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'A Caravan of Alloglots': Interrogating Greekness in Translation

Rigas, Jason

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"A CARAVAN OF ALLOGLOTS": INTERROGATING GREEKNESS IN TRANSLATION

Jason Rigas

A DISSERTATION
PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY
OF PRINCETON UNIVERSITY
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ABSTRACT

How has the literary culture of Greece, globally perceived as the descendant of Europe's most exalted ancient monoculture, responded to contemporary multiculturalism, specifically the diversity of present-day Athens? And how can this response be brought to a global audience via translation from Greek to English? This dissertation is simultaneously a literary anthology, an exercise in translation, and an attempt to answer these two questions in a scholarly fashion. I have chosen to translate and compile fourteen short works by ten different authors, all originally published in Greece between 2007 and 2018. These works are often verisimilar, occasionally multilingual, and mostly set in Athens during the first two decades of the twenty-first century, a period that has witnessed actual demographic changes but also a reluctant acceptance of those changes even within the Greek literary sphere. I present these works here chronologically by date of publication, in order to highlight the rapid evolution of a national cultural consciousness, which has, apparently, evolved in tandem with the progress of recent historical developments. The collapse of Albania's economy in the 1990s, the advent of the Eurozone, and wars in Central Asia and the Middle East are all dealt with here, mostly from the perspective of a Greek author/narrator walking us readers through a newly multicultural cityscape. But is the experience being depicted here really translatable? The presumption of Greece's cultural uniqueness dominates both the scholarly discourse surrounding the Greek literature of migration as well as the narratives themselves. The tension between the age-old notion of a special, peninsular Greece and the newer but perhaps more pessimistic notion of a globally integrated, European Greece presents a unique challenge for me as a translator having to navigate the nuances of the original Greek text with respect to these issues of cultural history, linguistic asymmetry, and the dominance of English. Thus, the translations themselves are preceded by an introduction in which translation theory, contemporary literary scholarship, and the thematic and stylistic content of the original texts are discussed within the framework of the relevant critical conversation.

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INTRODUCTION

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Mapping Greekness in Athens

Omonia. Patisia. Patision. Agiou Meletiou. Acharnon. Liosion. Filopappou. Exarcheia. Pallini. Agioi Anargiroi. The stories that I have chosen to translate here are littered with place names like these, mostly names of real municipalities, neighborhoods, streets, and plateias. Virtually all of the places referred to are in Attica, with the majority being in the city proper of Athens. This city was chosen, due to its classical glory, as the capital of the Hellenic Republic in 1834, and houses, among other historical sites, the Parliament of the Greeks, not the Parliament of "Greece," at Syntagma Square. Indeed, this imposing edifice is, nominally at least, the seat of the government of a specific *nation*, of a group of people at times defined, as Peter Mackridge informs us in *Language and National Identity in Greece*, by the following criteria: "speaking the Greek language, being a member of the Orthodox Church, and living in lands that were inhabited by Greek ancestors" (9). And these criteria, Mackridge says, "have been held to distinguish Greeks from non-Greeks" (viii). Nation building according to these criteria has been on the agenda in Greece since even before the advent of the modern Greek nation-state. Political policy has historically been crafted in the interest of promoting a mythical, monolithic Greece, including such policy as citizenship by descent and forced displacement of Muslims during the 1920s population exchange with Turkey. And, until the 1990s, these criteria for nationhood were unchallenged, at least in the public imagination. In the last decade of the 20th Century, migration Greece was spurred on by an escalating series of geo-political upheavals beginning roughly with

the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union and continues in the present day with the so-called Syrian refugee crisis. The belief that Greece was populated by Greeks, defined according to the popular definition that Mackridge provides, was dominant both in Greece and abroad but is demonstrably inconsistent with the present-day globalized reality of Greece.

How does the literary record of the time reflect the resultant tensions and the hegemonic modern Greek perspective on a diversifying Athens? What repercussions, if any, does this rapid demographic impact have on the self-image of those whose national identity prioritizes language, religious ritual, and generational ties to the land as keystones of "Greekness"? Thirteen recently-published short fictions, as well as the "book version" of a recently-performed one-woman show, all of them written in Greek by self-identified Greek authors, investigate this reckoning. These works prominently feature non-Greeks living in a modern metropolis seemingly designed for Greeks. To translate these particular works into English, the lingua franca of the "globalized" twenty-first century, as well as the dominant language of other diverse metropolises like New York and London, for example, is a unique challenge, since many of the original works make a deliberate juxtaposition between the familiar, i.e. distinctly "Greek," urban terrain and the unfamiliar, i.e. "migrant," population.

And, as I mentioned, many of these authors employ a narrative technique that reminds the reader that these stories are taking place in the *real* Athens, and not in a fictional city or even in a fictionalized *version* of the real city: the frequent naming of real places on the map. Considering the overwhelming Greekness not only of the place names themselves (many of which actually refer to *other* places in Greece and in the ancient Greek sphere of influence) but also of the entire city-as-national-symbol, can we conclude that there is a juxtaposition being made between the protagonists and the setting? That the inherently Greek character of the constantly alluded-to

cityscape actually highlights the foreignness of the migrant protagonists whose stories take place there? Possibly not, since toponym-laden prose is something of a trend in contemporary Greek fiction, perhaps most famously employed in Christos Ikonomou's 2010 short story collection *Something Will Happen, You'll See*, a collection which features few, if any, protagonists who are migrants or who do not identify as Greek. These are two sentences from Ikonomou's short story "Mao": "Every so often he gets up and walks back and forth like a watchman. Down to Ikoniou Street and then back again to Kastamoni and Tzavelas" (36). The intersection of Katsamoni and Tzavelas is in Nikaia, a municipality that is not technically part of Athens but is solidly within the Athens-Piraeus conurbation. Meanwhile, a passage from one of the stories I translated, Yiannis Tsirbas's "Between Middle and Index," published three years after *Something Will Happen, You'll See*, is strikingly reminiscent of Ikonomou's: "Then you circled the block. Right on Acharnon. Another right on Derigni. Again on Filis. And back onto Heyden where you pulled into the same spot." The stylistic parallel is obvious. But the block that Tsirbas's protagonist circles is not in Nikaia. It is in Athens proper, and in one of the many Athens neighborhoods populated mostly by migrants and their descendants. This toponymic accuracy takes on a different dimension in Tsirbas's work. Whereas Ikonomou sets his stories on street corners that are virtually unknown to all but the few people who walk past them every day, Tsirbas is walking us down famous, densely-populated streets: major thoroughfares that happen to cut through the least Greek places in Greece.

At least, that is how these urban communities are sometimes thought of, not only among fictional protagonists but even among the occasional scholar. "The New Social Geography of Athens: Migration, Diversity, and Conflict" is a study by Vasilis Arapoglou published in 2009, two years after the earliest stories that I translated were first published, that focuses on roughly

the same urban zone that Tsirbas and indeed most of the authors featured here have chosen as the backdrop for their hyper-realistic portrayals of an Athenian population in flux. "Already by 2001," Arapoglou explains, "migrants made up almost half the population of Omonia and one quarter of the population of Agios Panteleimonas," adding that the "presence of migrants in these two neighborhoods was especially apparent in public spaces, judging from the large number of stores owned by migrants and catering primarily to other migrants." But Arapoglou is quick to point out that this sudden street-level visibility of migrants "was not perceived as ethnic diversity"—*by Greeks*, he implies. Instead, he claims, migrants were thought of "either as a racially homogeneous mass (e.g. 'Asians') or as an annoyingly unclassifiable admixture of ethnicities" (63). For Arapoglou, this newfound diversity, although rejected as a concept by the "indigenous residents" of the neighborhood, as he calls them, has led to a conflict that "takes on a central and symbolic dimension, corresponding to the centrality of the neighborhood itself" (64). The Athenian neighborhoods that are bounded by Patision, Acharnon, and Liosion, i.e. the three main arteries that lead to Omonia Square and that are mentioned again and again in these stories, are a microcosm for the entire city which is, in turn, a microcosm of Greece. This is the area that is now home to the largest population of migrants in Greece, not one of the smaller municipalities that Christos Ikonomou writes about. The symbolism inherent to this demographic shift in this location predates and even transcends the literary treatment that the ethnically diverse population of the area has received among the authors I translated, with the line between fictional prose stylings and documentary blurred not only in the stories themselves but also, as we see here, in the works of social scientists like Arapoglou, whose turns of phrase such as "annoyingly unclassifiable admixture" are not necessarily the result of impartial fieldwork.

Another study, Yiorgos Rakkas's *Contemporary Babel: Migration, Multiculturalism, and Conflict from Agios Panteleimonas to the Refugee Crisis*, published in 2017, perfectly embodies the relaxed attitude towards impartiality that Arapoglou's study only hints at. Rakkas is himself a former resident of the area, and he is not a migrant. Nor, for that matter, is the vast majority of fellow residents whom he interviewed for the study. "Living through the development of the migration question in Agios Panteleimonas," Rakkas writes, "I can attest to the fact that the front-page headlines of articles that dealt with the conflict here and described the daily social situation as war-like were not at all the product of journalistic exaggeration (144). Rakkas describes the urban area in question as comprised entirely of "old neighborhoods of the center of Athens" (148), all of which possessed a "middle-class character" (149) until the early 1980s, when, according to one interviewee referred to only by her initials M.B., "the northern and southern suburbs of Athens started getting more developed, and it was suddenly considered banal to live in the center of the city, and so seventy to eighty percent of the middle-class residents of the neighborhood moved to the northern suburbs" (151). This is an oral history that takes us from the Cold War era, during which there were relatively few non-Greeks living not only in Athens but in all of Greece, to the post-Cold War period covered by all of the stories presented here, a period which Rakkas and his interviewees describe as multi-phased. In the first phase, lasting from 1990 to 2005, again according only to Rakkas's study, the residential units abandoned in the 1980s by the eventual suburbanites were occupied by migrants from Albania and other Balkan, Eastern European, and Caucasian countries. And in the second phase, after the millennium, the basement units of these same buildings, as well as the streets surrounding them, once again based purely on the testimonies that Rakkas records, became the temporary or even permanent homes

of migrants from most regions of the Eurasian-African landmass, including active war zones in Afghanistan, Iraq, and, most famously, Syria.

One fifty-five-year-old resident, whom Rakkas identifies as "Spiros," says of this second wave of migration to his neighborhood: "Nigeria, Bangladesh, Syria, Pakistan...there is not one country that is not in Greece right now...okay, fine, in Syria there's a war, man, I get it, and the Kurds are being hunted down...but all these other people? What the hell do we have here in Greece, and especially around here? In Agios Panteleimonas, in Plateia Attikis, in Plateia Viktorias" (170). Every place name in every literary work presented here is potentially an allusion to this history, a popular, still-living history of an urban sphere that witnessed the sudden flight of many residents even before the period of migration that the stories portray. This is an area that was impacted by literal development in far-flung corners of Attica, namely the suburbs of Athens, years before it was impacted by figurative developments in far-away regions of the world, namely the fall of Communism and the armed conflicts in Central Asia and the Middle East. Rakkas's study is an attempt to reinforce the biased conclusions of that popular history, i.e. that the impact was totally negative for the residents who predated both waves of movement and yet remain there, by providing first-person accounts from real people "on the ground" that support the sensationalist headlines of a Greek mainstream media in which, according to Anna Triantafyllidou, "diversity is simply represented as a deleterious thing...while homogeneity and nationalism are praised as a desirable thing" (157). Perhaps the place names peppered throughout their prose ultimately serve as a geopolitical as well as thematic jumping-off point for the authors I have translated, who might presume that their Greek-speaking readers are not only aware of the oral history of contemporary Athens that the likes of Rakkas have

immortalized in print but, more importantly, all come from a national cultural background shaped by a not-so-distant past in which exclusion and erasure were the norm.

This is to say that the post-Cold War culture of xenophobia and strained coexistence that a place name like "Acharnon" or "Omonia" might automatically invoke in the contemporary Greek reader might itself be considered the product of an earlier effort, the legacy of which Lambros Baltsiotis illuminates in a 2004 article on the Cold War-era mechanisms of ethnic cleansing that the Greek state employed to essentially assure that the twentieth century would conclude with as ethnically and culturally homogeneous a population as possible. Of course, these efforts proved a failure, considering that, as Dimitris Christopoulos writes, "the appearance of a million migrants (particularly) from Albania during the last decade of the twentieth century has generated new suspicions" (278). Nevertheless, attempts were made, and the most effective of these mechanisms of ethnic homogenization, Baltsiotis explains, was citizenship revocation, in which "enemies of the state," Greek communists as well as ethnic minorities, were targeted. More often than not, members of minority groups who had their citizenship revoked left Greece and permanently settled in other countries. However, Baltsiotis concludes that it is only in the case of minorities, and not of communists, that "the notion of silencing, or what Gal and Irvine call erasure/muting, rendering socio-linguistic groups invisible, becomes entirely pertinent." He adds that in two particular cases, namely those of Slavic-speaking Macedonians (predominantly Orthodox Christians) and Chams (Albanian-speaking Muslims from Epiros), "the erasure was absolute" (96). Thus 1990, the year that Rakkas pinpoints as the start of the first migratory wave, a wave supposedly dominated by Albanians, was, according to Baltsiotis, preceded by seven decades of erasure, beginning right after the population exchange with Turkey, during which the

centuries-long social and cultural histories of various ethnic groups within Greece, among them Albanians, was erased from the collective cultural memory of the nation.

As Triantafyllidou, writing in 2002, summarizes, "the state refuses to recognize that some Greek citizens may belong to some other ethnic, cultural, or national group," and "[the] view that Greece is a relatively homogeneous country, in terms of culture and ethnicity, has been dominant in the country until the late 1980s, if not still today" (150). For Baltsiotis, the state's attack on its own citizens, and indeed on citizenship as a concept, during the 1920-1990 period "demonstrates a worldview that is extremely resistant to change and to difference, revealing a society that rejects contact and strives for self-sufficiency and isolation." He admits, however, that this worldview ultimately "feeds off of a deeper ideological position: namely, that Greece is special and unique" (95). This is an ideological position that we see lurking in the background of Spiros's interview with Rakkas: "What the hell do we have here in Greece?" he asks, referring perhaps to the lack of resources that "economic migrants," as non-refugee migrants are commonly called in Greece, are thought to have crossed international borders in search of. But he could just as easily be referring to the uniquely Greek character of Greece, which, as Baltsiotis and Triantafyllidou have shown us, is not accidental but intentional. In the context of migration, "What the hell do we have here in Greece?" could be read as "What could a migrant possibly want in Greece?" not only in light of the well-publicized economic downturn of the late 2000s but also in light of the extremely recent state-sanctioned ethnic cleansing which popularized the belief that Greece is and should be for Greeks only. Patision, Acharnon, and Liosion are streets where, in truth, mostly Greeks lived until the 1990s, but this was entirely by design, and to mention these streets by name is, ultimately, to mention erasure by another name.

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Introducing Part One: Stories from We Are All Immigrants

A secretly Albanian soccer hooligan who buys weed from Romani dealers, an incontinent Albanian b-boy who joins the cast of *The Persians*, and a Greek detective who drinks five iced coffees a day and generally phones it in. These are three protagonists of three different stories from *We Are All Immigrants*, an anthology of short fiction published in 2007. The volume was edited by Misel Fais—whose 2009 stage play *The Yellow Dog* I also translated for this project—and is partially the result of a yearly short story contest. The book includes a prologue by Anastasia Natsina, who describes *We Are All Immigrants* as "a crossroads." She elaborates: "new authors write about migration. People who finally start telling their stories to strangers write about the exodus from the familiar and the exposure to the unfamiliar" (10). None of the three stories from *We Are All Immigrants* that I translated were, at least according to the authors' biographies included in the volume, written by migrants, unless we consider Christos Kythreotis, who was "born in 1979 in Nicosia and raised in Athens" a migrant. But even if we do, in all fairness, consider him a migrant, the migration experience that his story depicts is quite unlike that of a Greek Cypriot child settling in Greece in the decade following the Turkish invasion of the island. Regardless, in the case of these three stories in particular, the "new authors who write about migration" and the "people who finally start telling their stories to strangers" belong to distinct groups. The message is clear: "we are all immigrants" regardless of our unique personal histories. But the authors of these stories are certainly not migrants in the same way as the non-Greek characters they depict. They are not, for example, speakers of Greek as a second language. Nor are they secretly secular Muslims performing Orthodox Christian rituals to evade detection.

And they are certainly not victims of human trafficking or targets of corrupt border patrol agencies. They are several degrees removed from the experiences they depict.

"The stories in this volume," Natsina writes, "prove that migration is an eternal, ever-present part of the human condition, the awareness of which has been facilitated more than ever by contemporary circumstances" (12). She proceeds to qualify this statement: "When I write of discovery and revelation I am referring, of course, to the new reality, to the broader awareness of migration—of exposure to the foreign—as a condition that is fundamental to human existence" (14). Natsina admits that the stories in *We Are All Immigrants* were, despite the eternality and universality of their subject matter, written primarily in response to recent, local developments, specifically to a demographic transformation within Greece that, especially in retrospect, has been described as sudden and shocking. Natsina's qualifying term "exposure to the foreign" is ambiguous. It can be understood either as the exposure of the migrant to the dominant culture that is initially foreign to her *or* as the exposure of members of the dominant culture to the culture of the migrants from outside that dominant culture. In these three stories from *We Are All Immigrants*, both types of exposure are depicted. And the notion that "Greeks were psychologically, socially, and logistically unprepared for this influx" (60)—as Vangelis Calotychos, writing just three years before the publication of *We Are All Immigrants*, declares—is not exactly called into question. The voices of actual migrants are far from absent in *We Are All Immigrants*, but the perspective to which most attention is paid is that of the "native" Greeks who are suddenly made aware of the fragility of what Baltsiotis calls the "basic national myths" of the Greek nation-state, namely the shared belief in "common ancestry and cultural-linguistic continuity, as well as national homogeneity and exceptionalism" (97). Indeed, it is only *after* the basic national myths are challenged by the mere presence of migrants within Greece that Natsia

has occasion to assert that, in fact, migration has always been part of the broader human experience, including the experience of individuals comfortably nestled within the supposedly shatter-proof walls of the Greek ethnos.

All three stories from *We Are All Immigrants* presented here depict moments of recognition. In the case of the first story, Christos Kythreotis's "Chalk Dust," that recognition is twofold. There is a recognition of the present and a recognition of the past. In an instant, the narrator of the story, Nikolas, comes to terms with his best friend Michalis's identity as well as the identity of AEK, the team the two friends not only root for but risk their lives for as ultra-violent hooligans. Michalis was born in Albania and conceals his origins from the entire fanclub. Nikolas discovers that Michalis was born in Albania and initially shuns him, but then asks himself:

> Was I in the wrong? I was. You should always give people the benefit of the doubt, I thought. Unless you're a dick. And I wasn't a dick. Also, wasn't AEK started by immigrants? It was immigrants who founded the team. Refugees. Not anchovy-vaseline pretty boys. That's just how it is. Actually it was the Patriarch who said it best: "AEK is not a team. AEK is an idea." An idea. A concept. And the anchovies know that about us. That's why they shout "Pussies! From Turkey! Fuck you fucking refugee!" It's not just a random chant. It's the *concept* that sets us apart from the shitheads and the pigs.

AEK is the Athletic Union of Constantinople, a multi-sport club based in Nea Filadelfia, near Athens. The team was founded, as Nikolas recalls, by Orthodox Christian refugees from what is now Turkey in the early 1920s. AEK's main rivals are Panathinaikos, whose fans are called “vaselines,” and Olympiakos, whose fans are called “anchovies.” AEK fans are called “hanoumis,” from the Turkish word "hanım," which means "lady." The Patriarch that Nikolas refers to here is Bartholomew I, the current Archbishop of Constantinople and the spiritual leader of the worldwide Greek Orthodox community, i.e. the ethno-religious community to which Nikolas was automatically born into but Michalis has to pretend to be a part of, abandoning what

is presumably a secular Muslim Albanian identity. And while Nikolas might be a fictional character in a fictional narrative, Bartholomew's comments are anything but fictional: he was filmed talking about the "idea" of AEK in the early 2000s, as hard as it may be for North American sport fans especially to imagine a deified global religious leader weighing in on the Greek Super League. But, Bartholomew aside, it is only Michalis's confusing and confused ethnic identity that makes Nikolas temporarily forget about the beatdowns, muggings, flag-burnings, and molotov cocktails (i.e. the cornerstones of the hooligan lifestyle) and reflect on the origins and symbolic meaning of the organization that he worships.

The truth about Michalis is the truth about the present day: there are non-Greeks who have moved to Greece and assumed nuanced, yet recognizably Greek, identities. The truth about AEK is the truth about the past: there are Greeks who are descended from refugees who were forced to leave what is now a predominantly Muslim European country, a country of origin that in that respect is not unlike Albania. Michalis is Albanian *and* Greek *and* AEK. He himself is a symbol of change, and the symbolism of the protagonist is reinforced by the fact that AEK's yellow-and-black team flag, which becomes a major plot point in the story, is virtually identical to the national red-and-black flag of Albania. Both feature a prominent double-headed eagle, the symbol of the Byzantine Empire *and* the national symbol of Albania. Within Athens, within AEK, within the Patisia AEK fan club, and within one fan there is this blatant symbolic dissonance as well as the potential for coexistence, if not multicultural cohesion. But as blatant as the symbolic juxtaposition might be, Nikolas, as a first-person narrator, initially rejects the notion of an Albanian-born Greek person, an Albanian AEK fan, or even an Albanian friend:

> Obviously you can understand how defeated I felt when I found out the truth about Michalis. I had known him for a whole year and hadn't picked up on a goddamn thing. This might sound weird but he really didn't look Albanian, man. And his Greek was perfect. Better than mine. His face, too. Flawless.

