

# Lily Michaelidou



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# Lily Michaelidou

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***Note from the Editorial Committee and the Translator:***

*In phonetically rendering Greek names and titles (e.g. books, works, blogs, websites) into English, we follow the spelling used in other Cyprus PEN publications, respect personal preferences, and reflect how these appear most frequently in print and electronic media, despite variations and inconsistencies.*

# LILY MICHAELIDOU

by Stelios Papantoniou

Lily Michaelidou made her appearance in Cypriot letters with the poetry collection *The Alchemy of Time* (Govostis Publications, 2001). The poetry collections *Shapes and Roads in Relief...* (Govostis Publications, 2003), *Remembrance of a Dawn* (bilingual edition, Govostis Publications, 2004), *Innuendoes* (Melani Publications, 2007), and *Arena* (Melani Publications, 2014, English translation by David Connolly) followed, along with the collections of travelogues *The City Needs No Introduction* (Melani Publications, 2011), and *Drops from the Maasai Land* (Nicosia, 2017). Her most recent work, *Him, Stories of Men* (Melani Publications, 2018), is a collection of short stories, which were translated into English by David Connolly.

An autodidact writer, who is always contemplating life's great questions, she studies and collects – like a worker bee – elements from other writers that are fecund and vital to her nature, integrating them into herself and into her writing.

The main characteristics of her work are the creative power of language, the mirroring of the internal and the external world, and Eros. A cosmogonic force, Eros is so pervasive in her work that Lily Michaelidou can be characterized as an erotic writer, a poet with all her senses alert and with a piercing gaze on her protagonists' inner and outer worlds.

When she comes across great teachers on her literary journey, she decodes and adopts the secrets of their philosophy and art, enriching herself and her work.

The analysis of her collections that follows will consider the characteristics of her work and the sources where she savours pinnacles of wisdom.

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Always remaining true to herself, to her character, and to her identity, Lily Michaelidou journeys through the physical world and the intellectual-cultural realms, enriching herself and her work with all that she learns along the way.

With the passage of time, experiences are transformed through alchemical processes and emerge into the light as gold – this is poetry, light-giving and light-filled. The more I read the poems of Lily Michaelidou, the more I admire the young person who arrived at the great and essential truths, not simply espousing them, but integrating them within herself and her work, exploring their many facets. First, she grasped the concept of the Word as creator, and second, the concept of Man as clay animated by spirit – the clay that he obsessively excavates so that tunnels of light may be opened within.

The third element that characterizes her body of work is Eros in its coexistence with the human body and with nature, as well as the union of the two. Eros emerges as a nobly attired, coherent and cosmogonic force, which permeates the body and produces cosmogonic spasms that reveal man's intellect and creativity, while also working on his behalf and saving him from decline.

In the beginning was the Word, God, the Creator. He spoke and it came to pass – a great revelation that also speaks to man's creative power, and especially the poet's, since the poet creates worlds that reflect his inner self. Poetry is nothing more than the creation of the world through words. Lily Michaelidou has not only grasped this great truth, but also anchored herself to it, in order to save herself from the chaos of successive external impressions.

### **THE ALCHEMY OF TIME (GOVOSTIS, 2001)**

And God breathed life into man. “Only the Spirit, if it breathe upon the clay, can create Man,” in the words of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. Spirit bestowed upon man the creative and intellectual powers to

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elevate the clay to Word. Man himself was transformed into a creator, who delves into the clay, into his own depths, which he brings to the surface as embellished language, as poetry.

Having grasped this miracle, Lily Michaelidou expresses it in a various ways in her first poetry collection, *The Alchemy of Time* (Govostis Publications, 2001), which is divided into three sections: “Vibrations,” “Fireflies,” and “Signs of the times.” Before “Vibrations,” the quote from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, “Only the Spirit, if it breathe upon the clay, can create Man,” is offered as an epigraph to the poems “Distant journey,” “Purification,” “My loneliness,” “Contrition,” “Game of Fate,” “My kind hours,” and “Private.” The epigraph “In the clarity of words the land was illuminated, turning the upside down so they could see the light of day” paves the way for the next set of poems: “The reader,” “Fragrant benediction,” “The kerchiefs of gypsies,” and “Enchanter.” The epigraph “I gaze at the horizon beyond the alchemy of time” introduces the poems “Soul spring,” “Eros is poetry,” “Reflection,” “Drops of life,” “Idol,” and “Couplets.” The section “Fireflies” follows with the poems “November,” “The thread,” “Lampposts,” “The history of the city,” “Beloved,” “India,” and “New memory.” The last epigraph, “I cried for the fragrant memory for the red torment of poetry,” introduces the poems “Expectation I, II,” “Anguish,” and “The Big Apple.” The book’s last section “Signs of the times” includes the poems “The first flame,” “Journey,” “Unrevealed passion,” “Night sheets,” “The crack of dawn,” “Openings,” and “Wordlust.”

I have presented the structure and contents of the first collection in order to demonstrate the careful organization of the poetic material and the overriding spirit, as this is revealed through the epigraphs and poem titles.

In the collection’s introductory poem, Lily Michaelidou expresses her creative journey and declares her poetics, i.e. the communion of the Word. Following words to their mystery becomes an act of worship

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and she, a high priestess, who discovers her own essence and comes to know herself in the process. The faith that she places in language as a force for truth, which illuminates and overturns, is rendered in the epigrammatic “In the clarity of words the land was illuminated, turning the upside down so they could see the light of day.” As Erotocritos would say, “For me the nature of things is born anew.”

Memory illuminates; the poet explores the nadirs and brings to the surface deeply buried memories and experiences, which find an outlet in moments of confession – this is why she finds images in the external world that correspond to her inner states.

Buried in the deep recesses of the unconscious perhaps, like images of springs and water wells imprinted in her childhood, the baptism in oneself produces a flower-water distillate, which takes the form of poems. Poetry purifies; it washes the interior clean of sin. Contrition is inevitable.

The creator does not exist in isolation, however; she feels empathy for others, wishes them well, and prays for them, so that young sprouts may be granted enough time to dream, travel, know, create and feel. For her, poets are the lampposts that light up the world. In a poem entitled “The Reader,” she acknowledges how important the reader is to the poet, in the reciprocal act of transmitting and receiving: Without the receiver, the transmitter is annihilated, while the receiver’s presence saves the poet’s world. Lily Michaelidou places great importance on her fellow man, friend or stranger. She also acknowledges her debt to those she has admired and succinctly imprints their personalities and intellectual journeys. Seeing through someone else’s eyes or walking a mile in their shoes broadens one’s horizons and begins to break ego attachments. It also reveals different aspects and functions of poetry, as psychotherapy, confession, or a path to self-knowledge.

“Fragrant benediction” is a poem that educators might consider in their foundation courses. Mountains of knowledge are deposited on

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youth, but this knowledge can only be classified, hierarchized, organized and integrated over time; only in time can this accumulated knowledge begin to shed its light. The requests of the soul are, more or less, the same; they include steadfastness, hope and continuity.

As previously noted, Eros is a key element. Moving between sin and atonement, between regrets and dreamy angelic visions, a delicate eroticism permeates the collection. Eros is poetry: Poetically rendered erotic moments elevate angels and nymphs to the spirit realms, between earth and sky. Even the need for sensual pleasure is elevated to ecstasy and to the divine initiation of the senses. Terms from botany, such as pistils and stamens, are used to depict an erotic encounter in poem that conceals as much as it reveals. One might assume that modesty prevents the poet from surrendering fully to Eros, hence she escapes into language, logic and books.

