

Michael Sharkey

DAYS OF '98

No, you don't read Cavafy for wit:

the charge of emotion,
the force of nostalgia,
the horse-driven cab
to a bed and the half-opened clothes ...

Faces like statues of gods'
and more yielding than stone,
and the light on young limbs.

Every body that stirred his desire
a blow to the heart.

Words are museums of silence;
each beautiful face a vieux jeu.

Maybe it's envy;
I know that the chagrin is real.



IMAGINARY COUNTRY: THE NECESSARY FAIRYLAND

Stranger things than children can invent occur in this land,
Where some infants are discovered fully formed without a parent
And where mothers feel no birth pains and no periods exist.

Children may be eaten here by ogres with no surnames.
Elder-wood is also death to infants,
And brings doom into the house.

Numbers can be fortunate or fatal.

The language here is riddles,
and the serpent's ancient question, "Why not?" frequently is asked.

Swans and seals are women who may pine away on land.

Caves are where the trolls live,
When they're not pursuing humans. It's their craft.

Asses, cats and dogs and hens may sometimes sing art music,
And an educated wolf speaks decent Hochdeutsch
To young pigs, and scarlet women bearing gifts on forest paths.

This happened when the Fall was in the air,
Before the gods declined to fetishes with logos on their breasts.

People danced in circles, round a fire.
Life was fado.

Rudiments of happy song still linger in the skipping rhymes
Of children who have legs.

In the shadows, Goya's pictures of the accidents of conflict came to life.

In Fairyland, the good are always white.
They have fine weapons, horses, dogs and,
If they plan to be Lord Mayor, a chatty cat.
Animals and fishes, birds and humans, ghosts and goblins speak
A common tongue. It helps.

Heroes of all sexes wear such colours as delight the eye.
The fabric may permit invisibility, a useful thing in life.

Children have the knack of walking out and being lost
Or finding lodging with a witch who runs a sweets-shop.
Some of these may turn out to be killers of old ladies.
All is not as it appears.

Poppets who decide to chance the forest
Bearing gifts of comfort food
for their grandmothers should consult
An ophthalmologist before they do the run.

No one may mine minerals in this country
But the dwarves, between their bouts of minding women with amnesia.
It is never clear whose land rights are respected when a man at arms
appears.

Animals and vegetables have grown beyond proportion.
Horses turn to mice, and landaus shrink to marrows.

Beans provide a stairway for a peasant boy who seeks
to plumb the sky where ogres live.

Remorse and guilt are absent in this world of changing shapes.

A talking mirror wins a rhyming contest with the consort of a king.

A monarch may walk naked through the streets,
Or dine on crow pie, hear string trios
Or decide to slay the suitors of his daughter whom he loves.

What we know as politics does not occur in this land
Where duende takes its place.

No one dies but witches, ogres, suitors of kings' daughters
And a hiss of dragons bred for sacrifice.

Children, when the colour trickles from them,
Pop into the Land of Nod.

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