Echoing Vangelis Calotychos's statements about the "unpreparedness" of "Greeks" for the arrival of migrants—initially mostly from Eastern Europe and especially Albania—Gerasimus Katsan claims that "the 'sudden' appearance of so many non-Greeks intending permanent residence created shock waves that continue to reverberate in public discourse" (1). In "Chalk Dust" we see the interplay between that public discourse and the private inner monologue of an individual within the dominant culture, since the entire story is framed as Nikolas's interview with a journalist whom he occasionally addresses directly but who remains silent throughout the whole narrative. But whether private or public, the "shock waves" to which that Katsan refers are a dominant theme in "Chalk Dust." Furthermore, given Kythreotis's first-person narrative framing device, the perspective from which the story of sudden awareness is told is the dominant one: Michalis tells his story to Nikolas who tells their story to the journalist and to us.

"Chalk Dust" takes place no earlier than 2003, which we can deduce from a reference to "Lymbe," a.k.a. Nikos Limperopoulos, who began playing for AEK that year. Vangelis Calotychos is writing in 2004, and his essay is thus roughly contemporary to *We Are All Immigrants*. Gerasimus Katsan is also referring to Greece's oft-discussed transformation from a country of emigrants to a country of immigrants. The precise date of this transition—which, of course, is called into question by Nikolas, who draws the obvious parallel between his Albanian-born best friend and the Ottoman Empire-born founders of AEK—is debated by contemporary scholars, who tend to periodize the migratory "waves" that have been "crashing down" on Greek soil since roughly the time of the Fall of Communism. The 1990s are thought of as being dominated by the mass migration of Albanians—including Albanian citizens who identified as members of the Greek Orthodox minority of Albania—to Greece in the wake of Albania's transition to democracy in 1991 and especially following the collapse of Albania's economy in

1997, with Albanians representing over half of all non-Greek citizens living in Greece in 2001. The 2000s, however, are remembered as the decade of "economic migrants," who arrived in Greece from the rest of the Eurasian-African landmass but were *not* refugees. And the even more recent 2010s are now remembered as a decade dominated by the European Migrant Crisis of 2015. If we follow this paradigm of periodization, then the three stories from *We Are All Immigrants* depict the first phase, the "long" 1990s. The second story that I have translated, "Butterfly Kicks" by Georgia Tatsi, is similar to "Chalk Dust" in several respects. The protagonist of "Butterfly Kicks," Genti, is an Albanian-born young man who came to Greece with his mother at the same age as Michalis came to Greece with his family. Genti's story also takes place in the late 1990s and early 2000s, which we can deduce from the 2000 release date of the music video that changes Genti's life and introduces him to break dancing: "Freestyler" by the Finnish hip-hop group Bomfunk MCs. So, my anthology begins with two contemporary stories about young Albanian-born men living in the greater Athenian conurbation who get involved in subcultures and have intimate relationships with Greek youths. In the case of Michalis, of course, his intimate relationship is with the narrator, Nikolas:

> For a second there I thought the whole thing was a dream. Michalis showed me the flag and we held each other and sang together like maniacs in the dead of night. It was almost morning and there we were, two idiots locked in an embrace. Dancing together wrapped up in the thick fog. Waving a yellow-and-black flag in a tiny park making up songs about fucking anchovies who always lose in the end.

Genti has a similar moment with his former schoolmate Sofia, who also narrates her side of the story in the first person:

> He saw me in the wheelchair. He saw me without my leg, half-missing and motionless. After the show he bolted across the stage to get to where I was. He held me close, squeezed me tight. He touched the stump through the folded pant leg. Then he looked at me. He looked inside me. And I felt intact.

And, even though Sofia has always known that Genti is from Albania and in fact watches from across the classroom as he begins learning how to speak, read, and write Greek, her own moments of discovery and revelation are not unlike Nikolas's:

> We were confused. Alamanas is a road that cuts right through the vineyards of Pallini. And since the only houses on that street belong to the landowners, we started to wonder where he was actually going. He veered off the road at various points, venturing alternately towards the creek on the left or towards the vineyards on the right. We watched him grab fistfuls of dirt and rub them between his fingers. We saw him pull branches down from the bushes and chew. Meanwhile, he never took his eyes off the startled wild pigeons that flapped their wings to get away from him. He flapped along with them, frantically beating his arms against his sides. Naturally, this fueled our curiosity all the more.

The Greek children do not speak Albanian, and Genti does not speak Greek at this point in the story. To them, he is a curiosity. He wets himself in class and he spends his free time not with Greek children, not with Albanian children, not with his mother, but with non-human wild animals. The human body dominates this story thematically and is constantly juxtaposed against the bodies of animals. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Genti transitions from an animal-like, hybrid being to a more human-like entity when he grows up, starts reading classical Greek texts, and takes direction from a Greek choreographer who casts him in *The Persians* of Aeschylus. But at the same time, Sofia loses part of her human body in a car accident before the two protagonists get together. Thus, one could argue that what Sofia loses Genti gains, and the two can finally become partners in the various senses of the word. But despite this development, Genti holds on to a secret, and the story ends with his first-person revelation: "There is one thing, though, that I can't bring myself to tell her," he tells us, but not Sofia. "That I don't feel at home in my house. That I feel like I'm living in a hotel. In a dilapidated hotel." We are left with an uncertain, uneasy feeling not only about the state of Genti and Sofia's relationship but also about the state of Helleno-Albanian relations within Greece at this point in history, since Genti's tenuous sense of

belonging prevails despite the subcultural niche he has carved out for himself within the broader mainstream Greek cultural framework.

However ambiguously "Butterfly Kicks" ends, though, there is one narrative element that separates it from "Chalk Dust": namely, that Genti, unlike Michalis, is the co-narrator of his own story, rather than merely the subject of his Greek-born co-protagonist's narration. Genti's first-person narration is italicized, to mark it as distinct from Sofia's. And he peppers his Greek narrative with Albanian words and phrases, which are *de*-italicized (and thus highlighted), transliterated, and, in numbered footnotes, translated into Greek. We never see the Albanian words written in the Albanian alphabet, which is a variant of the Latin alphabet. Therefore, on the one hand, Genti enjoys a degree of agency over his own story that Michalis—who, within the fictional world of "Chalk Dust," is not even alive at the point when Nikolas starts talking to the journalist—cannot. But, on the other hand, Genti's words, though ultimately his own, are still filtered through an authorial system of narrative appropriation. How does "rrëmujaxhi," Albanian for "klutzy," become "ρμουγιατσί," even though it is probably pronounced closer to "ερεμγιάτζι"? Since there is no universal system for transliteration of Albanian into Greek, as there is none for transliterating Greek into English, it is hard to not attribute some type of authorial intervention to Georgia Tatsi, or to a fictionalized figure who somehow exists in a space *between* the respective realms of author and narrator. Unless, of course, we are to believe that this is how Genti the fictional character would, within Tatsi's fictional world, transliterate his own Albanian words. For whom, though, is the act of transliteration performed? Not for Genti, who has very likely not forgotten how to write Albanian if he still remembers struggling to distinguish the Albanian letter "p" with the similar-looking but differently pronounced Greek letter "ρ." Is the goal of the transliteration to help the presumably monocultural Greek readership

become acquainted with the sounds of Albanian? If so, then why are Genti's English b-boy terms, like "down rock," *not* transliterated, even though the English and Albanian alphabets are so similar?

Perhaps the answer lies in a potential spelling mistake within one such transliterated English phrase, "power moves":

> *On the board. Out back. Warming up. Beats blasting. Back straight. Stepping. Feet locked in. Locked into the rhythm. He we go. Down rock. Cat moves. The tape playing in my head. Cat stretching. Combo. Hands and feet on the floor. Legs. Strike a pose. Again. Check it.* Shpejtësia*. Check it. Check it. Power moves. Hedgehog. Combo.* Forcë. Durim. Forcë. *Precision.*

I have taken the liberty of correcting the original text here: "power moves," an actual b-boy term, is erroneously printed as "power movies." I made the decision despite the fact that "power movies" might be something that blurs the already blurred line between fiction and reality in "Butterfly Kicks." Why is "power moves" written as "power movies?" Is this Genti's mistake, an element of his idiolect? Is this a typo made at some point during the editing process? Or is this a mistake on the part of Tatsi herself, who heard the word uttered by a b-boy and transcribed it almost, but not quite, correctly? Perhaps the answer to the question is irrelevant, since, regardless of whether an actual Albanian b-boy told his story to the author of "Butterfly Kicks" who misspelled "power moves," the fact remains that Genti is, to us, still a fictional character. And, at least within the text, the Greek language still dominates. Genti's Albanian is Hellenized, at least typographically, if not in terms of his cultural identity as well. Genti as we know him is a product of the dominant Greek literary culture and Tatsi's narrative has clearly chosen to "absorb" the more apparent Albanian elements of Genti's character, and especially his language, into the existing codes of literary writing.

Does Tatsi's transliteration, then, mirror the broader, startled response of the culture to the arrival of hundreds of thousands of Albanians and other migrants that Calotychos and Katsan take as a given? Yes, but only if we assume that her use of the Greek alphabet is designed to soften the proverbial "blow" of the "influx" that Calotychos refers to. At the same time, though, the third story from *We Are All Immigrants* that I translated, Louiza Spiliotopoulou's "All Alike," calls the entire notion of a sudden, unexpected wave of migration into question, when the Greek, and not just Greek but stereotypically too-Greek-to-function, nameless detective of a protagonist does a double take on his own face:

> He was unable to concentrate on his shaving and stood motionless in his windowless bathroom staring at the reflection of his own face in the tiny mirror, mouth agape, with the clock ticking away and the distinct possibility of a late arrival looming over him...So he stayed there, observing his wild, jet-black whiskers angrily jutting out of his chin. He examined the rest of his face looking for a sign. But it was all in vain. There was nothing there. Was it all a lie then? But who would tell such an absurd lie? Such an inconsequential, absurd lie? And why?

At the beginning of the story the detective is marked only by the qualities that make him not distinct from the rest of his countrymen, and especially by his unquenchable thirst for frappé, an iced coffee that, despite its French-sounding name, was invented in Thessaloniki and was the most popular drink in Greece until about the time that *We Are All Immigrants* was published, at which point it was swiftly supplanted by the freddo, an iced coffee also invented in Greece despite its *Italian*-sounding name. Apart from serving as yet another time-stamp, the frappé is a mask that the detective wears. It is a crucial part of the neo-Hellenic masculine uniform that, like the best camouflage, can allow anyone to blend into the dense shrubbery of Greekness. But he is not "entirely Greek," at least as Greekness is defined by the national myths that Baltsiotis called into question. The "wild, jet-black whiskers" are, for the detective, phenotypic reminders of a less-than-Hellenic genotype, and, after his father dies, he allows himself to remember being told

by an uncle, and even before that discovering from photographic evidence, that his paternal grandmother was not Greek but, probably, from somewhere in the Pacific Rim, and perhaps even from the same general region as a pregnant girl whom he encounters at the police station both before and after her arrest on suspicion of killing a man who, given the recent history of human trafficking into Greece from places like Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia, was likely a man who exploited her both bodily and economically.

The detective is another Greek protagonist in *We Are All Immigrants* who experiences a moment of past-present double recognition. Every day as part of the job he yearns not to do he is given the task of "processing" irregular migrants from around the world, all of whom he considers identical to one another regardless of their different countries or continents of origin. Initially we are led to believe that this is an ultra-contemporary state of affairs, a development that took place in the recent past, entirely within the era of the frappé's dominance (after all, the frappé, before being supplanted by the freddo, itself supplanted Greek, a.k.a. Turkish, coffee as the most popular drink in Greece). But the phenotypic similarity of the detective's *grandmother* to the young detainee, and the unavoidable fact of his own not-entirely-Hellenic genotype paints a different picture of the Greek monoculture both past and present. It chips away at the national myths in a way that even the first two stories, "Chalk Dust" and "Butterfly Kicks," do not. In "All Alike," the migrant population is not characterized as being dominated by a single group, namely Albanians, and simultaneously the *Greek* population is stripped of its status as an "uncorrupted" gene pool from which the only kind of men who emerge are frappé-guzzling, disaffected government employees who not only act the same but look the same as well. Ultimately, Spiliotopoulou's story is as vague and ethereal as the first two stories are specific and verisimilar. There are no place names, no street names, and no given names provided anywhere

in her narrative. Thanks in no small part to his coffee preferences, we do know that the detective's story is taking place at roughly the same historical moment as those of Michalis and Nikolas and Sofia and Genti, but the story does not care too much about details. The detective's half-hearted sleuthing reveals that we *were* all immigrants in the first place, even if we dove head-first into a comfortable nationalist stupor. And it thus casts doubt on the primacy of a singular migration narrative during a supposedly unprecedented period in recent Greek history. In the end, as real as Michalis and Genti are made to feel, they can and do coexist with the virtually unreal detective and the fleeting presence of the pregnant girl from somewhere else. They all live in Athens and they are all immigrants and there is no turning back.

Introducing Part Two: The Yellow Dog

One year after the publication of *We Are All Immigrants*, a Bulgarian woman suffered an acid attack in Athens. One year after that, Misel Fais, who edited *We Are All Immigrants*, published the "book version" of his one-woman show *The Yellow Dog*, a work which was doubtless inspired by the attack. The Bulgarian woman who was attacked is Konstantina Kuneva, who worked as a custodian in the Athens Metro (specifically on the "old line," the ΗΣΑΠ) and may have been targeted because of her efforts to unionize the private cleaning company that employed her. The protagonist of Misel Fais's *Yellow Dog* is Rouska Rouskeva, who was also born in Bulgaria, also has an alliterative name, and also cleans the subway platforms for a living (not on the "old line," though, on the two new lines that were built in the 1990s, largely by migrants). Thus, there are obvious parallels to be drawn between the real-life Konstantina Kuneva and the fictional Rouska Rouskeva, originally portrayed by actress Alexia

Kaltsiki. And, as Maria Xilouri recalls in her review of *The Yellow Dog*, some members of the public took it even further than that, not only drawing conceptual parallels but taking direct action against the play and the playwright on the grounds of their collectivist ideology:

> An author lingers on the story of a migrant woman, a story only half-told on the news, and decides, in good faith, as he says, to write a monologue about her. Five months after she was attacked the monologue is published and a theatrical run is planned. The revenue from the first and last performances, it is announced, will be given to the migrant woman.
>
> But the show does not go on. On the night of the premiere, a group claiming "solidarity" attacks the author, throws paint, and shouts slogans. They accuse the production of turning her struggle into mere spectacle for the urban haute bourgeoisie and of standing to profit handsomely off of her trials and tribulations.

Kuneva was attacked on December 23rd, 2008. Earlier that month, on December 6th, a Greek boy was shot dead by police in Athens and a nation-wide insurrection began. In an interview following the ill-fated premiere, Misel Fais acknowledged the impact of the insurrectionary moment on the course of the theatrical run. "A performance staged in solidarity with a stoned [λιθοβολημένη] woman," he tells interviewer Poly Krimnioti, "was itself stoned [λιθοβολήθηκε] by some supposed 'fanatical supporters' of hers." While the word "stoned," used here as both a verb and an adjective, admittedly sounds awkward in translation (probably because of its more common slang meaning), Fais's terminology is deliberate. The image of the black-clad, ski-masked, stone-throwing youth became synonymous with the insurrection of December 2008, and Fais is questioning the purported solidarity of that stone-throwing, trans-Hellenic insurrectionary movement with the actual marginalized and brutalized non-Greek woman who inspired *The Yellow Dog*. The fact that that woman is a migrant is not lost on Nelli Kamoubri and Alexandra Zavos, authors of an article on Kuneva and the aftermath of her attack in the midst of the insurrection. They explain how, at the time, Kuneva became a figurehead for direct action including, but not at all limited to, the incident at the theater:

> As a symbol she was domesticated, universalized and stripped of her particularities. Some of the slogans heard during protests and support actions exemplify this form of reductionism, where Greeks and migrants are subsumed under a common worker identity invoked as universal: "Migrants are the wretched of the earth. Greeks and foreigners united" (151).

I would argue that the fact of Kuneva's being a migrant woman is not lost on Fais, either. Yes, Kuneva's story is domesticated by the playwright in the sense that it finds a temporary "home" in the script, via the authorial voice of Misel Fais. But rather than "universalizing" her and "stripping her of her particularities," as the protestors did, *The Yellow Dog* does the opposite, albeit via fictional characterization and dramatization. Rouska Rouskeva is not a "common worker." Nor, for that matter, is the real Konstantina Kuneva. However, *The Yellow Dog* does something that the protests that Kambouri and Zavos describe, including the vocally anti-xenophobic protests, are unable to do by their very nature. The one-woman show literally gives a platform to one woman. And even though the actress who originally portrayed Rouska is not herself Bulgarian or a custodian, Fais's staged monologue is, paradoxically, a more complete vehicle for a multi-voiced cultural exchange than are the short stories from *We Are All Immigrants*, especially considering how often Rouska breaks the fourth wall and addresses the audience, who she presumes are indeed culled from Greece's urban haute bourgeoisie, without having her speech interrupted.

As Georgia Gotsi argues, "the real challenge faced by Fais was how to turn a symbol—an immigrant visible only as a heroic exception—into a full dramatic person; in other words, how to render the autonomous consciousness of the immigrant woman" (172). I would suggest that Fais accomplishes this by leaving out of the text any possible markers of linguistic alterity. Rouska's Greek language is not necessarily distinct from the language of the audience. If anything, she is more erudite and well-versed in various linguistic traditions, including Greek, than any collective

group of theater-goers could possibly be. The text includes excerpts from Byzantine historian Ioannes Skylitzes, lyrics from Leonard Coen, as well as Bulgarian World-War-Two-era marching songs left untransliterated from Bulgarian Cyrillic. But even if one could make the argument that these intertextual moments are all reminders of the author's heavy hand rather than fragments of the protagonist's consciousness, the fact remains that this text is intended for a stage on which there is only one woman, and that one woman is portraying one woman who is herself multilingual, and who is herself a walking, subway-cleaning encyclopedia. In the theater the playwright is totally obscured, shrouded in literal darkness. Every word in the script and every line that is spoken belongs to Rouska Rouskeva, and Rouska Rouskeva shines a light on her unique reality while the stage lights shine on her.

Despite the specific circumstances that led to the show's tumultuous original run (according to one review nine out of the twelve scheduled performances had to be cancelled!), *The Yellow Dog* is as much a product of a broader period in Greece's cultural evolution as it is a product of the urgent, insurrectionary flash point of December 2008. Even though the population of Athens was changing rapidly during the 2000s as a result of not only the above-mentioned waves of "economic migration" from across Eurasia-Africa but also the wars in Iraq and especially Afghanistan, Fais focuses on a migrant from neighboring Bulgaria, the country whose citizens comprised the second largest migrant group living in Greece in 2001. Not to mention that, as Rouska reminds the audience at several points during her monologue, Bulgaria is a country that fought multiple wars against Greece over the course of the twentieth century, while the presence of Slavic-speaking populations living in Greece was being erased from the Greek nation's selective, collective memory. In this respect Fais's play, which addresses the pre-existing ethnic tensions in the Balkans that predated the post-1990s era of migration, is not unlike the first

two stories in *We Are All Immigrants*, which, while they do not directly address the centuries-long ethnic conflict between Greeks and Albanians, carry the weight of that history with them implicitly.

Furthermore, the dynamic between stunned native and uprooted migrant is very much a part of *The Yellow Dog* as well as *We Are All Immigrants*, with the key difference being that, in the former, the stunned natives are not the authors, protagonists, or narrators but, rather, the audience members interacting with the text in a more direct manner:

> Get out there and find me one person who can live off of three euros and ten eurocents an hour. And let me ask you something else: do we *look* homeless? One person! We get ripped off, we get no benefits, and we get furloughed. Comrades, comrades, please. You're disgusting. I hate to break it to you, Mr. Slovenly, but this is just a gig. It's a way to pass the time. Sorry to burst your bubble! Anyway, the bottom line is that our job is to love, and loving is a dirty job. Every last piece of your trash has a place in our hearts.

Here Rouska is poking fun at the leftist (which is to say pro-Communist, which is to say pro-Soviet and, by this point, Soviet-nostalgic) leanings of the literati of Greece, with the intent to shock their sensibilities in two distinct ways: firstly, by giving them an unprecedented look at the street-level reality of the Eastern Bloc and, secondly, by adopting the preferred Modern Greek register of the intelligentsia. Amazingly, a blog post from 2009 written by Ilias Kanellis, which Misel Fais reposted in full on his now-defunct personal website, offers considerable insight into the degree to which Rouska's command of Greek is a deliberate authorial choice. Following the attack on the theater, Kanellis writes, Konstantina Kuneva herself "sent a hand-written message from the hospital in which she was still receiving treatment. It was filled with spelling errors—Greek for her is a foreign language. 'Society today is in need of thought and dialogue. Art must be able to express itself freely,' she wrote." The actual content of Kuneva's message, as reproduced by Kanellis, is totally in keeping with Rouska's musings on the state of affairs in late-

2000s Athens. But Kanellis, perhaps in the interest of full disclosure, reveals that his own blog post has "corrected" Kuneva's hand-written Greek, and thus drawn a distinction between the real Kuneva and the fictional Rouska. "Foreign" is the operative word here. Greek is not Kuneva's "second" or "additional" language, in the eyes of Kanellis, but a "foreign" one. *The Yellow Dog*, however, is hyper-conscious of the distinction between a foreign language and learned language, and Fais makes an effort to eradicate one particular thought from the audience's mind: the thought that Rouska is a foreigner and thus not a relevant actor in the greater story of Greece.

