about his mare that had dropped a colt, about rain and hail, about the overprolific rabbits who were ruining his vegetable garden. I, perched on his knees, threw an arm around his neck and listened. An unknown world unfurled in my mind—fields, rainfalls, rabbits—and I too became a rabbit, slipped out stealthily from my grandfather's yard, and devoured his cabbage.

My mother would ask about this one and that one in the village—how were they getting along, were they still alive?—and grandfather sometimes replied that they were alive, having children flourishing; sometimes that they had died—another one gone, long life to you! He spoke about death

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