Her love for travel gives rise to poems that bear the imprints of the art world, questions from unknown places, sociological poetic approaches, and attempts to understand other people and cultures. It becomes one of the main characteristics of her work.

Her language is laconic, a third-person expression given with emotional distance. Like a resplendent high priestess in her simplicity, she turns inward with the first person at times, but then reverts to the third person as the introspective and extroverted observer. She takes the readers along on her travels with successive, cinematic images, and calls upon memory and the senses. She expresses her concern and affection for others – the daughter, the friend, the life partner. Without ostentatious verbal fireworks and with a philosophical perspective, she communicates effortlessly with her readers through a wealth of dialogical images of the inner realms and of the outer world, moving from the specific to the general.

*The Alchemy of Time* was my first encounter with the poetry of Lily Michaelidou.

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## SHAPES AND ROADS IN RELIEF... (GOVOSTIS, 2003)

Lily Michaelidou 'received sight' as a poet and set her sights on correlating the inner with the outer world – a discovery that points to the very essence of poetry, i.e. the expression of the interior through images of the exterior. The remarkable consistency with which this concept returns to her work suggests that it is deeply integrated within her, that it imbues her thoughts and feelings. Change is a characteristic of the external world, where everything is constantly in flux; the internal lens endeavours to focus on eternal things.

This collection is also divided into three sections: "Aura of body, Wave of soul," "Road traces," and "The body-The pain; The pleasure-The game; Nature-Time; Life-The journey."

The poems in the first section "Aura of body, Wave of soul" thematically reflect the title. The first part of the epigraph, "The weight of the mountains, the expanse of the sea," expresses the external world and confirms a universal truth. It is followed by "the fire that consumes the bodies as they struggle to prevent the blood from escaping from the veins." Body and soul, outward and inward – the poet endeavours to preserve her inner strength, as well as to correspond the world with Man and vice-versa.

In *Shapes and Roads in Relief*, the poet emerges erotic and a traveller once more, just like in her first collection. Above all, she is a miner of the inner realms who is learning and practising self-knowledge. Eros, the dream, and the journey, whose ultimate goal is self-knowledge, are the foundation stones of her poetic edifice.

The great philosophical question of time, which marked her first collection *The Alchemy of Time* in its entirety, leaps into her second collection in the form of Time, the deceiver. The external time of the clock, compared to the images which are clarified inside us, reveal the trap that time sets. Once more, the inner world and its processes, which deepen the soul and reveal the true values, dominate in the

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collection. They have the ability to collect all that is valuable and to correlate it with the internal structures of the eternal man.

An enchanting atmosphere in the shadows and at night, the scents of the moon, the transparent erotic blood, intoxicating moments, the coexistence of nature and man, the influence of nature on the body, and the palindromic refuge to images of nature, express admiration for Eros, living and blissful.

Starting with the epigraph “They drank all the dew of the sky, but did not quench their thirst. With one kiss desire was sated, yours the whole secret that springs up completely naked,” Eros gradually pervades the collection. This may be the key to understanding the preceding, as well as the springboard for the turn toward the spirituality of Eros, the influence of the spirit on the dust and clay of our material existence. Genesis is not only the result of a physical embrace, but also of a secret encounter with the sacredness inherent in the clay, a return and a deepening, as well as a different perspective on Man’s spirituality. It is as though the erotic ceremony takes place inside a temple with the vacillations of body and soul that lead to deliverance and reformation, to a reunion with the whole of nature, to a holistic understanding of man and nature, like in the *exodos* of an ancient Greek tragedy.

That same union continues in the epigraph “As it rained, the city’s fountains overflowed while Eros was releasing its inner substance.” The recycling that governs nature and man, who is a part of nature, produces poems of a universal and holistic erotic union, with individual images focused on specific places and actions in man’s relationship with nature, in his participation in the life-death cycle (“The Reaper,” “Strength”). Anyone who does not participate in the universal movement is lost in the depths.

“Road traces,” the second part of the collection, begins with the epigraph “I am sufficed with the silence of the eyes that conquers any

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secret I have inside me with blind devotion.” The epigraphs are the keys to unlocking the deeper meanings of the poems. A philosophizing poet, Lily Michaelidou places emphasis on man’s inner workings and faith in the power of the soul. Knowledge penetrates when it manages to read man’s inner world, that which is hidden, in the necessary silence. This also takes place in this part of the collection – travelling and the passion for grasping the essence of other places. Descriptions recreate large or entire images, or focus on the details that arouse the travelling poet’s interest, always in the company of Eros, who wanders freely over landscapes, in cities and narrow alleys. Travel renews; it opens paths to the unknown and brings to the proscenium people from the past, along with their individual journeys and passions. Imagination runs wild. Travel is marked by unrepeatable moments, by the beauty of nature and of man’s creations. Alert, the senses ignite the mind and the imagination, with Eros starring in a panpsychistic and panerotic universe.

The collection’s third section is entitled “The body-The pain; The pleasure-The game; Nature-Time; Life-The journey.” By now, the reader is familiar with the above concepts-signets of the poetry of Lily Michaelidou. The epigraph, which calls to mind the Homeric “Like leaves are the generations of men,” brings back the life-death and memory-oblivion cycles, as well as poetic motifs from antiquity. “We perish while the leaves that fall dry to the ground mourn a testament that memory returns.”

The absence of Eros leads to decline; its presence brings back the emergent Aphrodite and the desire, pleasure and enjoyment of touching, tasting, seeing and hearing. Close to life and its passions is death with its mysteries, the journey into the soul’s unknown. Melancholy about the passage of time is expressed in the last part of the collection, along with the reawakening of the erotic urge, the faith in the light and in the power of life.

Devoted to her art, Lily Michaelidou restates her poetics in the last poem from a different perspective, the shaping of the external world

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within herself “into shapes and roads in relief – with a hand accustomed to writing everything that it yearned for...” The creator-poet at work.

In this logically-structured collection, where epigraphs serve as road-maps to meanings, images of nature are enmeshed with psycho-spiritual states and are given with musicality in free verse. The second-person singular is used for directness, the third-person singular is used for objectivity, and the occasional first-person plural embraces the collective. Everything is in constant motion – colours, things, phenomena, people and places. Auditory depictions range from the rustling of linen sheets to the mute cry to implied music among renaissance paintings – all this comes alive with theatricality and creates a magical atmosphere. Eroticism pervades many poems, albeit in coexistence with philosophical contemplation. The poetry of Lily Michaelidou is not univocal; the reader needs time to penetrate her work.

### **REMEMBRANCE OF A DAWN (GOVOSTIS, 2004)**

A trip to India gave Lily Michaelidou the *prima materia* for this collection, which begins with the epigraph “The sky is closed. I cannot breathe,” by Atal Bihari Vajpayee. The collection is divided into two parts, “Echo of India” and “Reverberation.” At the end, a series of highly expressive but laconic “Meditations,” some of which were already offered in her second collection *Shapes and Roads in Relief...*, encapsulate meanings which are important to the poet.

Her love of travel, her aptitude for exploration and for broadening her horizons, characterize the poet. Lily Michaelidou seeks to verify intellectual concepts on the one hand and, on the other, to channel her proclivity for escape to the ends of the earth, only to return to her foundations and to herself more sagacious and secure. This is confirmed by the collection’s first verses: “My world has room for innumerable other worlds; it vacillates and often falls to the chaos of the beginning.” Her experiences, contemplations and studies have led her to a clearing, where she can speak with certainty and declare

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her truth, becoming a guide herself in the process – if that is not an overstatement.

