



after GREECE
poems by
CHRISTOPHER BAKKEN



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The purpose of the T. S. Eliot Prize is to publish and promote the best in contemporary English-language poetry, regardless of a poet's nationality, reputation, stage in career, or publication history.

Judge for 2001: Lynne McMahon

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FOREWORD

by Lynne McMahon

Christopher Bakken opens his expansive first book, *After Greece*, with what might be considered its ongoing preoccupation: in the face of personal grief and geologic and historic catastrophe, what will endure to console us? His answer, surprisingly, is not the marble glories of Greece, but the little-regarded clay. “Foundling of fires,” he says, “you make, along with us, companion carbon / a common corporation of dust.” This book does not offer the tourist’s or archaeologists’s or historian’s or scholar’s exegesis of the ancient world—though elements of all those occupations can be tracked—but rather the poet’s perception of the palimpsest itself. What he “scrapes again”—the etymological rendering of *palimpsestos*—during his years teaching at Aristotle University and Anatolia College yields a kind of faith (“since the earth is god I am not dust but god”) immediately thrown over by brute fact. A cart load of garlic is “a mountain of tidily braided skulls”—no less beautiful for the intrusion of Thanatos—; the sea casts “under the waves their exuviae, each // delivery a wreckage”; the reason for self-exile is sorrow and desperation; the reason for home the same.... And the history of the much-conquered archipelago underpins every waking day. “How can I explain these overgrown stones,” Bakken asks,

 this house, the Sephardic man who built it,
 or my students who trace their blood to Seville

 and Auschwitz? There are too many details....

 But my lover and I, we are here, in this

wretched city, sublime Thessaloniki—

soon enough to find them: root-gagged, mossy,
pressed flat into the ant-hollowed earth.
When we pry them up with our boots

the patio stones reveal their shape,
a graceful gravestone arch, and long names
of the Hebrew dead in Greek granite.
(“Finding the Stones”)

Christopher Bakken has taken a courageous step in titling his book after James Merrill’s famous poem. His essay “The Poet, After Greece,” recently published in *Literal Latté*, eloquently offers this summary paragraph relating his work to James Merrill’s, which I will let stand as my conclusion here:

I learned from Merrill that even an American could approach Greece without writing a travel diary. Like him, I saw not only idealized ruins and monuments, but the sense that “All through the / Countryside were old ideas / Found lying open to the elements.” Ideas and things are interchangeable in Merrill’s Greek poems, as they are in mine.... In [his] “After Greece” Merrill suggests that we must find a way to comprehend the where before we understand the who, locating ourselves so we might understand how locale alters the ingredients of identity. Lit by the afterglow of our highest life experiences, shadowed by nostalgia, with Merrill I raise this toast:

This first glass I down
to the last time
I ate and drank in that old world. May I
Also survive its meanings, and my own.

AFTERWORD

On Mount Helicon Roula's father keeps his bees. They point it out to me as we pass on the highway. But we are climbing a different mountain, curve after curve toward the famous Parting of Ways, where poor Oedipus made a wrong turn, collided with Fate; we are taking his route backwards, out of Thebes, and we will leave it soon to head straight through the pass. Roula tells me this is her parents' first excursion in years (though her father retired some time ago) and they are taking us all, in my honor, to Delphi. By six we are awake, speeding off in their little car in order to beat the heat and the tourists. Vagelis sings *rembetiko* while he drives and Pelagia, beaming, sings every other verse (they have memorized all the songs on their cassettes). I recognize only a few words—*eyes, moon, train*—and so Roula tries to translate a bit, though she says it is quite difficult. *Rembetiko* is the music of sufferers, exiles. It is made by men in flannel shirts who smoke and drink too much, and by women who have borne too many hard knocks. What keeps me from the words is not a lack of these prerequisites exactly, it is something more fundamental. *Rembetiko* was born in Yiorgos Seferis's Asia Minor, so the Greek is flecked with Turkish words in addition to taverna lingo; it is a Levantine blues that veers toward the ecstatic. There are times, indeed, when the singing can be mistaken for moaning, or, in another country, the prayer call of a muezzin. Hearing it, you remember that in Greece you are in the East, not the West, in the Balkans, where borders and the identities that blur around them often shift beyond recognition, where tyrants are as popular as rock stars. In a car with a Greek family, listening to words I cannot fully grasp, my life in this country takes on its strange character: suspended between

inclusion and confusion, honorary citizenship and tourism. I am too much barbarian to be Greek and, though not by blood, too Greek to be barbarian.