As performed by Alexia Kaltsiki, who, once again, is not Bulgarian, *The Yellow Dog* is potentially as appropriative as the non-migrant protestors of December 2008 making sweeping generalizations about all migrants, the so-called "wretched of the earth." Even the fact of Rouska's fluency could be construed as an act of appropriation, a means of co-opting a narrative over which Fais and Kaltsiki have no valid claim. But the monologue itself, the actual text, periodically reminds us that this fictional protagonist is not monolingual or monocultural but multilingual and engaged with various cultural spheres simultaneously:

> Three hours in the morning, then three hours in the afternoon. "Pepito la Mallorca." "Paloma." Dinamo București is the best team in the game right now! "Besame mucho." No complaints from me. People love me. I came here on a train that went zakata-zakata down the tracks. I speak Italian, Spanish, and Greek. I could never really talk about myself. So apologies to all the details of my life. What did you say your name was again?

As the monologue draws to a close Rouska's train of thought has derailed for good, and in this passage she surfs the channels of her own brain, tuning into to Latin American soap operas, European soccer commentary, and her own life's story. We learn that she "came here" on a train, rather than "emigrating" to a foreign country. We learn that she speaks Italian, Spanish, *and* Greek, in addition to the Bulgarian she also speaks during the course of the performance. We learn that she is sometimes fine. And we learn these things because she finally has occasion to

tell us, the presumably monocultural audience, the people whose houses she cleans but who make assumptions about her, that our assumptions were wrong. All thanks to a playwright and an actress who never mention that Bulgarians sometimes have accents when speaking Greek.

Introducing Part Three: Stories from Victoria Does Not Exist

And so we abruptly transition from a 2009 one-woman show that consists of nothing *but* a migrant's voice to a 2013 short story collection, an entire book that is *about* migration but in which migrants utter only six words total. *Victoria Does Not Exist* is by Yiannis Tsirbas, whose story "Rou-Pou" I did not translate even though it was also featured in *We Are All Immigrants*, but not in *Victoria*. "Rou-Pou" is set in a military barracks in Northern Greece in 1998, and the protagonist is an ethnically Greek conscript originally from Abkhazia. *Victoria*, on the other hand, is set in Athens a decade or so later, and depicts a middle-aged Greek man who wants to kill everyone who is not ethnically Greek with rat poison. Even though *Victoria* is by no means a follow-up to "Rou-Pou," when we look at these two texts by Tsirbas side-by-side it is impossible to ignore the extent to which this juxtaposition reinforces, or at least mirrors, the established scholarly periodization of the last three decades of migration to Greece. One such periodized study of migration is from Anna Triantafyllidou, who, writing in 2011, breaks down two successive migratory waves as follows:

> In the last 5 years, the number of irregular migrants and asylum seekers from Asia and Africa towards Greece has intensified. Increasing numbers of people arrive from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan and to a lesser extent Somalia, Iraq, and north African countries. These new immigrants have some special features that make them stand out from the settled Balkan and East European immigrants of the former 15 years: they are predominantly young men (not a migration of women, as happened in the case of Bulgaria or Georgia for instance, nor a family migration as was the case for Albanians); they are darker, they are Muslim in the

> vast majority; and they are trapped into an irregular status as no regulation has been implemented in the past 7 years and the asylum system was basically not working until 2011. In addition, because of the role of ethnic networks and the former availability of jobs in the informal labour market, these new arrivals have been concentrated to a large extent in the centre of Athens and Thessalonike (the second largest city in Greece), becoming particularly visible to the public eye.

In this passage she does not mention the hundreds of thousands of ethnically Greek migrants from countries like Albania and, in the case of "Rou-Pou," the Soviet Union, who were given direct paths to citizenship that non-Greek migrants arriving at the same time from those same countries were denied. And "Rou-Pou"—the title of which is a slangy shorthand for "Russo-Pontinans," a pejorative term for Pontic Greeks from the Soviet Union—is set against the backdrop of this massive, 1990s wave of migration from Europe but is ultimately concerned only with ethnic divisions *within* the established Greek Orthodox nation, a nation that has been conscious of, if unsure about, its large diaspora since the earliest days of the Modern Greek nation-state. Then, suddenly, from the fenced-in barracks where, by law, only Greek men can be, Tsirbas fast-forwards, taking us to his semi-fictionalized Victoria, an urban battleground where the younger, darker, Muslim, undocumented men that Triantafyllidou describes have indeed been spotted and targeted by the remaining ethnically Greek residents of the neighborhood.

In the "train story," which is how I will refer to the untitled longer narrative in *Victoria* that is periodically interrupted by shorter, standalone stories, an unnamed man, the narrator, finds himself on an intercity train bound for Athens. He, a suburbanite, is seated next to a lifelong resident of Victoria. The Victorian bombards the suburbanite with conspiracy theories, personal anecdotes, and unprompted vignettes about Victoria and its multi-ethnic population, including a first-person account of a hate crime against, we assume, a recently-arrived "economic migrant," possibly from sub-Saharan Africa:

> This black guy bounces right by me and he's holding a dish filled to the brim with soft serve. And he's got toppings, too. He's got his syrups and his crushed almonds and his everything. A real parfait! And he's eating it slowly, slowly. Really enjoying himself. Savoring it, you know? And he's flipping and flopping with those flip-flops and you can see it, you can just make out that...that whiteness on the soles of his feet and in between his toes...disgusting [...] And I can't even remember the last time I had an ice cream and I'm only buying essentials now and meanwhile this "African people" had his dinner and felt like going out for dessert! That did it, man. I put on my hazards, step out, and go pssst! With the first blow there goes his ice cream and with the second he's getting dragged down the sidewalk and his flip-flops are flying in opposite directions. Friend friend, he says. What friend when he's getting kicked in the face, there go his teeth there goes his everything.

This climactic scene has prompted reviewers of Tsirbas's "novella," as he calls it, to hone in on two pieces of historical context: the rise of Golden Dawn, and The Crisis. Golden Dawn was, in 2013 when *Victoria* was published, an anti-migrant political party that, since 2020, has been classified as an illegal criminal organization: essentially a violent, xenophobic gang. And "The Crisis" refers to the period of economic downturn for Greece that began in the aftermath of the global recession of the late 2000s. The above passage certainly evokes both the spike in urban hate crimes against "visible" (i.e. non-European) migrants, to use Triantafyllidou's qualifying term, as well as The Crisis. And it even hints at a connection between the two, with the Victorian freely admitting that he took out his economic frustrations on his non-Greek victim. "Tsirbas's book, writes Michalis Nikolakakis in a 2014 review, "is a representation of fascism in Greek society, a type of fascism that is presently manifested as an urban phenomenon, which is to say that it is geographically restricted to urban zones." While the "urban" and "fascist" themes are indeed prominent in *Victoria*, as we have seen, Nikolakakis's review touches upon an even more significant aspect of the work as a whole: namely, that it represents the prevalence of behaviors termed "fascist" within "*Greek* society." The book does not deal with the firsthand experiences of migrants at all, as is evidenced by the fact that the actual victim of the "fascist attack," the man

with the ice cream, is three degrees removed from the reader: his brief utterance "friend, friend" is recalled by the protagonist (the Victorian), whose words are in turn recorded by the narrator (the suburbanite), all within the fictional world created by the author (Yiannis Tsirbas). Author, narrator, and protagonist: three Greek masculine figures regurgitating the Greek words of a Greek speaker who is not treated as a member of the Greek society that Nikolakakis refers to.

The train story is one of two stories in *Victoria* that feature migrants in brief supporting roles. The other is "Between Middle and Index," which I have also translated. "Between Middle and Index" delves even further into Greek social history than the train story does, fast-forwarding from the 1967-1974 dictatorship, also known as the Junta, a time during which there were almost no non-Greeks living near Victoria Square, back to hyper-recent time of the train story. The protagonist of "Between Middle and Index" is known only by his surname Meletis. The story's narrator uses the *second* person exclusively, thus addressing Meletis directly, telling him his own story. Meletis thus has no agency over his narrative. We come to understand as readers that the narrator holds a grudge against Meletis, probably because of his role as an informant to the dictatorial regime. But there is one character in "Between Middle and Index" who has even less agency than the scorned Meletis, and, unsurprisingly, that character is a migrant. His name is Georgi and he is Meletis's present-day sexual partner, or, more accurately, Meletis's paid sex provider. He says four words to Meletis at the end of their tryst: in Greek, "σ'αγκαπό λούγκρι μου"—"I love you, my lougri." This last word, "λούγκρι," I have transliterated and left "un-Englished," to use Gayatri Spivak's term: in contemporary slang it is a pejorative term for a gay man, but the stress is usually placed on the ultimate, rather than the penultimate, syllable, i.e. "λουγκρί." It is similar enough to λούγκρα, a noun that is defined in Elias Petropoulos's 1971 dictionary *Kaliarnta*, which records the secret language of gay men in twentieth-century Athens,

as "a very bad feminine thing, of uknown etymology" (80). But regardless of whether Georgi is using Kaliarnta here, and thus signalling his own engagement with a queer subculture, or poking fun at Meletis's sexual identity, or both, the contration "σ'αγαπώ," literally "I love you," is definitely misspelled, and in two different ways. One of the two "errors," however, replacing a stressed omega [ώ] with a stressed omicron [ό], does not actually affect pronounciation: the two letters are pronounced in exactly the same way. Meletis does not *hear* Georgi making this mistake. Rather the narrator shows *us* the mistake, engaging us in a private, derisive conversation about migrants who have not learned the difference between the identically-pronounced letters omicron and omega and who are, fittingly (as he sees it), the last sexual resort of a disgraced informant. This is the same type of conversation that the Victorian and the suburbanite have on the train: two Greek men talking about migrants but, in effect, talking about only Greeks. The difference is that in "Between Middle and Index," the second party is not another fictional character like in the train story but the imagined reader who can immediately spot the spelling mistake and pick up on the debasement of the national language, and thus the entire nation, by extra-national, non-native speakers who fraternize primarily with the already-debased elements of society, like Meletis.

The entire enterprise of *Victoria*, then, is a national reckoning prompted by migration, rather than a reckoning about migration. The Victorian does claim to have committed a hate crime against a dark-skinned migrant, to be sure, but the Greek suburbanite, from a northern suburb of Athens called Agia Paraskevi, elicits his ire as well:

> So, Mr. Agia Paraskevi, enlighten me: is this the kind of neighborhood you'd want to live in? Let me take a second to tell you what it's like to walk around the neighborhood where you grew up, because I grew up somewhere too, you know. The only difference is that now whenever I walk down my own street, the street I've lived on my whole life, I have to walk past a Pakistani holding the feet of his still-clucking chicken in one hand and a transistor radio blasting Arab music in

> the other hand. Because that's the other thing. It's not just the chickens anymore, it's the radios, too. And if it's not a radio it's a cell phone that can play the top-ten of the United Arab Emirates. Do you hear what I'm saying?

Migrants are the *reminder* of a pre-existing class struggle, reinforcing a city-suburb divide that predates the arrival of most non-European migrants by at least several decades. The suburbanite enjoys the privilege of being shielded from migrants, and the Victorian not only resents that privilege but assumes that the suburbanite, a resident of a presumably ethnically "homogeneous" municipality, would also disdain living in an ethnically diverse urban environment. But in the end the Victorian resorts to racist violence, not class warfare. And in a 2014 interview with Marialena Spiropoulou that can at best be described as "fencewalking," Tsirbas himself all but declares that sort of violence inevitable:

> If most people believe that foreigners are dangerous, then, subconsciously, that will become the truth. We reproduce stereotypes, without having "lived" them, which in turn perpetuates the whole situation. I do not wish to idealize the migrants. Things are hard and there is desperation. But I want to stress that, yes, migrants are poor, but some Greeks are poor too, equally poor. They could have migrated and gone somewhere else, but they did not make it in the end. I do not take a stand in favor of the migrant. Nor do I take a stand in favor of the racist or xenophobe.

Taking a stand in favor of "the migrant," which Tsirbas claims he does not do, would be an act of homogenization. Triantafyllidou's article lists five major countries of origin, on different continents, and even that is just a small sample since, in reality, by 2013 there were migrants from virtually every country living in Athens. Yet, for Tsirbas, there is "a migrant," full-stop, just as there is an anti-migrant, full-stop. There are two distinct and oppositional forces, fighting over turf in a forgotten part of town. These two stories from *Victoria* are hate stories. The Victorian hates, and so does the narrator of "Between Middle and Index." Love is nowhere to be found in Victoria.

Introducing Part Four: Stories from Plateia Messolongiou

Then, three years after *Victoria*, Vangelis Provias takes us to another Athenian square, or "plateia," a word that I have in various instances only transliterated, because the famous "squares" in the English-speaking world (Times Square and Trafalgar Square, for example) cannot be considered concrete nexuses of urban microcosms in the same way that the Greek plateias are. And whereas Victoria Square, or "Plateia Viktorias," is heavily trafficked thanks to its eponymous subway station and, by 2013, already had a reputation as a hub for non-European migrants—a 2014 news story even refers to Victoria as "Plateia Afghanistan"—Messolongi Square, or "Plateia Mesolongiou," in the equally central though less ethnically diverse Athens neighborhood of Pangrati, is smaller and virtually unknown beyond a three-mile-radius. The plateia is thus a blank canvas for Provias, who, unlike Tsirbas, is neither challenging nor reinforcing stereotypes about a beleaguered cityscape in the wake of multiple "crises." This is not to say that Provias's stories are less focused on, or conscious of, the changing ethnic make-up of Athens. Quite the contrary: the four stories presented here feature protagonists originally from Greece, Albania, the Soviet Union, and Syria. The difference is that in *Mesolongiou* we hear the migrants' voices more than we do in *Victoria*, where their voices are either distorted or silenced. The stories in *Mesolongiou* are the migrants' stories, or, at least, they are *also* the migrants' stories.

And they are not hate stories. Are they love stories, then? "The Sirian Sea" depicts tender moments between an unnamed Syrian refugee and Thanasis, who pays him for sex and might not respond to his text message. "Tinsel and Tequila" depicts the recently-fired Marianna slapping her unpaid, Soviet-born domestic assistant Nina, who may or may not console her. "Messolongi

Square" features the brief first-person narrative of an Albanian-born, involuntarily celibate umbrella salesman who is called "Tassos" instead of his Albanian given name and who "swims naked and alone." Only "The Lid," which takes place in 1992 and features no non-Greek protagonists, mentions love by name, but that love is unrequited and fleeting. Still, this is progress, especially if we compare, for example, Georgi's paid sexual encounter with Meletis to the Syrian's paid sexual encounter with Thanasis. When Georgi says "I love you," the verb is misspelled by the author/narrator for the sake of mockery, and the implicit message is, of course, "I do not love you." However, when the Syrian texts "I'm from Siria," erroneously replacing one letter with another identically-pronounced letter, exactly like Georgi does, not only do we watch him eventually acquire the orthographic aptitude that Georgi is never afforded but we are also told his implicit message directly by the narrator, rather than being forced to glean it from context:

> Days went by. He thought constantly about the books. He sent a text message. It was the first time he had ever done anything like this. He saved the number of the man with the wallet and the arms wrapped around him so that, if he called, he would definitely answer, even if he was "working." "Thanasis, how are you? I'm from Siria." He offered him this piece of information, this gift of knowledge. For a little while he was quite pleased with his generosity. He could see that the text message was "sent," but a response never came. He wanted to re-send it, and take care to write it again carefully, correctly. In the end he never did.

The relationship between Thanasis and the Syrian is tenuous, to be sure. But the Syrian's side of the story is actually part of the diegesis. Despite the "twist" ending in which the possibility that the whole story has been narrated by Thanasis himself is raised, though never confirmed, the Syrian is unquestionably the central figure of this narrative. Thus, even if "The Sirian Sea" is yet another attempt by a Greek author, speaking through a fictional mouthpiece/narrator, to come to terms with the different experiences of the migrants who live with, work with, and even have sex (paid or otherwise) with self-identified Greeks, this is still not xenophobic vitriol disguised as

gritty realism. Provias's plateia-centric stories might be interested in the daily Athenian interactions between Greeks and non-Greeks, just like Tsirbas's are, but the migrants in *Mesolongiou* are more than just set pieces opportunistically placed in the background in order to evoke a sense of urgency and unease. They are not literary devices to be exploited by author and narrator alike in the interest of blunt, yet totally ethnocentric, social commentary.

The question remains, though, as to why I have included in this anthology one of the several stories from *Plateia Mesolongiou* that does *not* depict, or even refer to, the experiences of migrants in Greece. The answer is that, if *Mesolongiou* as a whole provides us with a distinct variation on the theme of a multi-ethnic contemporary Athens (a theme that *Victoria* supposedly succeeds in portraying), then "The Lid" can be read as a counterpoint to "Between Middle and Index," which also is set during in the twentieth, rather than the twenty-first, century. "The Lid" takes place immediately after the end of the Cold War, while "Between Middle and Index," takes place mostly during a period of pronounced Cold-War tension that had a profound effect on the lives of everyone in Greece. During the Junta, three of Greece's four land borders (those shared with Albania, Yugoslavia, and Bulgaria) were, in effect, lines of battle between proxies of the United States and the Soviet Union. By September of 1992, however, all of Greece's borders (including the land and sea borders with Turkey) had already become, or were about to become, entry points for hundreds of thousands of aspiring residents of Athens.

Even though this is not addressed in "The Lid," the fact that "The Lid" is featured in the same collection, and is narratively time-stamped in the same overt manner, as the other three stories from *Mesolongiou* that I translated serves to heighten the palpable historicity that the collection as a whole strives for. Whereas in "Plateia Mesolongiou" and "Tinsel And Tequila" History (in both stories written with a capital "H") is said to have "paid a visit" to the respective

Eastern-Bloc protagonists, prompting their migration to Greece, "The Lid" does not mention History but is set at roughly the same historical moment that History was making the rounds in neighboring countries. "The Lid" is about Alexandros, who in 1992 is a recent high-school, or, more precisely, lyceum, graduate who delivers coffee to a journalist referred to only by the initial "Γ." "Γ," though, refuses to drink a cappuccino that Alexandros delivers to him without a plastic lid on the to-go cup. Meanwhile, Alexandros is falling for "Γ." Eventually, we learn, things change for both men:

> The one-time coffee delivery boy owned up to the promises he made to himself. He became very much like that mature, successful man. He wore unbuttoned striped shirts. He was always busy and, undoubtedly, short with people, with the supporting cast of his life, without being aware of it. In the meantime, the small, historic newspaper ended its run. And after that, a lot of other newspapers closed down too, and a lot of jobs were lost, among them the respectable position that Alexandros held, which was a world away from the mild embarrassment of the temporary coffee delivery boy. Despite everything, despite the fact that he never forgot that feeling of embarrassment, he never forgot that on the first autumnal afternoon of 1992 he was working at a café on Amerikis Street. And he felt lucky.

Thus, much like "Between Middle and Index," "The Lid" takes us from the Cold War to The Crisis. The future for Alexandros is the present-day for Thanasis, as well as for the Syrian, Nina, and Tassos. They all *eventually* come to inhabit the same place at the same time. The migrants are not there in 1992, not *yet*, but "The Lid" offers us a glimpse at a city that would soon become a home for them, cementing the parallels between protagonists who all feel displaced.

Introducing Part Five: Stories from Lathropsychoi

I have chosen to transliterate, rather than translate, the title of this mysterious 2018 anthology. "Lathropsychoi" is most likely a coinage of the editor (or editors: curiously, only the names of the publisher, proofreader, and contributors are provided). A plural masculine noun in

the nominative case, "lathropsychoi" is a portmanteau, fusing the adjective "λαθραίος," meaning "smuggled into" or "illicit," and the noun "ψυχή," meaning "soul." And the internal structure of the word "lathropsychoi" is identical to that of several, more commonly-used portmanteaus: "kalopsychoi," i.e. the "good-souled," "kakopsychoi," i.e. the "bad-souled," and "skatopsychoi," i.e. the "shit-souled." The implication of all of these terms is that the modifying quality (goodness, badness, or shittiness) is so dominant in a person (who is represented synechdochically by their everlasting soul, and *not* their mortal flesh) that it comes to define them. It would follow, therefore, that lathropsychoi are individuals who are defined by the fact that they are human contraband. Then there is also the fact that "λαθραίος" forms the first half of another well-known portmanteau: "λαθρομετανάστης," a noun whose closest American English analogues are "illegal alien" or "illegal immigrant," both terms that have been rightly replaced by "irregular migrant" in contemporary English-language scholarship. But even in Greece, the term "λαθρομετανάστης," according to a 2021 article by Nikos Stamatinis about the use of that term, is now considered taboo in public discourse and "by 2015...was already stigmatized as racist and did not appear to exhibit the pervasive hegemonic use it had back in the 1990s" (356).