“It is true that to feel life you must touch it with your lips, taste it, recognize it with your eyes, undress it with your hands, allow yourself to be loved with its marks, and become a secret lover of its days in an unending coitus of reproduction.” This is what has guided her journey and her creative process, a way of living in direct communication with the world with all the senses and human powers in a continuous erotic, cosmogonic intercourse. Beyond this lies “the mystery of silence and of the unknown,” however; beyond knowledge, man delves into the mysteries of silence and of the unknown. The teachings of ancient sages on silence and on the mysteries come alive in poetry once more.

Few can feel  
The mysterious aura  
The vibrations of the earth  
Under the soles of the feet  
The cries of bodies  
While they dig dreams  
The tension of time  
While life steams.

The hieratic element is present here as well. After knowledge and practice, introspection and its power lead with consistency to this position. Readers are learning, allowing themselves to be led by the experienced guide.

Colours dress people, sky and earth between them, the man who carries the soil and reconciles the dimensions of time.

India leaves a strong imprint on the poet and on her work. One of her most powerful poems, representative of her contemplations and of her poetry, is the concise “Colourful window,” which was written in New Delhi in 2000.

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In the poem “Expectation,” we encounter a two-sided image: on one side, the rational person with will and vital force who patiently waits for “the day when he will meet his dream” in order to spread his roots and, on the other side, a concentrated and explosive cosmogonic force, the personification of expectation.

Perhaps India spurred an even deeper philosophical perspective with questions about life and death, light and dark, fate, suffering and its lessons.

The poet’s perspective on key elements of India’s material and intellectual culture is rendered with an emotional charge, as it endeavours to delve into the deeper meanings of things, to sense and support her people.

The second part of the collection, “Reverberation,” is a metaphorical recording of India’s history, of the international treachery, of the political betrayal of her people’s expectations, of the reduction of everything to ashes. Be that as it may, the earth’s magnetic force returns to save wounded humanity once more.

After the trip, the poet returns to herself with the eternal questions: Who am I? What am I? Life-giving nature on the one hand and, on the other, the poet with language as her *prima materia*, “writing, a source that silently gestates and recalls,” the song and its object, the union of soil and man, a starting point for the erotically pulsating life and for death.

The eight “Meditations” at the end of the collection succinctly render feelings and thoughts, and the admitted small truths of her worldview and poetics.

Although some poems may appear rather dark due to the reader’s distance from events and circumstances, what we have here is an introspective, philosophizing poet with an intense passion for knowledge, emotional depth, a rich vocabulary and – by this point in her development – a practiced poetic methodology, a perspective on the world

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and on the act of writing that opens up new worlds with her travels, enriching the poetry of our country with its international dimensions.

### **INNUENDOES (MELANI, 2007)**

The collection begins with a pleasant surprise on the first page, an excerpt from Jorge Luis Borges's lecture "The poet's creed" on the art of poetry. "Now I have arrived at the conclusion (and this conclusion may appear bleak) that I no longer believe in expression; I believe only in suggestion. What are words, in any case? Words are symbols for memories that we have in common with other people. If I use a word, you must have an experience of that which the word declares. If you do not, the word means nothing to you. I think that we can only suggest, that we can only make the reader imagine. If sufficiently alert, the reader may be satisfied with the simple suggestion of something." Lily Michaelidou encapsulates this entire passage in a few words: "In the fuse of a common resultant." The fuse is the word, which will ignite the shared images, memories and concepts, so that the reader can partake of the meaning sent out by the transmitter-creator.

The collection is divided into two large sections: "In the fuse of a common resultant," where the basic characteristic is Eros, and "In the tropic of grief," which bears the weight of a great loss. Another theme present in this section is the act, deposition, and endeavour of writing. Most poems are short, while two or three have been poured into metrical moulds that bring familiar songs to mind, experiments in composing couplets and rhymes.

The main theme of the collection is Eros with poems which are suggestive to varying degrees. Innuendo helps the poet express herself, since her hitherto journey has revealed a feminine voice, which is rather reserved when it comes to erotic disclosure. Reserved, even bashful one might say, the poet retreats to innuendo, as the following poem illustrates: "If I could / like the verses / carefully erase / the fire of sleep / without letting the cinders / show."

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Be that as it may, in other poems she speaks freely, describing erotic moments and scenes in a realistic or even naturalistic manner. Of those few examples, the following is characteristic: “The passing of the tongue / the satin crust of saliva / on the skin / knowledge ignites a flame / burning your despair of being held hostage,” where the erotic element is explosively rendered, even though she hastens to extinguish it with knowledge, despair, and the palindromic movement of the flame that lights up, burns and disappears.

*Innuendoes* prompts a study of her style, i.e. the interweaving of two words through the surrealist stream of consciousness technique, which results in the coexistence of two words wherein animate and inanimate, location and emotion coexist, and beneath which erotic yearnings and passions are concealed.

The isolation of words, and their thorough analysis, help readers grasp various layers of meanings, which are illuminated because the attention becomes focused on the specific poetic microcosm, such as in the example “the candle of the navel” that, in isolation, sheds light on and brings back an important dimension of her poetry, i.e. the sacredness of Eros.

Some examples of verbal interweaving:

The river of words, the language of the soul, the lightning of desire, the tempest of kisses, plash of memory, the caress of winter, the caress of the eyes, the shade of loves, the twilight of the lips, the Symplegades of the lips, the pulse of the kiss, fleeting luminosity, dark memory, the snowy dusk, the unwelcoming darkness, the lantern of dreams, deposits of dreams, the lasciviousness of the waters, liquid enchantment, wounded breath, the swaying of the breath, insatiable lightning rods, the ultimate escape, the razor of the eyes, the bloody dagger, able-bodied desire, the departure of the words, wounded shapes, the desolation of the alley, two-fold provocation, the idol gaze, thirsty bird, vengefully generous,

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shattered words, the apron of loneliness, permanent anxiety,  
minimal makeup, the blaze of sleep.

Natural phenomena fused with erotic images, movement with colour,  
feelings with things, lead to aesthetic combinations in a suggestive  
and poetic expression.

The second section, “In the tropic of grief,” begins with the couplet  
“Anything born of the pen / is drowned in ink,” which points to the  
act of poetic creation, a part of life itself, a birth in the realms of the  
intellect, bloodless and biologically lifeless, and governed by differ-  
ent measures and laws. The creative process, the poet’s attempt to  
harness the act of writing, the unwritten poem – a familiar motif in  
the work of many poets – the role of poetry, its rage and, at times, its  
persecution:

The expert opinion was final  
instant  
“poetry to the pyre”  
this is it then  
this is why the pyre conceals in the cinders of its ruins  
sparks of enraged poetry.

Poignant moments in life and death, as well as painful illnesses, also  
mark the second part of the collection. The verses “I am burned by  
that flash of death / his last heavy breath / the incline of the cloudy  
eye / the ruins of his lips” successfully render a beloved person’s final  
moments in a laconic way, with emotions and descriptions forming an  
indivisible unity. The poet also offers the following variation: “To the  
other side he crosses / delves into the fog / there where the body  
slides / in the aquarium / of a funereal familiarity.” In this second  
poem, the poetic conception vastly differs because pain is on a differ-  
ent scale; it does not have the immediacy of the previous poem.