We stop for pastries in a tiny village on the verge of Parnassus, giddy from the altitude and coffee. I had returned to Greece the day before, after a two-year absence, and it is quite a stroke of luck to go from the airport directly to a home, a family, their intimate language. But the transition back to my Greek has me reeling. To make things more difficult, the Greek of Thessaloniki (where I lived for several years) and my Greek teacher's Athenian dialect are just cousins to this one, to Vagelis's village slang, delivered at the speed of a heated debate. But the Konsolaki's are generous, stopping often to rephrase their stories into what must be, for them, a kind of kindergarten simplicity. They are amused to have me and are endlessly entertained by my descriptions of America, the *polee megalo, para polee megalo* (very big, very *very* big) with which I begin almost every sentence. Pelagia, who keeps the joke going, requests for me *ena polee megalo cafe* from the waiter, who does not get the joke, brings me a tiny steaming cup like everyone else.

There is a dusty, caved-in hole in the hillside behind their house where Vagelis stores his hive-building lumber and rusting feta crates. Roula tells me it is not a hole, but a tunnel leading to the tomb of Antigone which had to be caved in to prevent looting and injury. When she was a child, votive figurines would sometimes turn up in the yard after a vigorous weeding around the tomato plants. The little archeological museum of Thebes, like all Greek museums, is overflowing with such objects: clay chickens, goddesses, phalluses, and rams. No one bothers to catalog this refuse of the ancient cults. This is not, as a result, a family impressed by ruins. So I am not surprised when Roula's parents tell us to go on ahead, that they will meet us at the museum later. There are already a number of gaudy tour buses parked along the road leading up the Sacred Way to the archaeological site. And, though we both have been to Delphi several times before (Roula on her yearly field trips in grade school), it is hard to resist another

climb past the treasuries, the Rock of the Sybil, the little amphitheater, up to the stadium.

We are all in love with the Charioteer of Delphi. But Roula has been carrying on a veritable affair with the handsome youth, though he is almost two thousand years her elder. She walks straight past the glass-cased amphoras and golden shields, the stiff *kouros* and *korai*, does not even stop for the omphalos (the very navel of the earth!), into a room lit only by two rather dirty windows and the Charioteer himself, with his beard of barnacles, his brown eyes carved from glass and stone. One can hardly bear to look him in the face. Yet we find our downcast eyes rewarded with the best surprise of the museum: his feet, a bare bronze pair entirely anomalous to the godlike proportions of their owner. If it is not the utter, gut-wrenching beauty of this form isolated in space that impresses us, then it is this collision of the divine and the human: the towering head and sublime face, the plebian feet, ankles showing, planted firmly on the earth. Tourist after tourist photographs him from the shins down. And this is the proper way of viewing him, since he would have been seen from below. The sculptor has corrected our vision, which shrinks objects above us, by making his body tall and unusually slender, gowned in a pleated tunic that inscribes straight lines down the torso, like the fluting on a column, down to that great revelation of perfectly ordinary feet.

But we see something that ancient maker could not; we see a man in ruins, an incomplete man, whose squared shoulders and placid expression conceal something tragic. The Charioteer *is* nearly perfect, but he has no team, is going nowhere fast. His horses have fled. He holds nothing now but a tangle of broken reins, like a forlorn handful of limp tagliatelle. Does he hear, like us, the echo of those invisible stallions? What we see is the void he clings to. The look in his eyes is the weary glance of his, and of our own, oblivion. And in this, the Charioteer of Delphi best embodies ancient man, who galloped forward once with his domesticated creatures, but now remains forever stranded, cut off from his transport. The future has left him, a greening relic, in its dust.

You would have to be dead not to love the art of the Classical period, to admire its Apollonian bravado and immortality: the government of Pericles, the monumental marbles of Athens, the canons of Polykleitos. But these contain an aura of the official. They correspond to an ethics of perfectibility, to a species of arrogance, what the Greeks themselves called hubris. Here the gods are made subjects, are forced to appear, to kill us or woo us, as we would have them. Like Rilke, we should return to the archaic: to the Minoan, the Mycenaean, the Etruscan. Let us have Linear A, the Phaestos Disc, everything indecipherable, the half-broken bodies of awkward stone men, the homely *kore's* lumpy figure beneath its panoply of marble garments; give us unsettling terra cotta dwarfs in lewd poses. The glowing marble dildos of Cycladic figurines. A Protoattic vase with its cartoon sphinx. Missing spears, and arms, and feet, those fragments of song on a burial stele: *I am a portrait in stone put here by Seikilos I remain forever in remembrance As long as you live do not grieve for time collects its tribute.* In Greece we become obsessed with time: there we encounter the past and it snorts like an animal at our back. Yet, that past is inaccessible, unknown, there *are* empty graves everywhere. We must suffice with looking through artifacts, resting awhile in the ruined places that house those artifacts—Knossos, Delphi, Mycenae, Thebes—and also looking in the forgotten places we step without knowing it.