Why was this title chosen for a 2018 anthology whose subtitle is: "SHORT STORIES about the Refugees and their Dreams" (original capitalization)? There is no explanation provided in the book itself. There is no introduction, and no biographical information about the authors. There is only a blurb on the back cover, written by contributor Maria Kanellaki, whose story "Sleep, sleep..." is also presented here:

> This book is a collective attempt for us to record the lives and experiences of contemporary refugees, in the hope that they will come to serve as archival documents for future generations.
>
> It is the least we can do for our fellow men and women who were packed like cargo onto "inflatable tractor-trailers," who put on those horrid orange life jackets that would later pollute the Mediterranean, and who crossed the Evros

> River in broken rafts. Not to mention the myriad children who traverse our civilized continent as "Unaccompanied Minors" and whose angsty cries of pain will haunt us forever.
>
> We will strive to keep our consciousness and humanity intact...

If there are indeed lathropsychoi, then they are not the authors of these stories. At least not according to Kanellaki, who draws an instant distinction between "us" and "contemporary refugees." Eleven years after *We Are All Immigrants*, we are, apparently, no longer all immigrants. Kanellaki presupposes a gap between author and subject that Anastasia Natsina, in her introduction to *We Are All Immigrants*, had attempted to bridge more than a decade earlier:

> Taking into account the concept of migration, the stories in this volume [*We Are All Immigrants*] seek and discuss otherness both in places where one might well expect to find it—in irregular [λαθραία!] crossings, racist confrontations, direct attacks—as well as in places where, at least in theory, one would not expect to find it, i.e. in the peaceful, comfortable, ordinary lives or within a seemingly unbreakable, static society (11).

Natsina draws a parallel here between the experiences of border-crossing, language-learning migrants and the experiences of non-migrants who identify only with a dominant monoculture, arguing that both narratives belong in the same anthology. Kanellaki, meanwhile, imagines herself and the other contributors to *Lathropsychoi* as literary archivists who are indeed haunted by the cries of displaced children but do not necessarily identify with them and cannot even guarantee that their "consciousness and humanity" will remain intact throughout the process of writing and anthologizing. Thus, whereas Kanellaki does very little to counter the notion that migration is inherently criminal, Natsina's use of the adjective "λαθραίος" in the above passage modifies not the migrants themselves but the "crossings," which could be interpreted either as the *act* of moving from one geopolitical entity into another or to the geographic *point* at which those two geopolitical entities intersect. In other words, Natsina leaves open the possibility that

the people migrating are not themselves illegal but that, perhaps, the concept of a border to be guarded and not crossed is itself more criminal than the act of crossing without authorization.

It is also worth noting that Greece is not mentioned by name in Kanellaki's blurb. While the "Evros River" and the "Mediterranean" are both bodies of water through which Greece's international borders do indeed pass, they are now also the borders of the European Union: "our civilized continent," as Kanellaki calls it. Even though Greece was part of the European Union in 2007 when *We Are All Immigrants* was published as well as in 1989 when the Eastern Bloc had just begun to collapse, Euro-consciousness is more dominant in *Lathropsychoi* than in any of the other, earlier works that I translated. Perhaps this can be attributed to the impact of what has been termed the "European Refugee Crisis" and is supposed to have begun in 2015, despite the fact that refugees from many of the same countries of origin, such as Iraq, Afghanistan, and even Syria are referenced not only in earlier Greek news media and social science documents but also, as we have seen, in the Greek *fictions* of earlier decades. Still, the broader cultural awareness of Greece as a destination for "refugees" as opposed to "immigrants" probably did intensify during the 2007-2017 decade: we cannot ignore the fact that migrants are referred to mostly as "immigrants" by Natsina in 2007 but referred to exclusively as "refugees" by Kanellaki in 2018.

A 2021 article by Christos Nikas and Dimitrios Aspasios purports to illustrate, as the title clearly states, "The Albanian Migration to Greece and the Refugee Crisis of 2015 from the Greek Perspective." Their assessment of this "perspective," despite sweeping generalizations and not-quite-objective prose stylings, does offer some insight into the shift in geopolitical allegiances and narrative tone that we see over the course of a decade of Greek cultural evolution. It is impossible to overlook the fact that these two social scientists use phrases like "harsh polymorphic reality," "dark sides" (117), and "multilevel negative consequences" (124) to refer

to movements of people. Nevertheless, Nikas and Aspasios are able to succinctly summarize a public sentiment that, I would argue, has permeated through all four of the stories from *Lathropsychoi* that are presented here. I am referring to the belief that the 2015 Refugee Crisis is not a Greek crisis persé but a European crisis that has affected Greece only because it is a border territory *of* the European Union. "The refugee crisis," as Nikas as Aspasios write, "led to the acknowledgement of the inability of the EU to effectively manage and secure its external borders [and] its sovereignty" (126). The European Union is depicted here, perhaps correctly, as a single sovereign state that has rendered the autonomy of its individual member-states obsolete. It is not thought of as a partnership *among* sovereign countries. Nikas and Aspasios go on to contrast the present situation in United Europe with that of Greece's recent past:

> ...the Albanian immigrants of the 1990s had Greece as their destination country, while the most recent refugee flows used Greece's external sea borders and inner land as a transit ground in order to use the secondary migration flows to reach northern Europe, where they wanted to settle down permanently and apply for asylum.

While I cannot confirm or deny the accuracy of this claim, I can point out that the verb choices in this passage illuminate the authors' understanding of the different migrant groups' attitudes towards Greece: the Albanians "had" Greece in mind the whole time, while the refugees "used" Greece to get to more prosperous European destinations. Thus, even though "the Albanian migration" is referred to earlier as "sudden," "unexpected," and "uncontrolled" (121), it is still seen as a deliberate movement *to* Greece rather than as more perfunctory movement *through* Greece. This sentiment is echoed in Kanellaki's blurb, where the "Unaccompanied Minors" are pictured "traversing" civilized Europe while the Greek author-documentarians hurriedly try to record the experiences of those transient refugees before they disappear deeper into civilization.

This same sentiment is echoed also in the stories themselves. The eponymous heroine of Sotiris Athineos's "Silent Mummy," for example, a pregnant girl living in a camp-like Athenian basement, laments the fact that she was not smuggled into Italy as promised: "If it wasn't for that disgusting captain who left us in Crete but told us it was Sicily. Goddamn it!" And the comically clueless narrator of Theodosis Mantzaris's "Across the Hall" says of his Syrian neighbor, whom he incorrectly considers a friend:

> I did not see him again. I noticed his car, abandoned at the tiny plateia near the tracks of the commuter rail, caked in the African dust that pays us regular, unannounced visits. A depressing picture, to be sure. The lady at the corner store said that he had recently lost all contact with his family. He couldn't cope with the loss, so he booked a ticket to some neighboring country and left. But before he did he tried in vain to sell his beloved car. Some dubious neighbor of ours tried to rip him off, initially agreeing on a fair price but then reneging at the last minute. So he locked the doors for one last time and said goodbye, feeling deeply repulsed by the stench of dishonesty.

In *Lathropsychoi*, then, Greece is depicted as a European entry-point as well as a less-desirable alternative to virtually all other member-states of the European Union. And, unlike the migrant protagonists from the earlier narratives presented here, the Syrian who cannot sell his car forms no lasting bonds with anyone in Greece and the Silent Mummy does not even make it above ground. This is a far cry from even *Plateia Mesolongiou*, where another Syrian has an intimate encounter with a Greek man (admittedly one rooted in a massive power imbalance) and goes so far as to send him a text message in Greek. These migrant figures from *Lathropsychoi*, even if they are permanently in Europe, are only temporarily in Greece, and the chasm between the self-identified Greeks and the non-Greek residents of Athens is reinforced by these portrayals.

Of course, this reinforcement is ultimately the work of the authors, all of whom are presumed to be Greek, especially if the blurb is taken at face-value. The voice of the Silent Mummy is a Greek fiction that does nothing to disprove the notion that refugees are people who

"use" Greece, taking advantage of its position both within and relative to the rest of Europe. And even the "native" Greek voices depicted in *Lathropsychoi* are keen to stress the Europeanness of the refugee experience, for instance in Kanellaki's story "Sleep, sleep..." where the second-person narrator references five largely-forgotten minority groups from the past few centuries of migration to Greece, all of whom arrived before the advent of the European Union, but employs the Eurocentric discourse of the present-day when discussing them:

> Sleep, sleep...sleep deeply. The last caravan of alloglots has already morphed into a swarm of balloons flying over Farmakonisi along with the Halikoutides, Tourkospori, Karagounides, Tzeftedes, and Xenomerites. You know, the people who never fit into our tiny, pearly-white European living room and whom we branded with the stigma of the foreign element.

The rapid-fire naming of historical ethnic designations followed by the phrase "pearly-white European living room" seems like a deliberate juxtaposition of the present and the past. The narrator draws attention to the inherent subjectivity of "whiteness" and "Europe," both concepts that originated outside of Greece, but still draws a distinction between "them" and "us," much like Kanellaki does in the blurb. Even if Europe is a fiction, then, it is still "our" fiction.

If *Lathropsychoi* represents a novel understanding of both migration to Greece and migrants in Greece, with Greeks largely thought of as witnesses to rather than participants in the stories, there is one story in particular from *Lathropsychoi* that takes the separation of the Greek and non-Greek spheres to another level altogether. "The (Up)hill Battle of a Life(time)" by Theocharis Papadopoulos is a story in which the condescension of the Greek-by-default third-person narrator towards the migrant protagonists is totally unchecked—"You wouldn't call her beautiful, but she wasn't unattractive, either...Let's just say that she was average..."—and is also the only story that I translated in which a blossoming romance between two migrants from two different countries is depicted. Athens has evolved from a city where migrants and "locals"

commingle to a city where migrants and migrants commingle, presumably apart from those same locals. In "Butterfly Kicks" Genti and Sofia tell their stories separately before getting together. In *Victoria Does Not Exist* no one can possibly together because the hatred is too suffocating. But in "The (Up)hill Battle of a Life(time)," Pakistan-born Ahmet gets together with Albania-born Greta only after they both become the targets of a Golden Dawn-like racist gang. They are united first by proximity and second by ethnic alterity, since they are both in Greece yet neither one is from Greece. "The (Up)hill Battle of a Life(time)" leaves us feeling that there are *two* Athenses: the Athens of the Greeks and the Athens of the migrants, with Albanians portrayed as the most established sub-group within this heterogeneous social stratum. While the stories in *We Are All Immigrants* and *Plateia Mesolongiou* anticipate a movement towards mutual acceptance and understanding, a movement that self-identified Greeks would at least participate in if not foment, this love story from *Lathropsychoi* lives up to Kanellaki's back-cover promise of documentary from afar. "You would not call her beautiful," the narrator says about Greta. And we can easily complete the sentence: "You would not call her beautiful *if you saw her*," with the implication being that you (Greek person) would never actually see her since you are reading this story (in Greek) which is for you but not about you. The narrator has been crafted as an omniscient tour guide who knows everything there is to know about the non-Greek protagonists, and also knows enough about his Greek-language readers to know that none would dare descend into this local yet unrecognizable Athenian underworld.

***

Language, Literature, and Migration

The works of ten authors are anthologized here. Each of these ten authors has written about migration. But, once again, most likely none of them is a migrant. Søren Frank would argue that this fact is irrelevant. In his "Four Theses on Migration and Literature," published in 2010, Frank declares that the "distinction between migrant and non-migrant writers becomes increasingly difficult to uphold." He believes that non-migrant authors "writing about the movement of people and objects across geographies and cultures and who formulate in their work a cosmopolitan, transnational, and hybrid vision of social reality are potential producers of migration literature" (52). Assuming that all three of Frank's criteria—cosmopolitanism, transnationalism, *and* hybridity—must be met, can we safely say that any of these ten non-migrant authors has realized their true potential for "migration literature" as Frank defines it? On one side of the spectrum is *The Yellow Dog*: Rouska's "vision of social reality" is informed by texts the whole world over, and she herself is cosmopolitan, transnational, and hybrid by her own admission. On the other side of the spectrum, of course, is *Victoria Does Not Exist*, a text whose main character is brazenly antithetical to anything other than hardscrabble monoculturalism:

> At the corner of Sourmeli and Acharnon, right by my old school. They call it a 'multicultural' school now. They're really rubbing it in our faces, man. They put us in this mess and they rub it in our faces just like that. Fine, okay: multiculturalism and globalization. I get it. But at the same time I'm running out of gas and I'm making a spectacle of myself at the gas station asking for five euros of gas.

Most of the works presented here, however, are neither quintessentially "Frankian," like *The Yellow Dog*, nor diametrically opposed to Frank's principles, like *Victoria*. Especially if we take cosmopolitanism, or "world citizenship," at face value, stories like "Chalk Dust" and "Butterfly Kicks" seem less concerned with any kind of global consciousness than with a type of hybrid

identity that results from a transnational, or, more accurately, *bi*-national, experience. The shared history and extreme proximity between Greece and Albania give both of these stories a more local, or regional, rather than global, feel, and, furthermore, we scarcely see Michalis and Genti interacting with other Albanians, and we never see them interacting with any non-Greek migrants from countries other than Albania. These two stories are, therefore, transnational and hybrid but not necessarily cosmopolitan. Meanwhile, the four stories from *Lathropsychoi* are cosmopolitan and transnational, but not necessarily hybrid: Greece is reimagined as a stopping point on a trans-global journey made by people from all of the world's cultures, but, in the "vision of social reality" presented by Kanellaki on the book's back cover, the migrants are unable to engage in any cross-cultural exchange with the Greeks who are, in turn, somehow still able to tell the migrants' stories.

Considering, then, that these ten authors vary so greatly in their representations of migration to Greece, what, if anything, unites them, beyond the potentially trivial fact of their *not* being migrants? The reality is that not everyone who writes about contemporary European literature and migration would consider this fact trivial. Caterina Scarabicchi, for example, identifies an "external authorial voice" that is pervasive in migration narratives written by non-migrants. And she argues that in some cases this voice actually excludes migrants from "the political and cultural debate surrounding their own stories." While Scarabicchi does recognize that "the cultural texts produced by European artists in support of migrants undoubtedly originate from a desire to express solidarity with displaced individuals," she concludes that there is an inescapable "tension between commitment and advocacy on the one hand, and silencing and appropriation on the other." For Scarabicchi, the "major issue connected with these stories is the ventriloquism of their authorial voices, which fictionally borrow the point of view of the migrant,

but actually remain framed within a European—and often Eurocentric—perspective" (175). The silencing, appropriation, and ventriloquism that Scarabicchi ascribes to the authors she writes about could, by the same logic, be ascribed to each of the ten authors in this anthology, especially those who feature the first-person narration of migrant protagonists, with the "perspective" gradually becoming more Eurocentric, and less "Helleno-centric," as the decade between *We Are All Immigrants* and *Lathropsychoi* progresses.

But for many scholars writing specifically about Greek-language migration narratives, rather than looking at a pan-European, or global, literary phenomenon, the kind of appropriation of migrants' stories by non-migrant authors that Scarabicchi goes to great lengths to uncover is actually taken for granted rather than interrogated. "The immigrant community" of Greece, recalls Mikela Chartoulari, "naturally enough roused the interest of writers but it did so in very different ways." She then elaborates: "the relationship of the Greek population with the first wave of immigrants was a theme that occupied a good number of experienced writers...who represented them in a positive light and noted the creeping racism of the Greeks and the exploitation or suspicion experienced by the 'foreigners'" (70). Scarabicchi would likely argue that the exploitation of migrants by the non-migrant population as a whole is not unlike the exploitation of migrants by non-migrant authors, even those who represent them "in a positive light." After all, Chartoulari implies, rather than states, that the "immigrant community" does not overlap with the community of "experienced writers," who were already in Greece at the time of the "first wave" of migration and therefore could not have participated in it. Migrants, in this view of the Greek literary world, are automatically relegated to the status of representational subject rather than thought of as potential authors in their own right. Theodoros Grigoriadis makes a similar implication but adopts a more pessimistic tone: "I very much fear," he writes,

"that today because of the crisis the social and artistic front line has once more undergone a restructuring. The stranger is no longer useful, he is neither exotic nor sexy, he is no longer a king but a beggar." For Grigoriadis, writing in 2016, the heyday of migration narratives has long since passed. But even during Grigoriadis's imagined golden age, the migrants were never storytellers themselves. They could only watch from the proverbial sidelines while their stories were "used" by Greek authors who, according to Grigoriadis, "are not in the habit of taking risks, and only when something becomes fashionable do they swoop in for the kill" (42). His metaphor is brutal, but his point is clear: Greek literature is the realm of the Greek author, and the Greek author is not a migrant.

This is not to say that there are no migrants living in Greece and publishing literary works in the Greek language. There are some. But even in the few critical assessments of one such author, Albanian-born Gazmend Kapllani, the question of belonging to the speech community and the national literature is invariably raised, and similar conclusions are reached. "[Narrating] his story in a 'foreign' language, that is, in Greek rather than his mother tongue," explains Konstantina Georganta, "Kapllani's alter ego confesses that he feels both a participant and a spectator of his own experiences, since the use of this adopted language offers him the necessary distance to reproduce and read again his past and present experiences..." (191). According to Georganta, Kapllani is able to distance himself from his own migratory experience merely by choosing to write in Greek instead of Albanian. And while she argues that Kapllani is able to take advantage of this distance, she does not question the fact of the distance. The language, the literature, and the nation are all conflated, and, apparently, that conflation is inescapable even for migrants in Greece writing about migration to Greece in Greek.

The question being asked over and over again, apparently even in discussions of Greek-language works by migrants, is: "What does *our* treatment of migrants say about *us*?" The debate surrounding migration and Greek literature is a recent one, to be sure, but this question in particular, being utterly self-referential, harkens back to earlier discussions of the role that the Greek language should play in the national literature of Greece. In his *Introduction to Modern Greek Literature*, which does not mention the literary contributions or literary portrayals of migrants who arrived in Greece after the Cold War, Roderick Beaton recalls how, even in twentieth-century Greek literature, language is "tellingly, and frequently described as a possession" (348). And the possession of the Greek language among authors, continues Beaton, "is a prerequisite for the survival and prosperity of the nation...conversely, as a thing, it is subject to the risks of damage and loss" (350). Perhaps references to Kapllani's Greek in scholarly discourse, as well as to Konstantina Kuneva's Greek in the blogosphere, for that matter, as an inherently "foreign" language is a safeguard against the damage and loss that Beaton is referring to. After all, if the number of individuals who possess Greek is limited, the fewer the chances for the language to become damaged or loss. Despite more than thirty years of border-crossings, rent payments, lyceum graduations, and, occasionally, naturalizations for migrants in Greece, events that are happening in real time and in real Greek, of course, the literary circle remains insular, or maybe *pen*insular, that is, mostly closed off. And the selectivity of the national literature, with its virtually coterminous national language, parallels the exclusivity of the nation-state, making it seem almost inconceivable that someone outside of the small, special coterie should have not only the desire but also the aptitude to join.

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Transliteration and Translation

There is a wrong way to transliterate Greek. That is, according to Gerald P. Verbrugghe, who proclaims that even though there are "now five main systems that a person in the English-speaking world could use to render Greek words with Roman letters," the systems are often "used indiscriminately and, indeed, are sometimes mixed." He observes that "[many] people, confused about the purposes for which each system was created, choose the wrong system to represent Greek words or names" (499). I am one of those many people. For this project I chose to render dozens of Greek words and names with Roman letters, but I did so without consulting any of the experts on transliteration, including Verbrugghe, who concludes his brief overview of the "five systems" with recommendations not only "for the English-speaking Greekless reader" (507) but also for "the reader who knows Greek and [is] in a situation where the actual Greek is of importance and it is not possible to represent the Ancient Greek fully and completely in its native script" (508). Apart from having no qualms about indiscriminate "mixing" of transcription systems, I also considered the needs of the "English-speaking Greekless reader" differently.

Even though I did, in fact, presume the potential reader to be both "English-speaking" and "Greekless," I chose to do two things that Verbrugghe advises against not only in the case of and English-speaking, Greekless readership but also in the case of a reader who "knows Greek": I often transliterated and, on occasion, *also* represented Greek "fully and completely in its native script" within the same text. In the end, the "actual Greek" was of importance to me, despite the Greeklessness of the vast majority of the English-speaking world, and I decided that the Greek alphabet belongs in the text just as much as the transliterations do. Verbrugghe suggests that "people who know Modern Greek, whether or not they are familiar with Classical Greek, are

influenced by the Modern Greek concern both to modernize the written Greek language based on the current spoken language and to confirm modern Greece as the custodian of classical Greek heritage" (499). While it gives me no pleasure whatsoever to acknowledge my own potential for a kind of national mythologizing that Verbrugghe cavalierly ascribes to not some but *all* people who "know Modern Greek," it is still worth examining the extent to which retaining elements of the Greek written language in an English-language translation, and especially in a translation of stories that portray characters who speak Greek as a second language or do not "know Modern Greek" at all, could be considered a less than "cautious" or "humble" act.