Poems composed next to a surgical theatre or a Good Friday Epitaph  
close the second part of the collection with a poignant partaking of  
the suffering and dignified sorrow.

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The collection ends with rhythms reminiscent of lyrics, “Let it fade in the rain / and be torn by the wind / let the water-fetching time / writhe in our hands / the torrent of kisses / the wounded pomegranate / as long as we have enough time / at the water’s lip / for you to kiss and talk to me / until the sun sets,” offers a succinct ending to *Innuendoes*.

### **THE CITY NEEDS NO INTRODUCTION (MELANI, 2011)**

Lily Michaelidou selects her teachers and learns from them by penetrating the secrets of their art without relying on external techniques, but by genuinely grasping the essence, which she adopts in her own special way, enriching her literary gaze and arsenal.

The journeys, which are described with such lyricism in this book, bear the marks of Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* and of Marco Polo.

The book contains travelogues of two or three pages each – a clear indication of how dense the writing is, free of excess and tedious encyclopaedic information. This is an outpouring of soul and sensibility, a unique perspective on the visited locations, combined with inner vision and given to the reader in a tranquil and very human voice.

In most texts, the first sentence is also the title. As a result, readers are immediately dropped into what is essential, into the exploration of cities, known or unknown.

The book’s epigraph or introductory note – an excerpt from Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* – highlights the passion for travel, the inner and outer journey, thoughts and emotions, the wealth of images, the importance of words in describing or poetically rendering places real or imagined. What is the difference?

Penetrating a city’s secrets, scents, lights and hues, without reservations of any kind, pre-requires an inward plunge, an inward journey.

The poet’s visits to Damascus, Aegina, Johannesburg, Archipelago, Kythira, Galata, Prague, Florence, Istanbul, Amsterdam, Stockholm, Beirut, New Delhi, Fikardou, Brussels, New York, Avesta, Vienna, Hel-

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sinki, Paris, Budapest, Delphi, Nicosia, Nicosia International Airport, trips within Cyprus or abroad, and a meeting with Tomas and Monica Tranströmer have inspired poetic texts which appear externally as prose. This leads back to the question: When will people stop needing to classify works of art and language that have been formed by creativity, by the soul?

These texts have been written with insight and intuition, with a holistic or partial understanding of representative moments in life, with all the senses alert, with an interweaving of imagination, emotion and philosophical contemplation. At first, things are viewed from a distance, visually and historically. This is followed by an understanding of the rhythm of life and of the mystery behind the windows of the world. “The poetic quest on a different horizon... thought is carried away by poetry, the senses are shaken.” These texts are more poetic than what others present as poems.

Using a rich vocabulary, the poet speaks to herself and to others, to the outside world, to the reader, moving between dream and reality, between the theatrical representation of events and their cinematic recording.

In conclusion, Lily Michaelidou is a poet, regardless of what she writes. She is a remarkable creator and traveller, who allows the world to speak directly to her soul. She receives its messages with her sensitive antennae, melds dreams, thoughts and emotions, avoids platitudes, and arrives directly at the essence, which she conveys in the most poetic way.

### **ARENA (MELANI, 2014)**

The bilingual collection, which was translated into English by David Connolly, begins with the epigraph: “Love, life and death compete in the same arena, for the ruby wine, some call it ‘*holy communion*’, others intoxication...” *Arena* revolves around three essential concepts: life, death and Eros, which is the life-giving force that has the power

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to defeat even death, since it gives continuity to life. These cannot exist without an ascent to the spiritual spheres, however, whether in a religious or a Dionysian form, which has been known since Greek antiquity as the other aspect of the Apollonian spirit.

The collection is divided into the sections entitled “Of the night,” “Little pauses,” “Writing the divide,” “In sights,” “Of the day,” and ends with notes, factual clarifications.

Dedicated to Milto Sachtouris, the first poem is descriptive, an account of a meeting perhaps. The specific person, place and time, as well as a more general view of the surrounding world – memories, people, situations, and things – unfold on a stage before us, and we join the gathering using our imagination.

After the word combinations and expressive explorations observed in the poet’s earlier writing, what we have here is a mature language that unfolds evenly and steadily. By now, the poet is sure of herself and of her abilities; she opens up to the reader in a direct, everyday language. “And I surrender myself to your judgement,” she says in the poem “Unexpected,” after conveying thoughts and images.

Poems that comment on the current political, economic and social reality mark a turn in her poetry in this collection, indicating her maturity and her stance on suffering in her country and in life in general. “It’s March and, unexpectedly, winter has returned. Just like our lives have turned upside down.” The poem “Unexpected” begins with “Crisis burst in everywhere” and ends with the note: “A time of harsh economic crisis that affected many lives.”

The poet moves between harsh reality and dreams, or in the realms of fantasy and books, opening up new worlds for herself and for her readers. “All those who buy and sell people and believe that everyone can be bought, do not recognize themselves here,” says Tomas Tranströmer, the Swedish Nobel Laureate.

A new aspect in her poetics are the echoes of other poets’ work, or the inclusion of excerpts from their work in her poems. Their influence is a

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result of repeated readings and of direct contact with external reality: “I read Bukowski and Pentadactylos is snowcapped... Stray politicians, banker crows, straddle the horizon.”

This contact also has genuine, human moments, such as the return to the land of her birth, to her home and roots, to traditions and customs, to the beauty of folk culture.

Landscapes painted by her poetic art, the absence of beloved persons, the escape, a dreamy *mise en scène*, sensual full-body shudders, the entire semantics of Eros, and a return to the interweaving of the inner and the outer worlds compose the section “Little pauses.” Introspective and simultaneously extroverted, and with a dignified sadness, the poet says in a monologue: “I feed on dreams and sky.”

The world-travelling poet does not miss any opportunity to offer her experiences to her readers through poetry or prose. In a wonderful simile, she likens northern and southern countries with the human body – the head as the north, which looks at the feet, the south, with its sun, sea, picturesque landscapes and erotic recollections.

In the section “Writing the divide” we are transferred to the divided homeland, where Turkish Cypriots have their own reading of history even though they live in the same place. Writers attempt to reunify people, hoping to heal the wounds, and to bring peace to the country, but the Turkish invasion has indelibly marked history and the souls of the people. It seeps into all aspects of life and divides the country. The only certainty is that nature knows no dividing lines. Fog and rain cover the entire island.

Scenes from the region where the poet grew up or where she currently resides, visits and memories, vivid descriptions, images and sounds attest to the violent division of the country.

Suddenly, another shocking moment produces a landscape of death. The explosion at the Evangelos Florakis naval base at Mari distresses the poet with horrific images of dismemberment and death, while darkness covers everything.

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With a constant flow of innuendoes about the people and places that she visits or thinks about, the section “In sights” presents poems in a living, embellished, everyday language. At times, the poet converses with her protagonists, writers or artists. She interprets works of art placed in a successful *mise en scène* and astonishes with her flowing language.

Visits to Aegina, to Kazantzakis’s house, to ancient Olympia, to Amiantos in Cyprus, to Armenia and Germany, to parks and museums, motivate the poetic rendering of thoughts and feelings on the work of unsung or celebrated creators. Harmoniously correlated, nature, man and his creations compose the world of this section, which includes the poem “In time’s arena” inspired by the poet’s visit to ancient Olympia. The ancient gods, the games in the *palaestra*, and the sculptor Pheidias take us back thousands of years. “Myriad dialogues between moons and suns / history within history, life within other lives / outside us and within us. / The eyes, hands, discourse / absorb, grasp, take wing / and whirl in time’s arena.” And, at the end, “With earth I fill mouth, hair. / I wrap myself in laurel leaves / that in years to come they may find me in this position. / Unknown female they’ll note, no identity.” The coexistence with the landscape, the invasion in time which fills it with the corresponding milestones in space, and the inward journey into psycho-spiritual states are some of the characteristics of the poet’s art.