The day is already approaching its heat when we step outside the museum. Cicadas are screeching in the immense olive groves which blanket the valley from Delphi to the sea. Vagelis and Pelagia are eager to get back over the mountains to Livadia, home of yet another oracle, at the intersection of the rivers Lethe and Mnemosyne, a place now shaded by plane trees where we will have our lunch. As we descend the pass, heading in the opposite direction, for mile after mile, there are panting men and boys with plastic numbers pinned to their chests. They are running uphill—a marathon! But these are not athletes, or at least not very convincing ones. A few appear dangerously near death in the morning

heat and we even pass a group that has stopped running to smoke. It is only gradually, and with horror, that Pelagia remembers the date—June 10—and first she bursts into tears, then Vagelis. There is no time to explain, for on a blind curve Vagelis has whipped the car around, accelerated in the opposite direction, with the runners, toward Distomo.

How to make contact with this language, the place that comes alive with it? My students used to tell me it is impossible to understand Greece unless you understand a single untranslatable concept: *Philotimo*. It is a species of self-esteem, a flavor of pride. When Walt Whitman sings the divinity of himself, he is, in some sense, singing *philotimo*. Not arrogance, because inborn, it is an intrinsic part of a Greek's ethnic ingredients. It might even be mistaken for nationalism: Greeks are unabashedly loyal to the country they constantly complain is failing them. It is hard for me to tell how much of this fidelity, however bitter, can be explained by looking into the argumentative nature of their character. As with most things in that country: it is not Greek without some large dose of conflict thrown into the mix. Really, both the anger and patriotism arise out of a sense of communal suffering, the shared pathos, the *philotimo* of an endlessly conquered people.

So there is no leap from song to tears for this couple, and to cry for the love of country is to cry for oneself. Pelagia is telling the story for Vagelis, who wipes his face on his sleeve and keeps his gaze forward. She lets Roula translate. In Karakolithos (a village we just passed), back at the end of the second war, Greek guerillas sabotaged a Nazi barracks, killing an important officer. I suspect Vagelis knew these men. German retaliation was decisive. They first obliterated Karakolithos, then Distomo, burned down the village, skewering pregnant women on bayonets and taking whatever other retribution they could improvise on the spot. Two hundred eighteen people died, and every year a marathon is run (by all who can) to commemorate the grandfathers.

So here we are, very late in some millennium, lighting candles in the dark little church and applauding, with the whole village, each runner's exhausted crossing of the finish line.

NOTES

TERRA INCOGNITA

The *Phaestos Disc* is a flat terra-cotta circle inscribed on one side with a spiral-shaped labyrinth and a variety of undecipherable symbols and human figures.

DION

What Delphi was to Southern Greece, Dion was to Macedonia. Residing at the base of Mt. Olympus, the city came to fruition under Phillip II. Excavations at Dion began only a few decades ago. The poem's final line was harvested from an Ancient Greek epitaph.

SAMOTHRAKI

The epigraph from Seferis reads: *There are no more witnesses, for anything.* A mystery cult of pre-Greek origin was celebrated on the island of Samothrace, which attracted visitors to its Sanctuary of the Great Gods. The Greek historian Diodorus tells us that the natives of the island, the *Sai*, developed their own language, which was used in the mysteries. Among the fertility deities worshiped there were the *Kabeiroi*, twin dwarfs who offered protection against shipwreck. In 1861, French archaeologists found the famous statue of Nike, which remains on "permanent loan" at the Louvre.

ALEXANDER AT HALKIDIKI

Birthplace of Aristotle, and near to Alexander the Great's home at Pella, the trident-shaped Halkidiki peninsula extends southward into the Aegean from the Thracian coast.

THE MAENAD OF PEREA

Perea is a beach-town on the Thermaikos Gulf outside of Thessaloniki.

BURNING THE TURK

Though the liberation of Greece from Turkish domination began in the middle of the nineteenth century, Crete did not gain its independence until 1913.

AT XANTHOS

Xanthos, the capital of ancient Lycia, is on the Mediterranean coast of Asia Minor. It was twice destroyed by its own inhabitants to save it from hostile occupation.

RAVENNA

In 1321, Dante died here, exiled. The Latin borrowed from him (*Inferno* XXXIV.1) can be translated: “The banners of the king of Hell draw closer.” Dante himself borrowed the first three words of the line, which open a famous 6th c. hymn sung during Holy Week.

CLIMBING OLYMPUS

Diarbekir was an epicenter of the Armenian Genocide of 1915. Smyrna, now known as Izmir, was the site of a massacre of Greeks in 1922, during the disastrous “population exchange” with Turkey.

SANTORINI

Also known as Thera, the volcano (and subsequent *caldera*) of Santorini has been inhabited since Neolithic times. The eruption of the volcano is sometimes credited with the destruction of Minoan civilization as far away as Crete, thus a possible explanation for the Atlantis legend.

A CONCERT OF ANCIENT MUSIC, HOUSTON

Ancient Greek musical instruments included kithara, lyra, aulos, syrinx, seistrion, tympanon, pandoura, trichordon, photinx, salpinx, kymbala, and others.

AFTERWORD

This excerpt is from a longer essay, “The Poet, After Greece,” *Literal Latté* 5 (Dec. 1999/Jan. 2000): 7–11.