It is Gayatri Spivak who declares that "we translators into English should operate with great caution and humility," since "the demand for translation—especially literary translation, a quick way to "know a culture"—has been on the rise" (95). The precise "culture" that my own literary translation could familiarize readers with is difficult to identify, with some stories attesting to the separation of "Greek" and "non-Greek" cultural spheres and others attempting to break down these imagined cultural barriers or offer a hybrid cultural vision. Still, it is possible that—by peppering the text with Greek letters and thus periodically reminding the English-language reader that these stories, despite their potential cosmopolitanism, transnationalism, or hybridity (to once again use Søren Frank's terms), are taking place in Greece and were written in Greek—I have afforded a certain privilege to the dominant culture of Greece. Ben Conisbee Baer writes that the "asymmetry of languages, giving us 'less taught,' 'neglected,' or 'subaltern' languages, is a product of history (colonial history as well as other histories of domination and oppression)," arguing that translation "has been both an instrument of that history and a tool used against it" (244). In determining whether my stylistic choices have ignored or even contributed to asymmetry, several potentially asymmetrical relationships must be taken into account. Not only

English and Modern Greek, but Modern Greek and Ancient Greek, English and Ancient Greek, and, perhaps most importantly, Modern Greek and the thousands of native languages of migrants living in Greece, some of which are represented in the original Greek texts that I have translated in a similar way as Greek itself is represented in my translation.

What, for example, is the difference between Misel Fais's use of Bulgarian Cyrillic in *The Yellow Dog* and my use of the Greek alphabet in my own translation of *The Yellow Dog*? Georgia Gotsi, reflecting on *The Yellow Dog* among other Greek texts that feature migrant protagonists, writes that "alternative aesthetics that draw on orality and different linguistic traditions, switching between languages or even striving for untranslatability, aim to disrupt the urban reader's monoglossia and oblige him or her to problematize any sense of cultural homogeneity." She concludes that these alternative aesthetics "enable a different politics, which by challenging the supremacy of a unitary language, makes room for the expression of divergent identities" (175). Gotsi is writing about an "urban reader" whose language is Greek, and whose monoglossia is disrupted by Bulgarian: Rouska's Bulgarian. Within the fictional world of *The Yellow Dog*, Rouska is the one who transitions between the two languages. She is the agent of the transition. Despite her (Modern as well as Ancient) Greek fluency, she makes a deliberate choice to code switch and thus draws attention to the asymmetrical, and, one could even argue, adversarial relationship between Greek and Bulgarian. And the genius of the "book version" of *The Yellow Dog* is that the contrast between the two asymmetrical languages is perhaps even more apparent when the two scripts are juxtaposed on the page than when the person portraying Rouska speaks Greek and Bulgarian on stage.

I am not certain that my use of "Α-Β-Γ-Δ" as opposed to "A-B-C-D" in the section where Rouska lists the multiple choices on her son's chemistry exam has the same impact. Considering

the exalted status of Greek, especially Ancient Greek, in the English-speaking world, a status that prompted the likes of Verbrugghe to make formal recommendations for the "rendering" of the Greek alphabet in English writing so as to avoid any impropriety, the juxtaposition of the two writing systems, Greek and English, cannot by default be considered a tool against the histories of domination and oppression. Unless, of course, we see Modern Greek as oppressed by English, or Modern Greek as oppressed by Ancient Greek. This is not an entirely baseless claim, especially if we consider Spivak's point about the responsibility of the translator into English becoming "altogether more grave when the original is not written in one of the languages of northwestern Europe" (94). Greece is not to be found on any maps of northwestern Europe, even though, as Gregory Jusdanis asserts, "Europeans," perhaps here referring to northwestern Europeans exclusively, "[around] the sixteenth century began to celebrate Hellas as the mainspring of western civilization." And eventually, Jusdanis states, "Greece came to be regarded as the birthplace of the West, the source of its cultural institutions" (13). Furthermore, especially when looked at through the lens of "Europe" as defined by Jusdanis, the relationship between Modern Greek and Ancient Greek cultures is a challenging one. Peter Mackridge, whom Verbrugghe ultimately echoes, notes that "at the heart of the Greek language question was the desire to develop a written language that would reflect an ideal national image that would in turn embody and express the relationship of the modern Greeks to the ancients" (2). This is the very same written language that I have deliberately imposed onto an English-language translation of texts that, at least according to Gotsi, challenge the "supremacy of a unitary language." Can the "alternative aesthetics" that Gotsi identifies be reconciled with the "ideal national image" that the development of the Modern Greek writing system strove to embody?

The answer is yes, but only if the original Greek text employs these alternative aesthetics in order to subvert, or at least revise, the ideal national image. A work like *Victoria*, which barely even acknowledges the fact that multiple languages are spoken in Victoria and only strives for a verisimilar portrayal of supposedly besieged urban Greek idiolects, is a far cry from "Butterfly Kicks," which invites the "Albanianless" reader to pronounce and even comprehend Albanian words and phrases via Albanian-to-Greek transliteration and translation. And even though the Albanian writing system is almost entirely subsumed by the Greek writing system in "Butterfly Kicks" (since the translations are *of* the transliterations), the two languages do coexist within the world of the story, at least to some extent. Therefore, reminding the English-language reader that this (admittedly disharmonious) coexistence is, in fact, occurring in Greece and not in the English-speaking world is not the same thing as reminding the English-language reader that Victoria is in Greece, since, according to the fictional Victorian, his language, Greek, is being threatened by linguistic diversity.

Interestingly, the Victorian does some transliterating of his own, or, rather, the author, through the fictional narrator, the Suburbanite, transliterates some, but not all, of the Victorian's English words. For example: "*CSI: Las Vegas*" becomes "Σι Ες 'Αι Λας Βέγκας," "African people" becomes "'Αφρικαν πιπλ," and "top ten" becomes "τοπ τεν," but the brand name "Unlimited" is left as is, perhaps mirroring the dominance of the Latin script in global advertising. This almost exclusive use of the Greek alphabet in the face of multilingualism and globalization reinforces the ultra-nationalism of the Victorian, despite the fact that much of his ire is directed at the global economic domination of the Anglosphere. After all, he does not strive for equality. He dreams of genocide. "African people" is not an anglicism trickling into Greek via Hollywood, but is most likely a phrase that residents of Athens originally from the English-

speaking regions of Africa use to refer to themselves. The Victorian is clearly conscious of the multi-lingual reality that awaits him on the streets over which he claims ownership, but *Victoria* as a whole is committed to Greek, and, dare I say, to Greeks. Within the context of my translation, then, preserving some of the Greek letter forms that are so anxiously hoarded by a violent protagonist would certainly be an act of submission to the "ideal national image." And yet, that is what I did, not in the case of the Victorian's rambling monologues necessarily but in "Between Middle and Index" as well as in several other stories that I chose to include in the same anthology as the stories from *Victoria*.

In "Chalk Dust," for example, I left the name of a rival soccer team, "ΠΑΟΚ," untransliterated instead of writing "PAOK," or "Paok," even though the name of that team is frequently written that way in English-language sports journalism. In "The Lid" I left the first initial of the protagonist's love interest untouched: "Γ." rather than "G." And in "Across the Hall" I took it a step further, leaving the thankful words of a migrant woman the first-person narrator encounters in an elevator to stand alongside my translation of those words: "Ευ-κα-ρι-στώ πο-λύ!" "Tank-you ve-ry-much!" In this last case, the practice of "ventriloquizing" that Scarabicchi discusses is on full display, with the author himself highlighting, through the blunderous narrative of a clueless yet well-intentioned Athenian, an artificial gap between migrant and native that is only widened by the type of transcription that the narrator engages in. But in the first two cases I mentioned, "ΠΑΟΚ" and "Γ.," the Greek letters are not there to double-down on a kind of deleterious discourse that is already challenged in the original. Instead, they are there to foreignize my translation of texts that themselves engage with the concept of foreignness.

As defined by Lawrence Venuti, "foreignizing translation" is "a dissident cultural practice, maintaining a refusal of the dominant by developing affiliations with marginal

linguistic and literary values at home, including foreign cultures that have been excluded because of their own resistance to dominant values" (148). Once again, however, the exalted status of Greek outside of Greece comes into play, since, as mentioned above, the notion of Greek as dominated by English is debatable. Perhaps it is safer to say that several of the authors whom I have translated are more successful than I am in foreignizing, at least in the Venutian sense of the term, even though I am the one who is translating them. Clearly Misel Fais develops an "affiliation with marginal linguistic and literary values," not only with his use of Cyrillic but also with his allusions to twentieth-century outsider poets, to the cultural history of the Eastern Bloc, and even to contemporary Greek popular culture, which is often marginalized by none other than the literati culture of Rouska's imagined audience. And clearly Vangelis Provias is accessing a "foreign," and "excluded" culture as he follows an anonymous Syrian sex worker around Athens and shows us his misspelled text messages. But it is less clear whether I, as a translator, with my untransliterated Greek letters, am "maintaining a refusal of the dominant," especially if the mythic Greek alphabet is "the dominant," both within Greece and in the English-speaking world.

One other Venutian element of foreignizing translation to consider is that of fluency, or a lack thereof. "The search for alternatives to fluent translation," Venuti writes, "leads to theories and practices that aim to signify the foreignness of the foreign text" (99). If there is one aspect of the Greek language that is more foreign than the others, it is the writing system. Even though, as Mackridge reminds us, Greek is distinct from all other languages because of its grammar and vocabulary as well as its alphabet (viii), the prevalence of Greek roots and even entire Greek words and phrases in everyday English, some of which even retain elements of Greek's inflection ("hoi polloi," for example), leaves us prospective foreignizing translators with the alphabet, the handiest tool for the disruption of fluency and thus for potential "dissident cultural practice."

Venuti writes that "the openness of any language to new uses allows nationalist narratives to be rewritten—especially when this language is the target of translations that are foreignizing, most interested in the cultural difference of the foreign text" (100). In my case, there is cultural difference *within* the foreign text in addition to the cultural difference *of* the foreign text. If, as Venuti claims, translation in and of itself constitutes a "cross-cultural exchange" in which "the peripheries are multiple, domestic and foreign at once" (4), what is the purpose of foreignizing the already foreignized by adding superfluous foreign elements?

For me it has less to do with the foreignness of Greek, or even its domesticity, among English-speaking readers and more to do with the eternal question of Greece's uniqueness, a question that was raised once again when Greece, as Vangelis Calotychos (and countless others) have claimed, was "transformed from a country of emigrants to a home for immigrants" (267). Since the myth of Greek nationhood is, as Baltsiotis illustrates, entirely dependent upon the concept of a unique peninsula populated exclusively by a uniquely pure, ancient group of people, it is inevitable that migration to this peninsula from beyond its established borders would be interpreted as a unique phenomenon. And yet, by the time *Lathropsychoi* is published in 2018, we see the uniqueness of Greece itself, at least when it comes to migration, being called into question, with a European, or Eurocentric, consciousness competing with a more established Greek ethnocentrism. Is Greece a "home" for migrants, as Calotychos writes, or is it a "hub" for migrants on the way to less peripheral European destinations? The notion of Greece as a "home" would appear to support the notion of uniqueness, and even the emergence of a unique cross-cultural exchange, as we see with Genti and Sofia, for example, who carve out their own unique space between Greek and Albanian cultures and languages. But the notion of Greece as a "hub" damages the illusion of uniqueness, since the special peninsula is reduced to a convenient, if not

random, port of entry, a peninsula not at all unlike the other two Mediterranean peninsulae of the European Union, namely the Iberian and the Italian. This is the not-as-special Greece that we see in *Lathropsychoi*, where even the toponym "Greece" and the demonym "Greek" are often replaced with "Europe" and "European," and where migrants are more frequently depicted interacting with each other than with self-identified Greeks.

This is not to say that one fictionalized vision of Greece is inferior to the other. Or is it? Perhaps my attempts at foreignizing amount to little more than Hellenizing, i.e. reinforcing the uniqueness of Greece by highlighting the most blatantly unique Greek cultural component, the language, and its most visibly unique element, the alphabet, despite the fact that some of the texts that I have translated question whether Greece has not fused with the rest of Europe, geopolitically as well as culturally. If the authors themselves are hinting at the universality of the experiences they depict, how could superimposing local identifiers be construed as a "cautious" or "humble" act of translation? It can be justified only if we take into consideration the common misconception, exemplified in Verbrugghe's survey of transliteration systems, that *all* of Modern Greek written culture is an attempt to ensure the nation's status as the "custodian of Ancient Greek heritage" by grasping at an untenable purity. And while the fourteen works I have translated do indeed represent a wide range of responses to migration and portrayals thereof, and while some of them do indeed allude to Greece's glorified classical past, all of them take place in contemporary Athens, and not ancient Athens. My attempt at foreignizing is an attempt to show that the Greek language is, in fact, one of the many global languages in which contemporary authors are responding to migration, whether those authors are migrants or not and whether those authors consider migration a unique, local phenomenon, or a global phenomenon, or both. Even though Greekness is a point of contention in more than one story, and a point of contention for

me as a translator, to downplay Greekness, a potentially "foreign" concept outside of Greece but a central focus of these narratives, would be to do a disservice to the original texts themselves.

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PART ONE

Stories from *We Are All Immigrants*

edited by Misel Fais

2007

"Chalk Dust"

by Christos Kithreotis

Have you ever watched a porno where it's like a role-play fantasy and the girl has on a tight-ass nurse's uniform with the fake tits sticking out? Alright, well, these nurses were nothing like that. They were pathetic. The first one they sent in was ancient. Probably around sixty. She couldn't even get the IV in. She was twisting and turning the needle, poking and prodding all over the place. No luck though. She turned Michalis's arm into a pasta strainer. This woman could not find a vein to save her life. So I made a suggestion: "We'd be better off getting a junkie to do the job. Those guys are like mad scientists. They could find a vein in your fingertip. I'll just go down to Omonia and bring back the first person I see shooting up." She gave me a weird look and left without saying anything. I probably offended her. Whatever, though. She never did manage to get the needle in. Anyway, they sent in a younger nurse after a while. This one was short, basically a cripple. Pimples, glasses, braces on her teeth. Tragic. Everything about her seemed wrong. We all looked at each other like: "No way. There has to be at least one hot nurse in here somewhere." I will say that the short one did manage to do the injections properly. And it couldn't have been easy for her after the old one almost butchered him. We asked if there was a doctor coming or if the place was going out of business. She muttered something, as if she was performing an exorcism, and disappeared.

The doctor did finally show up around midnight holding some papers. Probably test results. "Fancy seeing you here, Doc" we said. "You were in the neighborhood?" He shot us the most murderous glance as he approached the bed. And he kept looking back at us angrily while he went over the test results. Then he gestured to us to keep quiet. He said it was all our fault. He

said that scum like us shouldn't be allowed to just roam the streets. But we kept our cool. In fact, we were perfect gentlemen. We ignored it and asked about Michalis. All he said, though, was that someone would be coming in to check his oxygen levels. Then he left the room, cursing his luck. And ours, of course. I suspected he was a vaseline.

Before long the nurse was back to adjust his oxygen flow. It was the really old nurse from before. She materialized next to Michalis suddenly and silently, like the grim reaper. We all froze. Her hands were shaking. She gazed at the oxygen tank with terror in her eyes, like she was staring down a nuclear reactor. Total hesitation. "That's it," I declared. "He's as good as dead. She's gonna lose him." She could barely even move her arms. We closed our eyes and waited for the shit to hit the fan. By the time we opened them again she was already gone. Vanished. Without making a sound, exactly the way she came in. Miraculously, everything else was still in its place.

At around three I went down to the cafeteria to get some food. I was barely keeping it together. With all the beat downs and the getting chased around town I hadn't eaten anything since that morning. So I grabbed my sandwich and plopped down on the front steps of the hospital. Just to get some air. Two minutes later Michalis's parents walked right by me. They were so beside themselves that they didn't even notice me sitting there. Dang, Michalis. How could this be happening to you? I thought. Fucking cops. It's their fault. It's always their fault. With their barricades and shit. It's like come on, guys. And we were chill today. That's the thing. We had the girls with us and they still sent in the goddamn riot squad. So, obviously, as soon as our guys up front saw the barricades they went berserk and started hurling rocks, throwing cinderblocks. Anything they could get their hands on. All sorts of shit went flying in every possible direction.

The girls panicked and ran into the cafés for cover. This went on for a good half hour until three different SWAT teams showed up and started spraying tear gas. We had to scatter. Michalis and I tried to duck into the side streets, along with about twenty other kids, including the mastermind of the entire escape: Apostolis. Fucking burnout. He claimed to know the neighborhood. He kept going on about some girl he used to fuck who lives nearby. We should have known better than to trust that burned out piece of shit. He had us going for twenty whole minutes. "This is the way, guys. Oh, wait, wait. Actually...no, it's a right turn. Yeah, 'cause on the left is the pool hall..." Eventually he was forced to face the facts. "You guys," he said. "I actually have no fucking idea where we are." Then, just as we're starting to rip into him, we see four kids with the shittiest, ugliest faces turn the corner and start coming towards us. They all had red scarves on. The second they spotted us grinning at them from across the street they did a one-eighty and took off running. They always say anchovies can really run and it's the truth. Like lightning bolts. What those pussies lack in just about everything else they make up for in speed. All of them except for these four, though. They were amateurs. At one point I don't know what happened—maybe one of them stumbled and brought the rest of the pack down with him? But they all ended up on the ground. We didn't have to lift a finger. We had them surrounded within seconds and that's when the party really got going. "Aww, shit! What's the fucking plan, boys? Only one way out now. Ha ha! In a body bag!" That sort of thing. These little dudes straight up shat themselves. One of them even started crying. "Actually, fuck it" I said. "These kids don't matter. Let's get out of here...Just take their scarves." That's when one of the four little anchovies tried to play it tough. He got up and proclaimed: "You're not taking shit, hanoumi! We're gonna fuck you up!" How rude, am I right? He did calm down after a few punches, though. Eventually we let them go. But not before taking their scarves and their shirts, too. By that point I was already feeling pretty

bummed because I had been getting text after text about how gnarly it was getting at the stadium. Meanwhile there we were somewhere in Galatsi slapping around these snot-nosed kids. One of whom, by the way, decides out of nowhere to reach for Michalis's keychain and make a run for it. So now we're at it again. We chased them onto Veïkou. Finally, a street we recognized. But that's when they started to slow their pace a little bit. What are these clowns even doing? I thought. Do they just have a deathwish all of a sudden? No, no deathwish. We looked up and saw a sea of red. They had led us right to the tail end of the big anchovy march. We looked at each other, terrified. It was the first time I had ever seen fear in Michalis's eyes. In an instant we were surrounded by a red phalanx of retards licking their lips. For about a minute nothing happened. They were counting. That's what anchovies do. They count. And if they have you outnumbered by at least four-to-one, they attack. If it's three-to-one, they run. In this case, however, it was ten-to-one. And that's a conservative estimate. The odds were handsomely in their favor. There was no saving us now. I closed my eyes and imagined I had wings.

Then I ran. And while I ran I thought about Michalis. The last I saw of him he was bolting down a narrow alleyway with Katerina. But she couldn't keep up. "We'll lose them in the side streets," he shouted. But there must have been twenty anchovies right behind them. No way they're making it out, I thought. I kept running. With my eyes closed. Why keep them open? Your legs can take you anywhere you need to go. Your legs alone. There's only one rule when it comes to making a run for it: what's in front of you is never worse than what's behind you. So there's no real reason to open your eyes. You just go. It's always better up ahead. As long as you avoid the big stuff. Poles, trees, cars. That sort of thing. And you never look back. Never. You don't want to give them anything. I turned my head for one second and immediately regretted it. One of

those fuckheads had a camera. He was filming the whole thing. What a goddamn nightmare. Tomorrow my ass will be plastered all over the internet. They'll have to pay for this.

As soon as we were safe I called Michalis to find out what happened. He wasn't picking up. Not good. I called Katerina. "Where are you guys?" she asked me. "Have you heard from Michalis?" "Why would *we* hear from *him*? Weren't the two of you together?" "We got separated. Like ten of them were chasing us and I ran into a café by myself. The owner wasn't letting any guys in, just girls. Call me if you hear anything, okay? I'm losing it." We didn't know what to do. Kostakis suggested we just go to the stadium as planned. He said that if Michalis managed to break free he would most likely go there. Everyone else agreed. And, of course, none of them wanted to miss the game. But I could tell that something was up. Not because Michalis didn't have what it takes. He did. But it seemed impossible for anyone to get out of this one. All by himself? In the heart of Anchovyland? Doubtful. As we made our way to the stadium I kept calling him and calling him. And right as I was about to give up, I got a voice on the other line." Michalis! What happened? Where are you?" "I'm not Michalis, sir. But I can tell you where he is. Could you please just tell me who you are first?" "Who am *I?* Who the fuck are you?" At this point my head is throbbing and I'm screaming louder than if Lymbe had just buried the ball in the back of the net. "He's in the hospital, sir. I'm a doctor. He was brought in with severe injuries."

That's how it happened. But you knew that already. You're not here for the play-by-play. I know what you want. And I can help you out. Even though you call us ignorant. All of you do. Even the blown-out bimbos on the morning shows call us that. "Ignorant." It's cool, though. I have my own reasons for talking to you. But let's get one thing straight right now: no names. Not one

name. 'Cause what's the point, right? Plus it's not my style. There's a line you just don't cross. There are rules. And I'm already breaking most of them. If you're smart you'll be able to fill in the blanks. And I think you are smart. Which is why I singled you out. But, like I said over the phone, I have a condition. I don't like answering questions. And the only thing you journalists do is ask questions. So, instead, I want to say what I want to say exactly how I want to say it. It's up to you whether you want to stay and listen. If not, it's been real. Ha! Of course you're staying. You're not stupid.