In the last part of the collection “Of the day,” we travel with the poet to Spain and explore its culture, while she – with her eyes fixed on the external and internal worlds, and with her senses and mind alert – leads us to scenes of everyday life among strangers, with the same love and desire for exploration. The arena is present here as well:

“In the arena; without bulls, bullfights and olé, oléee; The fury of the age; In the arena a huge shopping mall... The arena is in use again; Except that people have replaced the bulls; and multinationals the bullfighters... I am transformed into a bull that refuses to fight; The lances are already piercing my body; the blood flows writing the epi-

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logue; red cape; nightmare; I am transformed into a bull; that fights with itself”

For the poet, every visit is an inward dive, a living reality, and an impetus for self-knowledge, a vivid rendering and interweaving of the external world with her internal ebbs and flows. Above all, it is a part of her inner quest.

In *Arena* we have observed an upward poetic journey, free verse and language, maturity and directness in the poet’s communication with her readers.

### **DROPS FROM THE MAASAI LAND (NICOSIA, 2017)**

Lily Michaelidou loves to travel; she is keen to experience new worlds with the eyes of her body and of her soul open, with all her senses alert. She devours images and sounds, tasting and touching. Travelling enthral her, and she records impressions, thoughts, dreams. Her visit to Kenya provides the reader with an opportunity to become acquainted with an unfamiliar place through her sensibilities. Comparisons highlight its main characteristics – the different sense of time, the landscape, the people and their customs, their physical characteristics and their poetry, the expression of their emotions.

The book begins with the flight to Kenya. The writer’s observation is already on alert, focused on fellow passengers and flight attendants, drawing comparisons between here and there. Her olfactory sense is also on alert: “Every place has its own smell.”

Divided into seventeen short chapters entitled “Drops,” the book takes readers on a journey guided by a seasoned traveller, who knows how to observe and think, how to reduce things to relatable sizes and impressions, how to articulate her observations in a simple, graceful language. Everything is alive, personified: the night, the roots of the traditions, the countless colourful realities. Her prose is poetic. Her dialogue with nature and with the people is internal yet alive,

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descriptive. She craves adventure, the more the better, even the unsafe. Experiences are comprehensive and tangible “To pick up a handful of dreams and taste them like soft snow, to taste the wisdom of life.” This philosophizing poetry passes through the body, becomes filtered through emotion and knowledge, and celebrates beauty.

The daily lives of the locals, their days of rest, their way of thinking, the different sense of time, the sweltering sun – comparisons contribute to knowing and understanding others, those who are not us, but central to the images, sounds and experiences. How can we know them better?

The curious traveller and the curious locals, who are unaccustomed to visitors, imprint each others’ souls with fleeting impressions. Although such a visit can reveal only crumbs of the loaf that is Kenya, the important thing is that, because of it, a work of art has been created. The land has penetrated the sensitive writer’s veil, and this is a gain both for the reader and for the literature of our country.

### **HIM, STORIES OF MEN (MELANI, 2018)**

No matter what the poet writes, she is always a poet.

Lily Michaelidou prefaces her collection of short stories *Him, Stories of Men* in order to inform her readers about the inspiration and chronology of the presented material.

The collection, which was translated into English by David Connolly, includes the following short stories: “His smile,” “Mystic inebriation,” “Strong smell of cologne,” “Prolonged twilight,” “Glass tray,” “Vines trailing to the ground,” “He,” “In his eyes I saw,” “Aspect of a migratory bird,” “Unexpected awakening,” “Restitution,” “Destination: utopia,” “This is my body,” “At first sight,” “Leaden shadow,” “Question,” “The statement.”

The detailed introductory note reveals that every story was inspired by a male figure, a family member, friend or stranger, who moved the

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writer and became etched in her memory, so that he could be portrayed in a literary form later on, through her continuing experimentations that range from a classic to a surrealist writing style.

While highly descriptive when it comes to the external portrayal of her characters, Lily Michaelidou also penetrates their souls using visual, auditory and especially olfactory impressions, as well as explanatory comments. She transports the reader either to the Cyprus of yesteryear, highlighting the agricultural work, her characters' affinity with nature and the universe, their meekness and goodness, or she transports the reader abroad – she, a perpetual traveller-explorer in her encounters with others, writers or strangers, expatriates or refugees. In delving into their inner realms, the writer ends up revealing herself, even though she remains reserved and circumspect as always.

In the short story “His smile” she paints, with a great deal of love, the portrait of a grandfather within his small and large universe, the self-sufficiency and the wisdom of people. In “Mystic inebriation” she depicts the villager with his passions and tribulations in a language that is full of feeling and understanding, a language that penetrates her characters' inner worlds. “Strong smell of cologne” describes an uprooted man's shower ritual and makes use of the writer's strong olfactory sense.

A participant in the world that she depicts or reflects, she describes a meeting with important fellow artists in a flowing poetic language in “Prolonged twilight.” Always sympathetic toward her characters, in “Glass tray” she watches an amorous bookseller and records life's important moments. She sets the scene with the title in “Vines trailing to the ground,” which renders a refugee's yearning to see his home in the Turkish-occupied part of Cyprus. In “He,” with a great artistry in the repetition of the phrase “he sleeps,” she contrasts a modern woman's prolonged workday with a man's, in a text which can be characterized as a poetic rendering, a recording of thoughts, a psychological portrait, a merging of dreams, plans and reality.

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In “In his eyes I saw,” in a journey into one man’s eyes, she sees time and place, people and things. She delves deeply into people’s souls, palpating, analyzing and naming internal states like an anatomist, not of science but of sensitivity, beautifully expressing her discoveries or intuitive findings.

All stories are preceded by epigraphs, which introduce the overriding spirit and atmosphere. They are journeys from the external world into the inner realms, not only of the characters, but also of the writer herself.

Contemporary problems of the country, scenes from everyday life, the meaning of sin that seems to preoccupy the writer beneath the surface, simple stories given with poetry, with a metaphysical element, with imagination and knowledge.

The writing style, which ranges from the classic to the inebriated surrealistic, renders corresponding characters and situations – all this points to the unanswered questions: What power of the soul compels someone to write? What guides the creative process until the end?

Contemporary narratology offers an arsenal of terms and distinctions to those who endeavour to analyze, but I have used none, because I consider them to be cold and ineffective scalpels.

The poet and prose-writer Lily Michaelidou continues her fruitful creative journey.

## excerpts from reviews

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### THE ALCHEMY OF TIME

In seven words, Lily Michaelidou defines the writer, the man who is so engrossed in writing that he ‘fasts’ on the present, in other words, spends all his time leaning over pieces of paper instead of his mistress.

When I first held *The Alchemy of Time* in my hands, I – not a poetry expert – was afraid that I would not have the courage to delve into her writing. Since poetry is a distillate of sorts, in the same way that one can destroy the aroma of Malt whiskey by serving it on ice, I was afraid that my myopic eyes, which are accustomed to prose, would trample her delicate blossoms.