Anyway, I was the only person in the club who knew the truth about Michalis. If anyone else had found out they would have jumped him. Not that they were racists or anything. I used to talk shit about them, too. Does that make me a racist? No way. My dad is super left-wing. Old school. But I always wondered what anyone could possibly like about them. Think about it: these are people who left that whorehouse of a country to come down here and breathe our air, drink our water, eat our bread, work our jobs, blow up our spots, drive our cars, and fuck our women. You're probably wondering how Michalis and I became friends in the first place, right? That's another crazy story. Don't worry. I'll get to that.

So, like I said, everyone in the firm had it in for them. It is what it is. On a given day if we were on the streets and we couldn't find any anchovies we'd start hunting down Albanians. As a matter of fact, most Albanians *are* anchovies. "Not by chance," as Akis used to say. Akis was hell-bent on killing an Albanian. When he was little one of the employees at his family's store gave his dad a serious beating. He dragged him out to the street and started stomping on his neck. Really embarrassing stuff. Akis was sick of all of them. Albanians, Pakistanis, Indians, blacks, beige, purple, shit-brown. All of them. It didn't matter. He wanted revenge. But he wasn't the only one. Most of us were just little kids when the Albanians killed Filippos. It was ten years ago

but I still remember it like it was yesterday. I remember how for two days the who neighborhood from Patision to the Podoniftis was dead silent. No one talked. It was like everyone who lived here had lost a relative, even people who had never known him. I myself had only seen him once or twice at the basketball courts by the river. But he was a legend. Especially for us kids. He was the man. Untouchable. Girls would cream their pants when he walked by. They flocked to the courts to watch him play. But that was all until he came across some asshole Albanian with a knife one night in Agious. Apparently there was some sort of an altercation. He held on for just one night in the hospital and the next morning we woke up and it was like Holy Friday in Patisia. You could hear someone crying on every corner. And all of us young kids were huddled together in the plateias talking about a vendetta. A vendetta against Albanians. They closed the schools, too, so that everyone could go to the funeral. I didn't go, though. The whole situation didn't sit well with me. I was just a baby, you know? But I could still see right through them. The whole neighborhood was tagged with "Filippos Lives." Whatever that meant. It was spray-painted on every wall. I even saw it scratched onto a couple of trucks. And it wasn't his friends and family doing it. Just random people who had no idea who he was. People who would have turned up at the funeral and asked "which one is the dead kid?" since the entire procession looked like the walking dead. That's why I stayed home. But the party didn't stop on the day of the funeral. Oh no. You'd ask any idiot in the neighborhood what he was up to and he'd put on this tough-guy face and start with the bullshitting: "Mitsos and I went down to Agious last night just to scope it out but we ended up with a couple of kills under our belts." I shit you not. All of these losers trying to establish themselves. In Filippos's honor, of course. One guy would claim two kills, the next guy five, then another guy ten. Ten dead Albanians. That's what they needed to build themselves up. Then some other assholes would try and make their stories more believable so

they lowered the body count to one. They all made me sick to my stomach. But the vendetta was real. Every last one of us had agreed. Revenge. The years went by and the details were long forgotten, but something stuck with us. Even my mom now, whenever she goes off on the Albanians, never fails to mention Filippos. "They broke into Soula's apartment on the second floor again. They're the worst. And I can never forget what they did to that little boy." And she is always prepared for my dad's rebuttal: "How can you be sure they were Albanian? Aren't there Greek burglars?" "How come the building next door has never been burglarized? You know, the one with the Albanian super? Pretty soon we'll be looking for an Albanian *connection* just to keep us safe."

Obviously you can understand how defeated I felt when I found out the truth about Michalis. I had known him for a whole year and hadn't picked up on a goddamn thing. This might sound weird but he really didn't look Albanian, man. And his Greek was perfect. Better than mine. His face, too. Flawless. He had his little quirks, of course. "That's just Michalis," we used to say. "He's an enigma." One second he'd be totally zen and the next he'd get this look in his eye and he'd be ready to turn the whole world upside-down. That's how he was during big brawls against rival crews. He never hesitated. Wherever there was danger he'd dive in head-first. And he always sacrificed himself for others. Always. That's how I met him, actually. I was in Zefiri and he came out of nowhere and saved my ass. Now that I think about it, there was one small detail about that day that should have tipped me off: the Albanian weed. Okay, let me backtrack a little. I used to buy weed from a gypsy in Zefiri. I couldn't tell you his name. I never asked. It barely occurred to me that gypsies even have names. Anyway, I had my hook-up and I had no intention of taking my business elsewhere. He wasn't perfect. Not by any means, but he never ripped me

off. And he treated me like royalty. Whenever I went to see him it was always "Come on in, Nikolas. How've you been, Nikolas? What can I get you, Nikolas? My treat, Nikolas. Always a pleasure, Nikolas." Then one day I went to Zefiri to see him and his house was gone. There was nothing there. Just a vacant lot. I lost my shit. I'm standing there like "What the fuck? This can't be real. No way. I gotta quit the weed, man. I'm killing too many brain cells." I stood there like an asshole for god knows how long until I heard a voice out of nowhere. "Unbelievable, right? Don't just stand there though, 'cause they'll make you disappear, too." I turn my head and see a tall blond kid around my age. "Wait, who are you?" I ask, sort of scared shitless. At first I thought he was a narc and I'm not ashamed to admit it. He just had that look. "What difference does it make who I am, dude? Let's get out of here." He grabbed me by the arm and took me through the side streets. His movements were delicate, friendly. Otherwise I would have expected a fight. I didn't ask where we were going. The whole situation was aggravating, but it still felt like I was being led to safety. All the houses we passed were boarded up. The cars had all had their windows smashed. Dumpsters had been flipped over. "What happened?" I asked him. "You don't know? The cops raided the place two days ago. 'Operation Clean Sweep.' They sent in an elite squad. Elite my ass. The gypsies were all cracking up. It was around noon and the squad rolled through town like they were there to give parking tickets or something. They were chill! Probably expected the gypsies to welcome them in with clarinets and belly dancers and shit. But as soon as they got out of the van it was a hailstorm of bullets. The gypsies were blasting them from every direction. Even the little gypsy kids were firing shotguns from inside their living rooms. All out war. The cops packed it up and got out of there as fast as they could. You'll never see the pigs here again. At least not the 'elite' ones." I stood there with my mind blown. "Dang. What rock was I living under? And what happened to my guy?" "They say he was

the one that tipped off the cops. I find that hard to believe, though. Probably just an excuse to get rid of him. They had wanted him out of the picture for a long time. I have no idea why, though. Sometimes it's better not to know, right? Anyway, they burned his house down." We were walking more briskly now. Every new piece of information made me even more stressed out. And the streets smelled like tar. Or shit. Or maybe it was tar *and* shit. "Where is he now?" I dared to ask. But the blond kid kept on walking as if he hadn't heard me. Then he cleared his throat and, without turning to look at me, said: "He isn't." That was his answer. He isn't. Okay.

We ended up at this house in the middle of nowhere, with nothing much around it. He knocked on the door three times, rhythmically. Rrrat-tat-tat! A fat gypsy woman with beads around her neck and a cigarette dangling from lips opened the door. "Michalis! Welcome back!" she said. But she wasn't looking at him. She was looking at me. Staring me down. She could tell I was out of my element. Then she led us to what should have been the living room but felt more like a waiting room. After a few minutes a massive gypsy guy came in. Michalis introduced us and announced that I would be buying from him exclusively from now on. "Better take good care of this guy," he added. "This is my boy right here." I did a double take. I wasn't going to let anyone take me for a ride, so I asked the gypsy to quote me a price. It was dirt cheap. "Is this Albanian?" I asked him. "Yes," he told me. "But it's of the highest quality." At that point I knew it was a scam. People all over Europe jump through hoops to get their hands on Greek weed. And I'm standing there, two hours away from Kalamata, about to spend money on Albanian? "No, thanks," I told him. "I don't smoke Albanian." "Not a problem," said the gypsy. "I'll be here if you change your mind." So we left. Michalis let me have it. The whole way back he kept going on about how I didn't know shit and how I had embarrassed him. "Everyone in Athens smokes

Albanian weed, man. Do you really think there's a single gypsy out there selling Greek?" I was pissed. "My guy," I insisted, "only sold me weed from Kalamata." He looked at me like I was from outer space. "Oh. Right. I forgot about the other Kalamata. The one in Albania."

That was Michalis. He always made real life feel like a movie. Within days we became best friends. And he started coming to games with us not long after that. At first the rest of the crew gave him weird looks. Makes sense, though. He was the new guy. But after a few months every last one of them admitted he was the shit. Especially the younger kids. They worshipped him. He was a god to them, or maybe even more than that. His feats were legendary. We're talking about the guy who slashed the ΠΑΟΚ fanclub's bus tires. The guy who set fire to the waterfront offices of ΟΣΦΠ in Pasalimani and threw every anchovy that tried to stop him off the dock. The guy who smoked an entire joint in front of the Nea Filadelfia Police Station just to prove that cops aren't shit. As if we didn't know that already. Not to mention that he broke into the anchovy clubhouse in Kallithea *by himself* to steal back the flag those douchebags had taken from Yorgakis Mavros. Okay, Yorgakis Mavros is a sixteen-year-old fucktard who dropped out of school to spend every waking hour of his life in our clubhouse. One Sunday there was an away game in Nea Smirni and Yorgakis brought the club's flag along with him. But he didn't ask permission from any of us. Actually, he did ask Apostolis. So, basically no one. And the result? Exactly what you'd expect. Five anchovies stop him on the street and calmly remove his scarf, his sneakers, his phone, and the flag. He showed up to the stadium barefoot. Probably the smoothest, easiest mugging of all time. The next day the anchovies posted a recap of the whole incident online, complete with photographic evidence. They were writing poems and songs about it in the comments while we sat in our clubhouse bemoaning our fate. Yorgakis was beside

himself. No one blamed him for what happened, though. He was an idiot, to be sure, but whenever Apostolis gets involved in anything you can't be angry at anyone else. The bottom line: our flag was currently hanging in an anchovy clubhouse in Kallithea and we could only look at a picture of it or, perhaps, wait for the next game and watch the anchovies set fire to it before our very eyes. Going down to Kallithea to get it back was out of the question. We'd be sitting ducks. So we decided to wait it out and revisit the situation in due time. We locked up the clubhouse and called it a day. That very night Michalis stole it back. Kamikaze-style. Fearless. You know the story. Most of your colleagues seem to think that he paid the ultimate price for what he did that night. They're chasing leads in Kallithea as we speak. We did warn him about that crew. We always warned him about them. We told him he was playing with fire. He made enemies all over the place and half of Gate 7 was out to get him. "Who cares," he used to say. "At least I'll go out in style." He really was the man. You know, you'd assume that a guy like that, over six feet tall and ripped, would be a total player. But Katerina had him by the balls. We had all been there, of course, but Michalis was next-level. He was convinced that he had taken her virginity, even though before he met her she was like a twenty-four-hour gas station: always open for business. He wouldn't hear any of it. Of course he knew. He knew everything. He just preferred to live in denial. At the time I thought "Dang. Michalis really is pussy-whipped." Not in a million years would I have thought...I mean, being whipped doesn't make you Albanian. Right? Back then we used to walk around together most nights telling stories. And he never talked about his folks even though he still lived with them. Not a word. Still, I couldn't have pieced it together at the time, not before what happened on Mount Parnitha.

It was the craziest night of my life. And I've seen some crazy shit. Anyway, last summer we had this ritual. We had discovered a secret spot, a little wooded area right at the foothills of Parnitha. We went there every night. We would get there late, park our motorcycles, and smoke joints for hours under the pine trees. Just hanging out in nature with the whole city laid out before us. No cops, no narcs, no nothing. One night, it must have been in September, the rest of the crew bailed for whatever reason so Michalis and I decided to just go by ourselves. It was drizzling. We chilled under a huge pine tree, chain-smoking cigarettes, fidgeting with pine needles, and smelling the wet soil. Michalis complained to me about work, about how exhausting his construction jobs were. He told me he wanted to do something different. What else was there for him, though? That's what he got paid to do, so he figured it was better to keep at it than quit. Job security. But how secure are construction jobs, really? Then again, he had enough money to buy food and cigarettes so it wasn't all bad. I complained to him about conscription, about how I hadn't found a way out and how the army would be right there waiting to snatch me up after graduation. I told him how school was so boring and how I never went to class and how my parents always yelled at me for wasting their tuition money. We didn't say much more to each other that night. We mostly just sat there quietly passing the time. But right as we're getting ready to leave Michalis suddenly sits back down and pulls me down with him. I assumed it had something to do with the cops. "Don't look. Behind you is something you really shouldn't see." I did the exact opposite. About ten yards away there were two guys carrying a bag and a third one holding a shovel. I was almost certain that one of them saw me. My blood turned to ice. "What is happening?" I whispered. Michalis put his whole hand over my mouth and for ten minutes we barely breathed as the sound of the shovel digging through fresh dirt assaulted our eardrums. The three of them exchanged a few sparse words in a foreign language. Albanians, I thought. At one

point their voices grew louder, angrier. Obviously I didn't dare turn my head. Michalis had a better view of them. He was lying down against the trunk of the pine tree facing up towards the sky. And I stared at that trunk. I memorized the pattern on the thick bark. I still remember those deep wooden grooves, each and every one of them. I gazed at the trunk in awe, with total reverence, thinking that if the Albanians kill us we won't really die but, instead, we'll become one with the tree and stay there forever, invisible. Then I heard the sound of feet dragging through the dirt and, unfortunately, getting closer and closer until I could feel three shadows on my back. I couldn't take it anymore so I turned to look at them. They looked enormous from down there where I was. I tried to make out their faces but it was too dark. The night was thick as mud. I gave Michalis a shove but he didn't respond, didn't so much as blink. His mind was made up, clearly. He had decided to gaze at the heavens until the moment of his inevitable ascent. And that moment was fast approaching. The three scumfucks were deep in conversation now. Animated, making wild gestures, and looking right at us. But they never did address us directly. Not once, as if we were irrelevant to the whole situation. This was no way to die, I thought. We should fight to the end. Goddamn it, though. They were huge. Plus, they had guns. Plus, Michalis was in a coma. The guy in the middle, who seemed to be running the show, said something to the guy with the shovel, who, in turn, pulled something out of his pocket. Something other than a billfold. And that's when it happened. Michalis jumped out of the haze and started shouting gibberish. "Guess that's that," I figured. "No worries, Michalis, we'll see you in forty days for the memorial." What happened next is sort of a blur. I remember the three guys stopping dead in their tracks and just looking at each other, dumbstruck. I remember Michalis approaching them and grabbing one of them by the arm, still speaking gibberish. Then the middle guy said something and they all started laughing. It was the most bizarre laugh I've ever heard in my life.

It was a deciding laugh. But I couldn't tell what had been decided. I began to understand when Michalis started laughing along with them and when all of them were speaking gibberish even though their gibberish wasn't really gibberish anymore but, I could have sworn, Albanian. The boss hugged Michalis and started playfully running his fingers through his hair. They couldn't stop laughing. I thought about what my mom had said. About having an Albanian connection to keep you safe. "And to keep you alive," I might have added. Before long they were singing at the top of their lungs in their language and waving their hands in the air. Forcefully, as if they were trying to bitch-slap the steadily pouring rain. When the love fest was over and the mystery men had finally departed, Michalis came and sat right back down next to me. Without a word. As if nothing was wrong. He went to light a cigarette, but I stopped him. We had smoked enough. I started getting ready to leave but he wouldn't budge. He stayed on the ground with an unlit cigarette in his hand. Eventually he came around. He stood up and dusted off his pants. Then we left. Neither of us spoke on the way back. When I dropped him off at his house he got off the bike and said sorry and goodnight. That's it. I didn't say anything.

To anyone. I didn't say anything to anyone. We avoided each other for a while. Obviously. My stomach churned whenever I would look at him. But I wasn't a snitch. The gang would have destroyed him. I watched him hanging around the club playing it cool and I felt bad for him. Motherfucker I could say just one word and you'd be dead. And you know it. But I didn't. And I wouldn't. Not that it didn't bother me. For two whole months we didn't speak. And that whole time I kept saying to myself: "What difference does it make? Does it change anything? Okay, Michalis is Albanian. Has anything actually changed?" Maybe it didn't change a thing. He could have told me, though. He kept it going for way too long. And with *me.* Not with Kostakis. Not

with Yorgakis. With me. We'd been best friends for years. We'd eaten so much shit together. He could have just told me and I could have kept it a secret. But then I tried to see it from his perspective. You can't just come out and say you're Albanian. You can't just drop a bomb like that. In the clubhouse all I did was watch him. All day, every day. I watched him roll up every afternoon like clockwork. I watched him hanging out and talking to people. I even caught him giving me the side-eye a couple of times. I saw that frightened look in his eyes. I studied his movements. His comings and goings. Everything about him. I tried to take it all in. Dude must be going through it, I thought. He's putting on the performance of a lifetime. He's given nothing away. Well, actually, he *had* given something away. But I was the only witness. I kept second-guessing myself. Was I in the wrong? I was. You should always give people the benefit of the doubt, I thought. Unless you're a dick. And I wasn't a dick. Also, wasn't AEK started by immigrants? It was immigrants who founded the team. Refugees. Not anchovy-vaseline pretty boys. That's just how it is. Actually it was the Patriarch who said it best: "AEK is not a team. AEK is an idea." An idea. A concept. And the anchovies know that about us. That's why they shout "Pussies! From Turkey! Fuck you fucking refugee!" It's not just a random chant. It's the *concept* that sets us apart from the shitheads and the pigs. I kept thinking about that concept but I still stayed away from Michalis. I kept observing him from a distance. Day in day out. Every night at around nine Katerina would show up at the clubhouse. They were always affectionate towards each other. I saw them looking at each other and wondered if she knew, if he'd talked to her. He had to have talked to her. Anyway, that was two whole months of my life. Until one day I woke up and I wasn't angry anymore. I'm serious. All of a sudden I realized how ridiculous it was for me to have just stopped calling Michalis to ask how he was. Listen to me very carefully when I say this. I hadn't necessarily *forgiven* him. But, for some reason, I wasn't angry. I didn't

start talking to him again, though. Not until the game against Skodra. A "friendly match" against the Albanians. Who was the fucking genius who set that one up? Am I right? They branded it as a move towards cementing Greco-Albanian relations. We called it a war. The whole week leading up to the game we were getting ready for battle. I kept a close eye on Michalis until game day. The "contest" was rigged: a draw. But we weren't really paying attention. Our mission transcended sports. We were there to cement Greco-Albanian relations. The party really got going at halftime. We burned the Albanian flag, they burned the Greek flag. And the yellow-and-black. Fuckers. Michalis was in it to win it. Singing, cursing. And, after the game, bashing in heads. He cleaned up! He was chasing whole crews by himself. The rest of us were sort of intimidated by them. And we would have gotten our asses handed to us if it wasn't for Michalis. And for the cops, of course, who left us alone and went after the Albanians. But something else happened at that game, too. Something that paved the way for Michalis and me to become friends again. Right before the end our guys tied it and we all went apeshit in the stands. I grabbed an Albanian flag from Kostakis and handed it to Michalis. Then I handed him a lighter. I'll never forget the look on his face. He was at a loss. He looked first at the flag, then at me, then at the flag again. I felt like shit. Just as I'm about to take it back, the fucking ref blows his whistle and awards a bullshit penalty to the Albanians. All hell breaks loose. Kostakis grabs the flag out of Michalis's hands and rips it to shreds, then scales the fence and sets fire to whatever was left of it. Michalis was still standing there frozen holding the lighter. That's how it ended.

The next day I called him and apologized about the flag. We met up at a café near his house at around five in the afternoon. We ended up closing the place down. He told me everything. And in the days that followed I learned even more. How they moved here from Albania when

Michalis was twelve. How his parents worked all kinds of jobs to get by. How they struggled. One story in particular from that era really stuck with me, though. We he was really young Michalis played for a local soccer team. I knew that much from before, actually. He barely had any pubes on his nutsack but they put him on the roster anyway. That's how talented he was. Then, two years into his stint, the team got promoted to the fourth tier. They would be competing on a national level. But before Michalis had a chance to celebrate the promotion, they informed him that foreign nationals can't compete in the upper tiers. He would have to try out for a different team in the local league. A crock of shit if you ask me. Michalis was livid. He blamed the Greeks and he blamed the Albanians. And when his family moved up here to Patisia where nobody knew them, he made a decision. He was eighteen and he spoke Greek. He was able to blend in. "I never looked back. I was done with everyone who knew me from before. And I was done with goddamn Albania." I remember we were sitting in his room one day and looking through an old photo album. He had thrown away all the old photos from Albania. What can you say to that? All I did was ask him about a piece of chalk that I noticed stashed away in a drawer. "Oh, right. That." It was wrapped up in a tiny plastic bag. The kind of bag that a tailor would keep loose buttons in. "That's the last thing I have left from Albania. I grabbed it on my way home from school on the last day before we moved here." He stared at it for a second before he tossed it out the window. That was the same day I met his father, who couldn't stomach the fact that his son was ashamed of his heritage. Ashamed of his country. Michalis corrected him: "I'm not ashamed. I'm just not Albanian." I could see where his dad was coming from, honestly. It was an extreme rejection. But Michalis had a point, too. He was nothing like the other Albanian kids his age who wasted every second of every day sitting around the cafés reeking of beer and mud. Then again, he did spend most of his time shooting the shit with us dirtbags so I guess you

could make the argument that he wasn't so different from them after all. At the time, though, I didn't see it like that. I understood why didn't want to play in the local leagues. And I told his dad as much but my take on the situation wasn't so warmly received. Then Katerina showed up. She already knew. Of course she did. The three of us stayed there until daybreak with Michalis's dad, who kept pouring us tsipouro. I left at dawn. Just as I was about to jump on my bike I saw the piece of chalk on the sidewalk. It was still in the bag, still in one piece. For no real reason I bent down and put it in my pocket.

We killed Michalis. That's not a metaphor. It was us. Again, you won't be getting a name from me. But it was us. Everyone said that it was a case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. No. *We* were the wrong place and *we* were the wrong time. And goddamn it the doctor was even celebrating at one point. Michalis was going to pull through, he said. He's a fighter, a stallion. They were just a little worried about some internal inflammation. That's why they kept him in the coma. But when we showed up the next morning his parents were in the waiting room freaking out, preparing for the worst. I could hear his mom whisper that he was deteriorating. He was burning up. He had developed a fever overnight. I can't even remember how long we stood there staring at the locked door and trying to listen in. But all we could hear was a loud whirr. It almost sounded like waves crashing down. Then, at around noon, the door opened. The waves came and swallowed us up. First we saw the nurses crying and scrambling to get out. Then the doctor emerged, cold and silent. Just like that.

What do I remember most about Michalis? I remember scenes, episodes. That's how the past feels to me. Like a TV show. The episodes I've already described to you are the most important

ones. But you're still dying to find out who did it, aren't you? Let me just say what I want to say first, okay? Alright. So, right before he passed we spent every afternoon together. Usually just the two of us, but Katerina tagged along sometimes. She really was the best. Actually I just found out that she had spent the first twelve years of her life in Germany. In Munich, as a matter of fact. Maybe that was part of the appeal. I don't know. Anyway, all these little details are significant, to be sure, but they never really stick with me. All those hours we spent together, all those conversations. They don't quite fit inside my brain. And I know that as the years go by the only thing I'll have to hold onto is the action shots. I keep coming back to that flag, the flag that the anchovies stole from Yorgakis. Most people think it was the flag. They think that the anchovies wanted payback. I'm sure that's what you believe, too. That's what you want to hear. Fuck that noise, I say. The only thing that matters to me is the excitement I felt when Michalis woke me up at four in the morning and told me to meet him at the park next to my house. I bolted out the door, feeling giddy. I can still hear his voice. I can still hear him saying "I couldn't sleep, man. I couldn't sleep knowing that the flag was where it was, you know? I couldn't bear the thought. My brain literally rejected it. By two o'clock my mind was made up and I got on my bike. I made it to Kallithea in no time at all. I kept telling myself that I was just there to scope it out, to see what I could possibly do, and if there was no chance, I would bail. But deep down I knew there was no turning back. The lights were on in the clubhouse and I could hear voices coming from inside. I choked. But I thought about Yorgakis and that gave me the strength. The fucking door was unlocked! So I crossed myself and went in. Turned out there was not much to see in there. Just three dudes. I expected an army and got three little dudes. They lost their shit when they saw me. The first idiot went down with a single punch and I had the second one in a headlock. The third guy was a piece of shit with a ponytail. He took off running. So I grabbed the

flag, smashed up whatever I could, and got the hell out of there without a scratch. Sweet and simple. They didn't even chase me." He was flushed. Bright red. His face was puffy and his throat was about to close up from the intensity of the moment. And the paranoia. For a second there I thought the whole thing was a dream. Michalis showed me the flag and we held each other and sang together like maniacs in the dead of night. It was almost morning and there we were, two idiots locked in an embrace. Dancing together wrapped up in the thick fog. Waving a yellow-and-black flag in a tiny park making up songs about fucking anchovies who always lose in the end. "Just think," I said. "Just think how stoked Yorgakis is going to be tomorrow." "Fuck tomorrow, man! Call him now!" Half an hour later he was there. He almost had a seizure when he saw the flag. He yanked it away from us and started doing jumps off a bench and screaming. "Chill, chill, chill," Michalis said. "Didn't we tell you? We told you we'd get it back. Anchovies aren't shit!" Yorgakis, though, could not chill. He kept kissing the flag, hugging Michalis and shouting "Fuck everyone! Seriously! It's my time now, fuckers!" Then he sat down on the bench and broke down crying. Michalis sat down next to him and held his head. The little guy was trying to tell us something, trying to get something out. But his voice was breaking. Eventually he was on the ground, rolling himself into a ball. He finally said it: "Those three letters send chills down my spine whenever I see them." And he pointed to the embroidery on the flag. AEK. "We feel the same way, Yorgakis. Calm down." We felt the same way.

I want to remember Michalis like that. Not like how everyone else remembers him. In the casket, with his mother on one side sobbing hysterically and a bunch of our guys on the other side chanting as if they were in the goddamn bleachers. With microphones and cameras in his face, wreaths all around him, and a bunch of random people standing there who turned up just to see a

show. Alright, I thought. He's a hero. A hero wrapped in the yellow-and-black. A real Prime Minister. Karamanlis and Berisha rolled into one. Your fucking colleagues were like vultures that day. They smelled a fresh kill and swooped right in. A dead Albanian? And a hooligan too? It was like Christmas came early for you guys. Not to mention that it happened on the best possible day: October 28th. Parades and politicians get boring year after year, right? Why not broadcast a *real* procession at a *real* funeral. I didn't go to the funeral with the rest of the club. I couldn't stand their faces. I knew the truth. I knew that it was us who killed him. No names, remember? No names. It's totally irrelevant. It could have been any one of us, or it could have been all of us together. It really could have been. It could even have been you. Yep. It definitely could have been you, man. No, I'm not fucking with you. The crux of the matter is that I went to the service by myself. I didn't give a fuck what was going on. I was alone. I was alone with Michalis. Standing there wedged between his family and the idiots. In the same place I would have been standing had he lived. And as they started to lower the casket and his mom started wailing and the fuckheads started throwing scarves and the randoms started throwing flowers the only thing I thought to throw was the chalk. I had been holding onto it the whole time, gripping it with so much force that it turned to dust. So I threw the dust.

Oh, right, right. I almost forgot. Why else would you be here? Like I said, we killed Michalis. Whoa, whoa, whoa. Slow down, man. I told you. It's not a figure of speech. It was us. AEK fans. I didn't believe either when Akis told me the night before the funeral. I'm serious. Remember how I mentioned that before we got separated that morning we were chasing these four baby anchovies? Yeah, the ones whose red scarves and shirts we stole. Well, at some point after we split up Michalis was kicking the shit out of someone or other. But he still had one of their red scarves on. And three braindead kids from an AEK crew out in the country mistook him

for an anchovy. It's not hard to figure out what happened next. They stabbed him before he had a chance to explain himself. That's all I will say. Feel free to dig deeper. I don't care. It could have been any of us. Doesn't really make a difference. You still don't believe me, do you? That's how I felt too when I found out. I grabbed Akis by the arm and started dragging him down to the station. He wouldn't budge. "What the fuck for, Nikolas?" Huh? What for? Um...maybe because they killed Michalis? Maybe because *we* killed Michalis? And who the fuck were those guys, anyway? Fuck them! But all I could say was "Come on, Akis." "No point, Nikolas. There's no point." And we stood there like that until the rest of the crew showed up. They all knew. And they couldn't see the point either. Not even Yorgakis. "You're all fucking crazy," I remember screaming. "Fine, then. Just don't fucking dare show your faces at that funeral tomorrow, assholes."

They went, though. And so did I. Even though I never ratted anyone out. Unless this counts. Does it count? You don't seem so pleased, honestly. You probably think it was a waste of time talking to me. You're not wrong. But if you want a word of advice from an ignorant hooligan here it is: give up the chase, man. No one will tell you what you want to hear. And you have more than enough to go on now. Are you leaving? You're leaving. You're pissed. Bummer. And I had more good stories to tell you. Like about the time we chased those ΠΑΟΚ kids onto the highway. Or about the time we fought those vaselines on the boat to Crete. I guess you don't really care. Don't be angry, though. I told you from the start. No names.

"Butterfly Kicks"

by Yorgia Tatsi

Pissing his pants in the back of the classroom. That's what he was doing when I first met him. Pissing his pants. Sitting by himself at his desk. Staring at the board without actually seeing it. As if he wasn't really there. His arms were doing battle against something invisible. It looked like he was trying to catch flies, or maybe mosquitoes. His legs were fighting too. They would always jut out from under him randomly. As if a neurologist had tapped on his kneecaps with a rubber mallet. And he had this habit of digging his foot into the floor like he was trying to squash a cockroach. Or a scorpion. I can't say for sure but the terrified look on his face told me it was something dangerous. Then sometimes he appeared to be fast asleep but with his eyes wide open, his lower limbs splayed out, and his hands resting on the desk in front of him. We had no idea what color his hair was, since he never took off the black knit hat that he wore to school every day. We just assumed he was blond on account of his blue eyes and pale skin. And he never spoke. Not even when the teacher called on him. So we asked ourselves: "Is he slow? Is he deaf? Maybe he just thinks he's better than us..." At recess he stayed in the classroom. Every day when we went out to play he stayed in his seat. Eventually the boys decided that we should teach him a lesson.

The bell rang and we shuffled out. As soon as we saw the teacher make her way to the office, we shuffled back in and approached him. When I say "we," I mean Eleni, three boys, and myself. He noticed us, but never looked up. He sat there looking at his hands. As if his hands were a bigger deal than us. He inspected all ten fingernails one by one, then started clipping away with a little scissor, pretending to be totally unphased by our presence.

"Why don't you talk? Hey! Why won't you talk to us?" Eleni asked, half hurt and half angry.

No response. Timos threatened him with a punch-out. Still nothing. Eleni lunged at him. She got a hold of his hat. Then Timos started kicking it around like a soccer ball. Amidst our cackling he lifted his arms to cover his exposed scalp. He was not blond after all. In fact, his hair was dark and close-cropped. We waited for him to react. To stand up and start hitting us. Or maybe to reach for his hat. Or to scream. Or to start crying. Something. Anything that might prove to us that there was, in fact, a voice inside him. Nope. Nothing. He just sat there, frozen. He only moved a smidge when we literally pushed him. And that's when we noticed it. His seat was glistening and a little lake of pee had formed around his feet.

"You guys. He's peeing. He pissed himself. Okay. This kid is a retard," said Eleni. We laughed. It was a savage laugh. We were laughing with Eleni, of course, but mostly we were laughing at him. At the pants-pisser. Not that we didn't feel guilty. We enjoyed it, but it felt more like getting pinched or having your feet tickled and giggling uncontrollably. After that we gave up on him and left.

He started coming out at recess. But he always stood by himself behind the big tree, pretending to cut his nails with that little scissor. And he didn't stop pissing his pants either. He wet himself all the time, and for no apparent reason. Even during class. It was usually during language class. He would rock himself back and forth, rhythmically putting pressure on his stomach with his two clenched fists. Hard as he tried, he could never fight back the flow of urine. A stream always dribbled out and pooled onto the floor. And if the teacher didn't notice, we promptly alerted her with our cries: "Miss! Miss! He peed himself. He peed his pants!" He would turn beet red from the shame and put his head down, covering his face. She would do her best to

block our view of him with her body and protect him from our glances. Then she would scold us and make us work on some assignment. And when we had finally settled down, she would lift his head gently and give it a tender caress.

I was thirteen when I came to Greece with my mom. They held me back in school. I started learning the alphabet. But I was ashamed because I was so much older than the other kids. I didn't know the language so I never spoke. I never spoke to anyone. Not one word. I stopped talking at home too. I would leave the house without even saying mirupafshim. *I showed up to school prayers late on purpose, so I wouldn't have to stand near my classmates.* Me tallen*. They made faces, stuck their tongues out at me. It felt like a diss. I heard them and I didn't hear them. I could stop hearing with my thoughts. If I wanted to I could block out the sound completely, plug my ears without needing earplugs. I watched the other kids and I didn't watch them. I had my little scissor so I stopped seeing. I started imagining* gjarpërinjtë *and animals. Whip snakes, for example. They're snakes but they don't slither. Instead, they jump. Turtles, too. I studied the turtles in my imagination. I watched them crawl by and tuck their heads into their shells at the first sign of danger. Slowly, slowly they would poke their heads out, but only when it was safe again. When they got flipped upside-down it was brutal. They had to fight to get back to their natural position. When I saw that happen my heart hurt, as if it was my head on the ground and my legs in the air. I was like those turtles. I never calmed down until I saw them get back on their feet.* Macen. *I studied the movements of cats. The way they clean themselves. The way they move their feet. The way they sharpen their nails on tree trunks. The way they stretch, the way they bend. The way their earlobes flex and their eyes glimmer whenever they hear a sound. The way they arch their backs, the way their fur stands up. The way they patiently stalk birds and snakes.*

The way their grinning betrays their eager anticipation of the perfect moment when—as soon as their prey lets its guard down—they pounce! E vriste. *Instant death. Cats always play with their game. They relish the win. Paws cradling it. Fangs clenching it. Claws dragging it. Sometimes I would be the bird. And other times I would be the cat. I studied imaginary hedgehogs too. Before my father died, he brought home a dancing hedgehog for us. At dusk we went out to the garden, where we rhythmically banged on pots and pans with the rest of the kids from the neighborhood. At first the little guy rolled himself into a ball, his face hidden behind his spines. Then he let his body relax and resumed his natural posture, eyes glowing in the hazy darkness. When we started up again, he didn't run and hide. He danced. He danced crazy. Running back and forth, moving left to right. Curling up, opening up. Rolling around like a pinball.* Shtrihet. *Doing circles, flips, and jumps. Our beat got heavier and his dancing got faster, his moves even more intricate. I didn't know at the time that those jumps and flips weren't really choreography. They were movements of desperation, the breakdown of a tormented body. I lit a fire in the middle of the garden and we kept the beat going with our makeshift drums, prolonging his suffering. I'm not sure if he was dizzy from the smoke or drawn to the flame, or just blinded by it. At any rate, he ran straight in, drunk. His feet got singed and he retreated. But then he went right back in and right back out. Burned again. By the end he was just doing circles around the fire. The louder we banged, the faster he ran. This is the stuff I thought about and didn't listen. This is what I saw and didn't see. My movements were so closely modeled on these creatures that I became a hedgehog myself. And a cat. A* breshkë. *And a whip snake that jumped instead of slithering. I could feel the soles of my feet burning up. I could feel spines erupting from my skin. My back arched, my fur stood up. My legs were where my arms should be. I walked on my hands. I stood on my head. I came home and cried. That's when I finally spoke. "I'm a cat now. Let's get out of*

this place. I wanna go back. Nuk shikon qe u bëra iriq?*" My mom said nothing. She hugged me hard and gave me life again. My back straightened and the spines fell off. I turned back into a person.*

Eleni and I took it upon ourselves to track down his house. So we followed him after school one day and went to great lengths to evade detection. We stood behind buildings and waited inside vestibules. And where there were no houses, we crouched behind bushes and trees. He started down Mavromichali and then made a right onto Alamanas. His pace was brisk. And he hunched forward as he walked, paying close attention to every step he took. He never once looked back. Not even the slightest glance over his shoulder. We were confused. Alamanas is a road that cuts right through the vineyards of Pallini. And since the only houses on that street belong to the landowners, we started to wonder where he was actually going. He veered off the road at various points, venturing alternately towards the creek on the left or towards the vineyards on the right. We watched him grab fistfuls of dirt and rub them between his fingers. We saw him pull branches down from the bushes and chew. Meanwhile, he never took his eyes off the startled wild pigeons that flapped their wings to get away from him. He flapped along with them, frantically beating his arms against his sides. Naturally, this fueled our curiosity all the more. He never quite took off, of course, but he ran. He ran fast. So fast that we had to pick up considerable speed to avoid losing sight of him in the reeds. After a while he resurfaced on the road. When he came across two hugging pine trees, he darted up one of the two trunks like a squirrel and climbed to the highest branches. He picked off all the dead pine cones and threw them to the ground. Then, silence. Eleni and I were supposed to be in dance class. But we stayed right there, stalking him. Some amount of time went by and he was still in the trees. We

suspected he might have fallen asleep. Just as we were about to abandon the misson, we heard a massive thump. Suddenly, he appeared, having landed on a patch of asphalt. Then he gathered up his dead pine cones and left. We were right behind him as he walked across a private olive grove and made his way to a tiny mobile home. It was more like a shed on wheels, really. He dropped the pine cones in the little front yard and went to open the tiny front door. But before he could make it all the way inside, Eleni and I materialized, shouting "Hey, nice house, man. Nice house!" He turned around to look at us. I will never forget that look. That hard look. Very hard. Like a rock coming at me. Like a stone flying towards my skull.

My legs were nervous and jittery. They dashed out from under me. I would be sitting at my desk and they'd just take off. Something struck a nerve and made my joints spazz out. It pinched my toes and prodded my heels. I felt the itch spread from the soles of my feet up to my ankles, then my shins, then my thighs, and finally deep in my groin. Kruese. *I scratched until I bled. The blood was devouring my insides. It needed to escape. It tore through my veins looking for a way out. I broke the skin with my nails to give it relief, but it didn't work. Nothing worked. Not the cold compresses. Not the ice cubes. Not the herbs that my mom gathered for me. I couldn't keep still, couldn't stay in one place. So I walked. I walked constantly. I walked home, then walked back again. I walked aimlessly to the creek and through the reeds. I climbed some pine trees.* Hidhesha. *I spaced out watching the birds. The birds that chirped and zoomed through the reeds. They flapped their wings and took me with them. Sparrows, blackbirds, nightingales, and even pigeons. But the nights were hard. My legs shifted in my sleep. I was moving all the time, sleepwalking* ne dhome. *Then my arms started getting jittery too. The itch had made its way up. It shot right through me. My arms soared, grasping for something invisible. I started to yearn for*

amputation. I wanted a clean break from my limbs. All four limbs. I wanted to kill the extremities. I wanted to sever myself.

That hard look. Hate. It was hatred to the core. He wore that look on his face from the second he noticed us outside the mobile home until the last day of elementary school. Even after we stopped messing with him. Even after we got used to him and stopped caring. Still that look. We stopped caring that he was older than us, stopped caring about his black hat, stopped caring that he lived in a trailer. Eventually nothing about him bothered us, with one exception: the not talking. But in sixth grade he started raising his hand. And trying. At first he just grunted like an animal. Then he stuttered. He would blurt out a single syllable over and over again before pronouncing whole words. Finally, as if his tongue had suddenly been untangled, he built up his courage and started finishing sentences. But always with a heavy accent and never without making mistakes. Like the word for smell. Μυρωδιά. He started out saying "mipoudia." Then it became "mipodia." That always cracked us up. But it never stopped him. He noticed us but kept his focus on the teacher, who excitedly encouraged him: "Bravo, Genti! Bravo! Not too hard, right?" Still, he never said one word to any of us. We came to the conclusion that he really did look down on us. His silence put us in our place. And that made us mad. We wanted revenge, and the best way to get it was to act like he didn't exist.

They stopped talking to me. Stopped messing with me. Stopped making fun of me. They even stopped trying to steal my hat. They ignored me. Completely. But I had my little scissor and didn't see them. Didn't see any other kids, just their desks. Just empty classrooms. I got into words. I lived in words. I thought about words. I analyzed them. I broke them down into

syllables, and then into letters. I'd put them back together again. I looked at Greek words and Albanian words side-by-side, just to make sense of them. Erë-*Μυρωδιά. Μυρωδιά-Miroudia-*Mirupafshim. *"Mirou": pronounced the same, but written differently. And they mean different things. That tripped me up. I confused the Greek "ρ" with the Albanian "p." My tongue would stall out. I couldn't make it work. In the end I powered through. "Say it." I pushed myself. "You can do it. Just say it." So instead of "mirodia" I said "mipoudia." The invisible kids started laughing again. But I didn't care anymore. I brought my father back from the dead and sat him down right next to me at my desk. No one else could see him, not even the teacher. Only I could. When I spoke, he smiled at me. When I misspoke, he brought me back up. He gave me courage. He cut off the noose that was hanging around my neck. I read his lips as he sounded words out with me. "Μυ-ρω-διά." I finally got it. No more laughing. I gained the confidence to keep going. Dad was right there smiling at me the whole way through. I loved the words that I could actually say. The other words not so much. Those other words went right over my head, over my whole body. They ripped through my soul. The words that I hated never came out. They made it only as far as my tongue, then got stuck there. I swallowed them whole or spat them out. Some words smacked me, others caressed me. Some words healed me, other words hurt me. It was a battle. Hand-to-hand combat. Slowly, slowly I learned not to resist. The words that hurt the most were the ones I screamed at the top of my lungs by myself in my room. Or in my front yard. Or in the reeds. At the creek. With the birds. In the trees. The more I screamed, the softer those harsh words became.*

We ignored him. Blatantly. We turned our heads whenever he walked by us. And in class we tried hard to avoid even the slightest glance in his direction. But sometimes we gave him the

side-eye only to discover that he was still going at it with that little scissor of his. We also noticed that he had stopped peeing himself ever since he started talking. His arms and legs, though, were still moving constantly. We lost touch in middle school. Years went by until one day, as I was walking home from dance class, I spotted him at a plateia. It was Agios Trifonas Square. He wasn't wearing his hat. Instead, he had on this neon tracksuit. He was sitting on a bench with someone and drinking a can of coca-cola. He was just people watching, gazing at everyone who went by as if they were waves crashing down on the shore. It seemed as if he was dreaming.