I stepped reluctantly into the pool of Siloam, but its waters were magical. In short, I saw the light. Her words touched my eyes with the wings of butterflies. Her images offered visions of other worlds. I heard exquisite melodies, as a poet might say. A Cypriot Circe had invited me to feast on ambrosia. Transformed into a receiver of subtler forms, I was left reading her verses again and again, while Edgar Alan Poe’s Raven futilely mumbled “nevermore” over the bust of the intellectual Athena.

- Aris Sfakianakis, *Writer*

Excerpt from his speech at the book’s launch at Spiti tis Kyprou in Athens  
(December, 2001)

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### SHAPES AND ROADS IN RELIEF...

This is poetry, becoming one with reality and with everyday life, melting like time “melted in a glass of wine, mixing yesterday and today with tomorrow,” and bound to the present “like the mountain is bound to the sea, indistinguishable, present, ancient, precarious, uncertain in wise winters and summers.” This is Lily’s talent in perceiving and creating – she, who is in perpetual motion, surreptitious and

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impassioned, “not like autumn yeast ready for use,” storing wonderful, angelic worlds within herself, “carrying time beyond the shores of life,” emerging without being lost “while the dry leaves that fall to the ground mourn a testimony that memory returns.”

- **Anna Marangou, *Archaeologist-Art Historian***

Excerpt from her speech at the book’s launch at Yfantourgio (Nicosia, 2003)

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## REMEMBRANCE OF A DAWN

When a poet is seized by the Indian idea that, I suppose, is in the same parallel cycle as the Delphic idea of the Greek poet Sikelianos, knowledge derived from experience loses its weight in the same way that bodies immersed in water do. The poet refers to “the heavy metal of knowledge, in the Galaxy which changes scenery, as the park continues to whirl curled up in its nocturnal sheets.”

In the liquid atmosphere of hypnosis, however, some realistic moments emerge like volcanic isles in the vastness of the oceans.

- **Antonis Constantinou Eliakes, *Author***

Excerpt from his speech at the Nehru Centre in London (April 25, 2003)

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## INNUENDOES

An enduring voice from Cyprus, a convincing and genuine lyricism, a sincere poetic deposition... In other words, erotic spontaneity does not overwhelm the poem. The ego endeavours more and more perilous inner dives. Its pain resounds anguished at times, milder at others. The deafening conspicuousness, which usually plagues this type of writing, is absent.

- **George Veis, *Poet***

*Highlights of Hellenic Culture, Yearbook, 07-08*

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The language is sharp, lyrical at times, with tones of a melancholy that seem to stem from unconscious processes and dreams. Most poems are short and suggestive – in any case, the title of the collection is clear, as is the motto, an excerpt from a lecture by Borges “The poet’s creed,” *The Art of the Verse*: “Now I have arrived at the conclusion (and this conclusion may appear bleak) that I no longer believe in expression; I believe only in suggestion.”

- **Chrysa Spyropoulou, *Writer-Literary Critic***

*Kathimerini* (13.5.2008)

What we have here, however, is the innuendo of innuendoes, when Eros does not fit into confession and remains enclosed in its secret bond. Nature is called upon to take on human characteristics because the intensity is released when it becomes a cloud carried away by the wind or a harvest moon.

- **Vassilis Kalamaras, *Journalist***

*Eleftherotypia / Vivliothiki* (11.7.2008)

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## THE CITY NEEDS NO INTRODUCTION

We recognize the best of travel literature, mainly English (Leigh Fermor, Chatwin, Burton), in the masterful narrations of Lily Michaelidou.

Travelling is always an unsurpassed experience because it initiates an endless dialogue with people, places and life. A part of the inner world, the outer, is carried away in the vortex of impressions left behind by streets, seas and skies. An unusual travelogue through space and time, through desire and imagination, which spans many centuries in the histories of cities, an effort to record memories in their hidden and obvious traces.



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## ARENA

*Arena*, the poetry collection by Lily Michaelidou, was published by Melani in 2014. Excellently translated by David Connolly, it features a wonderful cover design by Annie Michaelidou. *Arena* is a entire house, a house to be read, a house to dream in, a house in Nicosia across from the snow-capped Pentadactylos – it is a house in the heart of the world.

### - Chloe Koutsoumbeli, *Poet*

Excerpt from her speech at the book's presentation in Thessaloniki (Ianos Bookstore, November 2015)

This world-traveller's poetic arena encompasses a wide range of literary themes, while the poems are dedicated to her favourite poets and to others, Greeks and non-Greeks.

In addition to the tragedy of her homeland, her subjects include the eternal 'bipole' of love-death, time and memory, political and social commentary, nature and the concept of destiny, her travels and foreign lands...

### - Tolis Nikiforou, *Poet-Prose Writer*

Excerpt from his speech at the book's presentation in Thessaloniki (Ianos Bookstore, November 2015)

For the Cypriot cultural scene, *Arena* is an exotic bird. First, the cover, a surrealistic drawing by Annie Michaelidou: An arena that encloses broken heads of statues, kites, balloons, the sea, lovers stealing a kissing, bicycles, trains and birds drowning in colour. Then, its bilingualism, which is in line with the European Union's directive for spreading poetry beyond national borders. Finally, its subject matter...

Lily "plays" (in a colourful language) with the complexity of the contemporary Cypriot, who is burdened by a heavy heritage and who is, in parallel, a traveller in the arena of globalization.

...the poet's psycho-spiritual complexity tempers her pain, which

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speaks with Bukowski and Pentadactylos at times, or with her omnipresent absent love, or with her religious faith and with her ancestors, while continuously opening up to life...

**-Myrto Azina Chronidou, *Writer-Poet***

*Diorama, Arts and Culture Magazine* (September-October, Nicosia 2016)

I would like to discuss three poems together, namely “House boat” (p. 25), “Memories” (p.31), and “Female portrait” (p.33), which I cannot present through excerpts because I would be not be doing them justice. I have chosen these poems because, among other things, they provide tangible proof that Lily Michaelidou achieves a high level of descriptive-narrative density without fracturing the poetic flow, the inner musicality, and the rhythm of her poems. This can only be characterized as an achievement.

**- Giorgos Frangos, *Journalist-Poet-Literary Critic***

Phileleftheros (5.10.2015)

Lily’s *Arena* is an entire world, vibrant, colourful, unseen and secret at the same time. It is a world where everything converses and coexists: the dream, the sky, the people, the buildings, the birds, the trees. This is what a book is, dear friends: an arena of meetings, emotions, colours, words, a world from which “branches, leaves, petals” pour out from Barcelona to Galata, from Yerevan to ancient Olympia. Familiar as I am with the rest of Lily’s poetry and prose, I have often wondered whether the power of her writing, her ability to touch and embrace everything with words, would be possible had she not had that strong, robust and unshakable force that is Galata, Mrs Anna, the Holy Week, the yeast, mother’s embroidery, and rivers behind her, whether these life imprints, memories and scents are what enabled her to fly to distant skies and know different people and places, because – as she says – “all people are the earth...”

**- Anna Marangou, *Archaeologist-Art Historian***

Excerpt from her speech at the book’s launch (Theatro Ena, Nicosia, 2016)

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## DROPS FROM THE MAASAI LAND

Dawn is breaking and I have just completed a first reading of your book. I am mesmerized by the way you slip between the things of the world, by the way you receive them and allow them to penetrate you, by the way you deliver them to the reader. The delicate precise recording of the experience and its articulation... Your writing is alive... The text pulsates. You are true to yourself and to the life within you and, with immense respect and tenderness, you allow it to infuse and moisten the words that touch not only our hearts, but also the depths of our thoughts, and the soft surface of our skin.

- **Elena Toumazi**

(January, 2018)

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## HIM, STORIES OF MEN

...I liked them. I was impressed by the language and by the way you handle the storytelling form that you have chosen, i.e. the short story, in its shortest form, which places restrictions and requires rigorous discipline. You have managed to meet all the criteria of this very demanding narrative form and to compose flawless short stories.

- **Costas Hadjigeorgiou, *Philologist-Theatre and Literature Critic***

(July 30, 2017)

## THE ALCHEMY OF TIME

### DISTANT JOURNEY

She followed the path of the words  
Did not wish to interfere

She was left with the mystery  
a priestess in the ocean of her essence

She set off on a distant journey  
thinking only  
of the holy communion

### THE READER

You are the reader  
the one who knows the night and the stars  
the day and the sun  
the cloud, the lightning  
the chain of the rain  
the wind and the thunder  
the dust and the sand  
the horizon and the sky  
and the songs of the shore  
the majestic mountains  
the stillness of moments  
the tremor of the sighs  
the love and the shadow  
the pain, the anger and the fire  
the mystery of the immaculate child

and the beautiful maiden, the neck  
the futility, the encounter with the paradox  
and the dense darkness of death  
the flowers and the birds  
the trees and the vision  
centres of vainglorious mortals  
You are the reader  
the saviour of private moments

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of beauty, of that which is different  
of the eternal song  
of the rhythmic pulse  
of the beat of the heart  
of the invisible beauty  
of forgotten poets

## SHAPES AND ROADS IN RELIEF...

### GENESIS

And then  
    through the stampede of horses  
through the galloping dust  
    in the haze of the landscape  
and in the river stagnant tears pooled  
And the clay  
    which was the beginning  
spirit waiting to come to life...

Then the horses  
    became one in their movements  
and a spasm of life  
a flash of orgasm  
lifted the veil of dust  
in that secret meeting  
    of the sacred  
inside the clay

### LANDSCAPE

I love a landscape  
    that begins  
where it ends  
  
I desire even more  
to compose it within myself  
lest I be wounded by its absence

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## REMEMBRANCE OF A DAWN

### MEDITATIONS

I

The age of the kisses  
the bloody sunset  
that rises from your eyes  
the music of the slowly-dying body  
elude me

II

We perish  
while the leaves  
that fall dry to the ground  
mourn a testimony  
that memory returns

III

I am sufficed with the silence of the eyes  
that conquers any secret  
I have inside me  
with blind devotion

IV

I mumble in my sleep  
while the waters flood  
my dreams  
And for anything the day nurtures and covets  
the night is a tomb  
where the fragments of love  
are buried

V

They drank all the dew of the sky  
but did not quench their thirst  
With one kiss  
the desire was sated

Yours is the entire secret  
that springs up completely naked

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## INNUENDOES

### THE WATERS STIR

the body remembers

the river of your words

the language of your soul

coveting the spring

the caress of winter

the torrent of kisses

the lightning of desire

...time casts an anchor

so that memory can dismount

so the escape can rest

in the shade of Eros...

## THE CITY NEEDS NO INTRODUCTION

...Seabirds are flying thoughts that accompany travellers. Open wings of a wide sea so familiar yet distant and cold. They have the ability to contract in the daylight and to raise their wings precisely at the moment the day begins.

The archipelago. The roar of the heart of every lonely, unwritten desire. Now I understand the sense born of the first visual contact, when the archipelago's watery branches slowly spread out. I first encountered it Tranströmer's verses. His grandfather, he wrote, was piloting ships through the islands of the Baltic Sea since the end of the 19th century, recording destinations, draft, speed, visibility, and signs of reefs every day. Then I thought of landscapes shot in such a way that they would appear real, taken from photographs. Thousands of lonely islands residing in the calmness of the waters. Silent homes painted mauve, in a misty white, in a soft green, open windows in the company of the wind, the sun that struggles to find a way out of the thick clouds...

**Archipelago** (May, 2010)

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...Monica went to prepare the coffee. Tomas got up slowly, with great difficulty but carefully, with determination, with an internal power in the mind that was instructing the limbs, which were obligated to obey. He picked up the cane and took a few steps, again very carefully and slowly, toward the piano. He slowly moved the bench to a comfortable position and sat down. He opened the sheet music in front of him. I read “piano music for the left hand,” and he started to play a melody that passed whole into my eyes and stirred up the tears. That gentleness of the fingers, that dignity of the sound that had neither beginning nor end. I stood next to him watching his hand, which touched the keys with so much skill and love, attempting to coordinate knowledge and action and to bring them to life at the tips of his fingers...

### Meeting with Tomas and Monica Tranströmer (December, 2009)

## ARENA

### I CAME TO PAY RESPECT

“Everything fits into writing. Rivers,  
bridges, mountains. Plains and districts.  
A spacious place the way you speak.”

- Michalis Pieris, *Writing's places*

I came to pay respect Master, to light the lamp.  
It took a long time and the nights gave out.  
Twenty years on this rock, beside the sea.  
Winters with the wind bringing the earth's echo to your threshold  
the wave leaping as far as the door, the foundations quivering  
overcome by the brine.  
Here now, I'm knocking at your door.  
Who are you to waken me with your cries?  
What wind is grabbing the ropes turning me from eternal sleep?

But I came only to pay respect, I mumbled  
not to unearth time's fury.  
Just to see your window, the steps that raised you up  
and the yard's tall pine —still alive and spreading—.

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A rock wedged in the dry-stone wall  
and the carved plaque on the entrance wall  
testify to your passing here.

Yet I'll say it, even if it sounds odd.  
I saw you today, sitting with that ponderous look.  
I saw the pen trembling in your hand, your lips voicing the writing  
and the message thickening, crowding on the paper  
and your word like lightning, and then, the bad news  
liberated in the fever.

Yet your lamp didn't go out.  
Thousands of eyes still pore over your writings.  
Thousands of hands grope, to grasp the meanings  
to make special yeast, to knead themselves with you  
to eat to drink from your blood  
to find repose in their souls.

Aigina, June 2010  
*Translated by David Connolly*

## MEMORIES

*To my grandmother, Erato*

I found her sitting at the front door.  
In her lap she was holding a large tin tray  
full of wheat that she was cleaning, sorting grain by grain.  
"I'm making kollyva," she said, "it's All Souls' Day tomorrow."  
I stare intently to read that which isn't written  
on any script, which by itself is a whole  
world; her own unique gaze, the misty white  
of the eye in the shadow of her years.  
"The souls," she went on, gazing up at the sky  
"find no rest; one day each year  
they come down to earth and watch us."  
A light reflected in her thoughts and her words  
came out like consecrated bread. I noticed the thick veins  
in her aged hands. "They come down to earth, touch  
our breath and sit on the trees' branches.

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The trees shouldn't be pruned on that day  
because the souls will fall to the ground, be hurt and crying  
they'll voice their grievances about the living..."

I brought the image before my eyes  
the rustling of the souls among the branches  
the breaths oscillating in space.  
Calm at the end of the daily toil  
inundates the nights, bringing to the surface  
the testimonies of the old 'uns  
emanating from of their fears.

*Translated by David Connolly*

## **IN TIME'S ARENA**

Midnight between the upright columns.  
The squares empty; total silence.  
Living together beneath the sacred rocks, Zeus  
Demeter, Hades, Dionysus, Helios and Selene.  
The Officials watch the naked bodies  
in the wrestling ring; the curving of the bodies; the goal.  
Hera's temple, the Echo Hall, the workshop of Pheidias  
who is still waiting to hew the light  
in men's closed eyes.

The moon follows the beaten path  
certain of its future.  
Subterranean tremors echo, recorded  
are myriad dialogues between moons and suns  
history within history, life within other lives  
outside us and within us.  
The eyes, hands, discourse  
absorb, grasp, take wing  
and whirl in time's arena.

Slowly I move the heavy column.  
I sit in the hollow.  
With earth I fill mouth, hair.

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I wrap myself in laurel leaves  
that in years to come they may find me in this position.

Unknown female they'll note, no identity.

Ancient Olympia, August 2013

*Translated by David Connolly*

## **DROPS FROM THE MAASAI LAND**

### **SELF-OBSERVATION**

Travelling makes me forget, even my face.

The mirrors at the hotel in Kisii were old; a faint haze had spread across their surface. The lighting in the room was just enough for someone to see what's important.

My face is not important, nor do I care whether my eyes have dark circles or bags, nor that my body refuses to accept that innocence and youth are far behind and that the deterioration is advancing.

Without meaning to, I compare my daily life with the daily life of the people of Kisii.

It's impossible not to be overcome by melancholy.

The value of life is different here, and children grow up with minimum demands. Education, over-education, greed and intoxication are the privileges of westerners.

I am aging.

I look at my face in the hazy mirror again.

In my eyes I see my mother's eyes, tiny, moist, and sleepless.

My life is a mountain that I keep climbing.

The peak is not far.

My thoughts are endless, downward, without periods.

I ascend, they descend, tumble down.

What law governs our lives?

How much we will learn, where does the path lead?

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Which few fragments of our past and future will survive?

Everything is reflected in the great river that slowly leads its waters to the ocean.

Everything, even our mute nights, our suitcases that are always ready for the next, and perhaps final, destination.

If my eyes can still see without glasses, then everything around me truly exists, and mornings are a joy, dare I say a rebirth, like this palm tree whose leaves sway lazily outside my window.

I select names carefully so they will match things. The definition of words is not difficult, especially when the moon is circling above my head.

Escape intrigues me, even if it is a part of flight that has no escape. I like looking at the stars, even if it's a sign of a chronic melancholy. The wrinkles, the anxiety about tomorrow, the futility of today, the first signs of laxity in my body are not visible in small photographs. Neither are memory, oblivion, and the loss between them.

I always look at people in the eyes, attempting to face the fear, the fear of the desert of their eyes that captivates me. Their eyes open to the same vastness and also to the same uncertainty, like the desert.

An unexpected psalm in the boundless night made me leap forward by a decade and come face to face with my future. The words of the Argentine poet come to mind once more "we forget that we are all dead men conversing with dead men."

I am aging.

I look at myself in the mirror again, pick up a pen, trace my outline. This will remain, when I have moved away into the distance. This, and a few verse offerings perhaps...

Kisii, Kenya, October 2017

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## HIM, STORIES OF MEN

### ASPECT OF A MIGRATORY BIRD

...At night, however, sitting by the rim of a glass of red wine that holds him captive, he traverses outlines of dreams in Van Gogh's landscapes, enters the solid darkness of Goya, climbs Kandinsky's triangles and lines, descends and lies supine in Matisse's colours, falls in love with Picasso's maids of Avignon, marvels at Renoir's tranquil, fragile lines and at Frans Hals's twenty-nine shades of black, swirls in the self-luminous shine in Rembrandt's faces, is surprised by the ugliness of Lautrec, grabs at Dali's moustache and tottering falls into the molten time, is woken in a sweat by the Miro's cocks, not knowing where he is... when at that very moment on the gramophone Montserrat with *Ensueño* reaches the inner, thinly-woven dome of his soul...

### HIS SMILE

*Childhood is our real birthplace.  
That's where we're always coming from...  
to my grandfather, Yacoumis*

His boots squeak at every step. I can hear them from far away, from the moment that, every Sunday after church, he turns into the street where our house is. He is dressed in his best clothes, black, pleated breeches, a belt that holds them tight round the waist, a white linen shirt, buttoned up to the neck, a short fancy waistcoat, tailor-made, a black jacket and black hat (he wore a straw hat for his daily work and in the winter a *mantos*<sup>1</sup>), knee-high socks and, of course, the leather boots, handmade by the village priest cum cobbler (for everyday use he wore *siritzes*<sup>2</sup>).

*Translated by David Connolly*

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1. *mantos*: thick black hood that men wore over their heads especially when working in the fields. It was fastened down behind their necks.

2. *siritzes*: boots made of untanned leather and with soles of thick roots to provide a firm step.

## biographical notes

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**LILY MICHAELIDOU** lives and creates in Nicosia. She studied Public Relations and Secretarial Studies.

She has published three poetry collections through Govostis Publications in Athens: *The Alchemy of Time* (2001), *Shapes and Roads in Relief...* (2003), and *Remembrance of a Dawn* (2004) in Greek and English - a bilingual edition.

Melani Publications in Athens are the publishers of the poetry collection *Innuendoes* (2007), the collection of travelogues *The City Needs No Introduction* (2011), the bilingual poetry collection *Arena* (2014), which was short listed for the State Prize for Poetry, and the bilingual collection of short narratives *Him, Stories of Men* (2018).

She has also self-published the travelogue *Drops from the Maasai Land* (2017).

Her poems have been published in newspapers and literary magazines in Cyprus and abroad, and have been translated into English, French, Italian, Serbian, Swedish, Bulgarian, Spanish, Romanian and Turkish. She has participated in poetry readings and events in Cyprus and abroad. ([www.lilymichaelides.com](http://www.lilymichaelides.com))

In June 2013, she joined the Board of Directors of the Cyprus PEN Centre. She is in charge of public and international relations, and also serves on the editorial committee of *In Focus* magazine, the centre's English-language literary journal.

Since 2006, she has been co-owner and director of Ideogramma (a non-profit cultural organization), which organizes literary festivals and poetry meetings in Cyprus and abroad, with the participation of poets and writers from all over the world. (<https://www.facebook.com/Ideogramma-1498934130328580/>)



**STELIOS PAPANTONIOU** was born in Nicosia. He graduated from the Pancyprian Gymnasium, where he also served as principal.

He studied Philology at the National Kapodistrian University of Athens and received his MSc from New York's SUNY Albany University in Educational Programs Development.

He has taught in secondary education and worked in Programs Development, publishing books on teaching Modern Greek, as well as poetry and essay anthologies in collaboration with other philologists.

As a member of the Philosophical Society of Cyprus, he has given lectures on philosophy and actively contributed to the publication of *Zenon*, the society's journal.

He has presented the work of Cypriot teachers, poets and other writers. He contributes to *Phileleftheros* newspaper with articles on the political life of Cyprus.

He has published one poetry collection, *For the Mountain*, the book *Stoic Philosophy*, and the collection of short stories *My Neighbourhood* (Chrysopolitissa Publications, 2018). He has also written poetry and prose texts for the album *Incense of Seven Epitaphs* (Kentriki Asfalistiki, 2018).

Most of his work can be found in electronic form on Scribd and on his blog: [www.steliospapantoniou.blogspot.com](http://www.steliospapantoniou.blogspot.com)