I worshipped an image. A single image: trup i prerë*. The image of a severed body. Arms and legs spread out across the train tracks. I imagined myself lying there, dismembered. The train passing over me. That was it. I spent hours drinking coca-cola at the plateia and picturing myself without limbs. Then I saw the tape.*

I saw him again. On the same bench. He was holding a can of coca-cola but this time he wasn't drinking from it. Instead he was staring at his legs. It looked like he was training, strengthening. One leg at a time. Flexing, relaxing, then flexing again. After dance class I always took the same route home: I would start down Patriarchou Grigoriou V and then turn right on Marathonos. Without fail, he was there, exercising his legs.

That's when everything changed. In high school. I had learned to speak. I was used to people. I acted like they did. And I had one Greek friend. Yannis. We talked, hung out. We played soccer. Five-on-five games at a field near the Anthousa stop. He always paid for both of us. It was

embarrassing for me. But I couldn't have afforded it otherwise. Sometimes after the game he would buy me a cheese pie and a coke. "Come over. I wanna show you something," he said one day. So I went over. He lived near Agios Trifonas. It was a nice house. It had a divan*, wall-to-wall carpeting, a TV, a VCR. "Get ready to lose your shit," he said as he popped the tape into the machine. The second the video started playing I lost it. My heart was racing, wings flapping. I was out of breath by the end. I thought I might not make it. It was totally unlike anything I had ever seen. "Are you losing your shit? Bomfunk, man. Freestyler. Break dance. Is your mind blown yet?" My mind was blown. My arms were at it again.* Duart më djersiteshin. *My legs were flying. The itch was back. Shooting pains too, angrier now. And more determined than ever. I stood up and started dancing. Right there in front of my friend. I didn't even think about it. I couldn't dance. I didn't know how to dance. But I moved. I moved back and forth and jumped around just to ease the symptoms. And it worked. At first a sweet sensation spread through me, sort of a tingling numbness. Then, relief. Slowly, slowly. Relief. My arms and legs were talking to me now. Start dancing, start dancing, they told me. Our bodies don't think, they just know. They know better than us. I wanted to learn. I wanted to dance like the kids in the video. That's how I started out.*

We went down to Monastiraki and bought a tape. A tape that showed you how to get started. And that tape was all I could think about the whole way back to Pallini. As soon as we got back to Yannis's house we put it on. We must have watched it ten times in a row. My head was filled with moves when I left. At home that night I tried to replicate them. But I was a rrëmujaxhi*. I was awkward, clumsy, heavy, falling all over the place. I couldn't do a backbend or a headstand. Nothing. I kept visualizing the moves from the tape. I isolated each one. Broke it down. Broke down the movements. Piece by piece. Then I tried to do one piece at a time. It didn't*

work. You had to be in shape. So I started training. First I did my legs. Squats. Squats nonstop. Squats for hours. Next I did my arms. Same deal. Pushups. Pushups over and over again. Then my shoulders and my neck. Në zverk. *The nape of the neck is the hardest. You need to work on it more than any other spot. You need to strengthen it. Drills. Practice. Two hours a day. Then moves, whole moves. I was persistent. I upped my practice time to three hours a day. The tape showed me the style, the basic, old-school moves from the '80s. I watched and I took them apart. I worked it out by myself. Then we worked on it more together, with Yannis. Walking home through the reeds one day I saw that someone had thrown out an old stove and a broken washing machine. They just left them next to the pine trees. I noticed a square wooden board wedged between the two appliances, so I lugged it home. That became my dancefloor. All I needed now was a boom box. And a tracksuit, of course. I bought a cheap one. Nylon. Stretchy, smooth, and hooded so that my head could glide across the floor.*

On the board. Out back. Warming up. Beats blasting. Back straight. Stepping. Feet locked in. Locked into the rhythm. He we go. Down rock. Cat moves. The tape playing in my head. Cat stretching. Combo. Hands and feet on the floor. Legs. Strike a pose. Again. Check it. Shpejtësia. *Check it. Check it. Power moves. Hedgehog. Combo.* Forcë. Durim. Forcë. *Precision. Heavy hands. Turn around. Windmill. Sweeping. Flames rising. Butterfly kicks. My head on the floor. Turtle flip. Tough one. Watch the neck. Don't lose that* zverk. *Spine twisting. Twisting all the way. One mistake can cripple you. I did a headstand and twirled. Rotating. Eyes shut. Then open. The world looks better upside-down. Freeze. Snake jumps. I froze. Suspended in the air, one hand supporting my whole body. I transitioned from one pose to another with a flourish. Style. Seamless. Pose. Freeze. Pose. Freeze. Then, suicide. Like I had lost control. Hitting the ground with a hard thump. Like it hurt. But it didn't hurt. I added my own elements. Snakes and*

cats. Turtles and hedgehogs. I incorporated their movements into the dance. And moves from our dances. Albanian dances. I joined a group. We danced in plateias. Mostly at a big plateia in Nea Smirni. We competed against other crews too. I came in second at a competition in Aspropyrgos. Second prize was a DVD player.

One summer I saw him again. At the post office. He was at the register, paying for stamps. I didn't see *him*, really. But I saw his arm. A bare, manly arm grasping a motorcycle helmet with a butterfly tattooed on its muscular bicep. I stood there, off to the side, waiting my turn and staring at that tattoo. It seemed as if the butterfly's wings, its red, spotted wings, were actually fluttering. I was just starting to examine his profile when, having stamped his envelopes, he turned towards me. Then he left. I half recognized him. But he didn't seem too familiar. It took me a few seconds before I realized that it was Genti. At that moment I recalled, possibly because of the tattoo, that butterflies are able to camouflage themselves and evade detection by their enemies. They assume the color of surrounding vegetation or adapt to the light as it's reflected onto their wings. Some butterflies, I remembered, can even generate their own pigments. After that, I started to think of him exclusively as a butterfly.

I got a tattoo on my arm. Like a sailor pining for his long lost love. It was a tattoo of my dad. Well, not exactly my dad. A butterfly, because he was a butterfly in spirit. Now when I danced I took him with me instead of leaving him to watch me from the sidelines. He was on me now. On my body. I could feel him there. I could hear him saying, "Lexo, djali im." *His voice gave me the strength to keep going. Reading helped with my endurance. I read. And not just for school. I read other books, too. More difficult ones. At first I didn't understand everything in them. It was*

frustrating. I couldn't tell why it made me so agitated, but at the same time I didn't entirely hate that feeling. All through high school I had a job in Loutsa, waiting tables at a place called "Flisvos." Then I started working at a print shop, stuffing free DVDs into newspapers. Hundreds upon hundreds of DVDs. Three euros and change per hour, between twenty-five and twenty-eight per shift. Not bad, but it was exhausting. We moved out of the mobile home and into a real house. But that house never felt like home to me. It felt more like a hotel. I didn't see much of my mom back then, since she took care of an old lady and was gone all day. Then that lady started having more and more problems, so my mom was gone most nights too. I had break dancing, but that never wore me down. Quite the opposite. It soothed my arms and legs, cured the shooting pains inside me.

Life started to hurt and I lost interest in everything. Like when I broke up with Yorgos. I quit dance, started avoiding people, and stopped going to the places where my friends hung out. I was in my third year of university, but I hadn't set foot on campus in three months. I sat at the café across from Pallini City Hall with a book. I never actually read the book. Instead I replayed scenes from Life With Yorgos in my head. At school with Yorgos. At the movies with Yorgos. At Yorgos's house with Yorgos. Yorgos talking to me. Yorgos shaving, bathing, smelling of after shave, or wearing the jeans and tee-shirt I got him.

One day I was sitting there drinking my coffee. And, just as I was about to whip out the old book and start playing that tired old game of mine, a fanny pack caught my eye. Someone had left it on the chair next to mine. Inside the pack were a set of keys, two ten-euro notes, some loose change, and a thick, dark blue notebook. I opened to a random page and there he was. I recognized him instantly. Genti. Upside-down, wearing a motorcycle helmet and standing on his

head against the white marble of a random plateia. Arms akimbo, seconds away from action. Legs spread open like scissors, the soles of his sneakers fully visible. Shirt halfway down, the pale skin of his torso almost fully exposed. I turned the photo itself upside-down and it looked as if he were walking on air and balancing the whole Earth on his head. I flipped through the notebook. The first pages were filled with lists of Albanian words and their Greek definitions. Then there was a series of pages with just two or three words on each of them, followed by a ton of blank pages and, finally, a drawing: some little critters at the bottom of the page and an upright snake. Also a turtle, a cat, and a hedgehog. In the middle of the page was a bright red butterfly. And at the top of the page were three birds flying through the air next to a little dude with wings spread wide. It reminded me of when Genti tried to fly like the wild pigeons on Alamanas. It also reminded me of a folk song that my grandmother used to sing when I was little. The words always made me cry. "Wayward little birds, high up you fly...why not come down and take me for a ride..." Something like that. The song really encapsulated how I felt looking at the drawing. Especially that little bird-man. I turned the page immediately and saw the following, written in Greek.

Cat stretching.

Windmill.

Butterfly kick.

Hedgehog.

Flames rising.

Turtle flip.

Snake jump.

SUICIDE.

I shuddered and tried to decode the phrases, especially that last one. The capital letters made the word itself seem even more dangerous than its literal meaning. Then, out of nowhere, his voice. "I'm so sorry. That's actually mine. I must have left it on the chair..." I scrambled to stuff his things back into the fanny pack. I handed it back to him and said "Genti! How've you been, man?" He looked at me, stunned. He couldn't place me and was totally shocked by the familiarity.

"You don't recognize me, huh? It's Sofia. From elementary school."

"Sofia...?"

"Yeah, from elementary school...I used to put you through it..."

"Oh, right. Sofia..." he whispered, as if remembering what a horrible little brat I was back then.

But he kept on smiling and kept thanking me for rescuing his fanny pack. "Thanks for the pack, Sofia. Thanks, thanks." It was almost as if he'd never held a grudge. Or maybe he forgave me right then and there on account of my finding his fanny pack.

I pulled up a chair and told him to sit. We caught up, and soon the initial awkwardness gave way to an unlikely intimacy. I started telling him about Yorgos without even realizing it. He revealed that he had just gone through a break-up too. But that was the extent of it. As he spoke I observed him. His expression had softened. Despite the pain of his recent separation, his eyes were bright. Nothing resembled the fearful, nervous image of him that I had in my mind up until then. When I mentioned that I was in drama school he got excited. "I love theater. I try to see as many shows as I can," he explained while trying to glance at the book I'd left open on the table.

"*Oedipus Rex.* Sophocles. It's a Greek tragedy," I said. He jotted down the title on a pack of cigarettes. We exchanged numbers and agreed to meet up, but neither one of us made a move until after the accident.

When I danced I let go. I tested myself, pushed myself to the limit. But sometimes I lost control. I broke up with my girlfriend and started drinking for a while. Obviously, I have a bad side as well as a good side. Sometimes I even do battle with myself. Like I'm in a movie. Saying and doing stupid shit. My life was non-stop problems. Then I met my girlfriend and I was fine. But I wasn't used to everything being okay. I sensed that I was making mistakes and then I made everything even worse. Was I taking something out on her? Who knows. I'm still piecing it together. I said I was sorry. It was too late, though. I felt alone, like a stranger in my own home. The house itself rejected me. As if the house belonged to someone else entirely. I got back into break dance.

I thought about him a lot. Then, after the accident, I started thinking mostly about his drawing. About the little man flying with the wild pigeons. About the upside-down turtle. And the hedgehog. Nights when I couldn't sleep the butterfly came and found me. It landed right on me, fluttering around my face, and my lips, and my belly. It came in for a sniff, felt me out, and brought me back. All the way back. I took massive leaps through time. I saw everything, starting from the beginning. The pee dribbling down his desk. His head stuffed into that black hat. His legs shaking and his arms squirming. Him—cutting his nails. Us—humiliating him. Making fun of his mobile home. I asked myself at long last: where did he find the strength?

We were in a plateia in Kallithea, dancing. All of a sudden cops showed up. They surrounded us. "Show us your hands! Now!" The helmets must have tipped them off. "What the hell is this? Are you guys getting ready for war or some shit? Out! Now!" Then a random woman from the crowd went up to them and said: "Leave the kids alone. They're artists. They're dancing. Break dancing. They're not doing anything bad." And they left us alone, probably embarrassed that they'd never heard of break dancing. Then the random woman came up and introduced herself. She said she was a director and wanted to put me in one of her productions. In the Persians. *I would be a chorus member. I lost it. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "But I'm not even an actor," I blurted out. "No worries. I want you to do what you did here. Don't sell yourself short." That's how I wound up in the chorus of the* Persians. I shushatur. *In rehearsal she gave us weird directions that made no sense to me. She went on and on about how the "choreographic idiom of* break dance *is the very nucleus of dance itself" and shit like that. "More introspection, less tension," she said. I had no idea what she meant or how she wanted me to move. I was way outside of my comfort zone and felt like giving up. I dropped to the floor and inched my way forward like a worm, pushing my lower half all the way up. A wave. That's when I heard her yelling "Bravo! That's it! You got it, Genti. Bravo!" Finally. I hadn't gotten it, but my body had. My body led the way. No poses. No tricks. At least not here. I had to give up my animal friends. To let go of their movements and hold onto just a slight touch of their style. I kept thinking about the hedgehog in the fire. I danced his dance, but in reverse. Without mimicking him. My heart kept time and the movements stayed inside me. What came out was just a whisper. That's how I got my start in theater. I remembered Sofia's book and dove head first into texts. Difficult texts. Challenging ones.* Oedipus Rex, Electra, Medea. *That sort of thing. At home I recited the women's monologues to get a different perspective. I had a little trick. I would* break dance *to the*

music and say each line in time with the beat. The text became my own. Still, home didn't feel like home. It still doesn't, as a matter of fact. The chairs. The table. The bed. The dishes. All new, all nice. But foreign. I feel like I'm living in a hotel instead of a house. Nuk ishte shtëpia ime. *It feels like a hotel.*

I desperately wanted to see him. To see his sparkle, see his glow. See that fire in his eyes. It was more than desire. Something was pushing me towards him. Maybe it was his drawing. His turtle and his hedgehog had been dancing around my brain for a year. The cat stretching, the windmill spinning, and the flames rising. The butterfly kick. I called him. "I'm so happy to hear from you," he told me. "Let's meet up. Come to my show."

Now I'm doing a show at a small theater in Neos Kosmos. Acting, but with my body. With my heart. I don't know any other methods. Just that one. I give my everything to the script.

They dim the lights and there I am on stage going crazy. Right on the edge. On top of the audience. I'm a cat with my back arched and my fur sticking up. My arms are grappling hooks. My whole body is wrapped in plastic. Tweezers. Tension. Sinking. I scratch the floor with my claws. I'm ready for the kill, but the bird gets away. Paroxysm. Down I go. I'm on my back now. I'm a turtle upside-down. Then I get back on all fours. But I'm careful not to poke my head out of my shell too soon. Drool, snot, and tears. I'm sobbing silently. Silence. The words in the script are churning around inside me. They rip into me and pull out my entrails. They uproot my heart. Lava bubbles up in my brain and starts flowing throughout. The voice that struggles to leave my lips is harsh and loud. Then it gets softer slowly, slowly. Finally it's gone. Silence. My turn to speak again. I speak and I am free. I say my lines and breathe.

I hear another voice coming from upstage. And another. And another. I can't see the rest of the cast but I feel their presence in my guts. I know their faces by heart. They appear on stage. We speak. I do a break dance move. This the end for the chorus. Suicide. I do a handstand and stay up there motionless for a few seconds, with one arm supporting my full weight. Then I drop face-down to the floor. Lying there, I notice a shoe. A single woman's shoe sticking out of a single pant leg. The other leg is gone, missing from the knee down, with half a pant leg neatly folded around the stump. Now I'm performing for this leg and this leg alone. I can't stop looking at it. I scream a scream that belongs to my character and to me. I am the role. I'm aching for the image I used to yearn for before I learned to break dance. The image of an amputated body. Then, silence. Silence. The End. Lights go up. We take a bow. The sweat is dripping and the people are clapping. Standing and clapping. That foot is front and center. I search for a face. Those eyes. Sofia. Sofia in a wheelchair. My blood freezes in my veins. I bow and see her smiling at me. When? How? Why? Sweat, snot, and spit. A knot in my throat. The audience dwindles and the cast retreats backstage. I stand behind the curtain and peek through. Sofia's chair is still parked there in the same spot. I run across the stage. I hold her in my arms and can't fight back the tears. "I lost it in a car accident," she tells me.

He saw me in the wheelchair. He saw me without my leg, half-missing and motionless. After the show he bolted across the stage to get to where I was. He held me close, squeezed me tight. He touched the stump through the folded pant leg. Then he looked at me. He looked inside me. And I felt intact.

I'm hugging Sofia and I feel like I can talk to her without feeling shame.

"I didn't bring all of me tonight. Something's missing, you know."

I can tell her about being in school and hearing and not hearing. About the shooting pains in my arms and legs. About the sleeplessness. About turning into a cat and a turtle and a hedgehog and a snake. About my mother, and my father. The butterfly on my arm. Break dancing and becoming a bird on stage.

That's what I said. But, actually, I said more than that. I think Genti understood, because he took me in his arms immediately. He lifted me up and held me. It was tender. I hated it. I didn't want it. I was awkward and scared. I kept shaking my leg. Kicking like an upside-down turtle. He calmed me down. He started twirling me around, rhythmically. Slowly, slowly. Carefully. I relaxed. Then he picked up speed. He went faster and faster, twirling me around. I felt drunk, like I was sprouting wings. I took off. I flew. I'm flying. And I know why Genti turns into a bird.

There is one thing, though, that I can't bring myself to tell her. That I don't feel at home in my house. That I feel like I'm living in a hotel. In a dilapidated hotel.

"ALL ALIKE"

by Louiza Spiliotopoulou

His fan is on the fritz again. A thirsty housefly has landed on his sagging jowls. His morning frappé has reached the temperature of a freshly brewed cappuccino. He is trying to make it through another day. Out of nowhere the fan turns back on and spins its blades once or twice before shutting down again. A vain attempt to relive the glory days when it worked around the clock. He shoots the coffee cup into the plastic garbage can and watches as its foamy remnants dribble onto the floor. Oh well. Someone will come around to clean it up eventually. The fly takes off and heads for the coffee. But the ninety-degree heat forces it to cut the flight short. It returns to lick more sweat off the nape of his neck. He goes through the motions of swatting it away, knowing full well that even his best efforts will amount to little more than a momentary respite from the tireless insect. Then there is the matter of his armpits. He can't actually see them without craning his neck, but he can sense that they've already turned blue, just as they do every day. Two more inductees to the sweat stain hall of shame.

He wakes up bored every morning. Every day for the last twenty-two years, three months, and change he has woken up at six fifteen and stepped into his office at precisely seven, coffee in hand. It's a hot instant coffee in the wintertime and an ice-cold frappé in the summertime. Two parts coffee to three parts sugar. No milk ever. And no matter how many cups he consumes in a single day, and it may be as many as five, he never feels jittery. He is always calm. Zoned out. Half-asleep, really. Yet somehow he maintains a constant grip on his clear plastic to-go cups while dangling a fuchsia, neon-yellow, purple, or kelly green straw from his lower lip. Meanwhile, with his other hand he is fully able to stamp, sign, and initial document after document, always using the same green ballpoint pen that he stole from his father back in

middle school. He has worked the same job, sitting in the same chair, for twenty-two years. He never attempted to work, or cheat, his way into a higher position within the department, as many of his younger colleagues have done. No, he always preferred the ground floor. Straight down the hall, fourth door on the right. He was never the type to take on more responsibilities than he could handle and, furthermore, he wasn't particularly fond of riding in elevators.

Which is not to say that he was fond of firing up his father's mustard-yellow jalopy every morning at a quarter to seven and squeaking down the hill slowly, with the car still in neutral, before stopping at a traffic light that was almost never green and under which, without fail, a dark-skinned immigrant stood holding a filthy bucket and a huge squeegee. This immigrant had learned never to approach him but nevertheless greeted him with a subtle, almost imperceptible, gesture. After this daily exchange, he would drive off. He would venture into an either brilliantly sunny or disgustingly muddy city and make his way to the station. However, on a few occasions, perhaps while idling at the aforementioned intersection, the frustrated honking of a fellow motorist jolted him out of an almost lucid daydream. A daydream in which he was barreling straight down the main thoroughfare, blowing through light after light with a velocity that his vehicle could by no means handle, reaching the airport in record time, booking a ticket, and hopping on the first flight to Hawaii (or some other island—Hawaii was just the first one that came to mind) only to find himself, a few short hours later, finally lounging under the shade of a pastel-colored beach umbrella with only his pasty-white feet poking out into the sunlight (he hated the sun, always burning and bubbling his sensitive skin) while he gazed out at the sea. And in this daydream, Hawaiian girls, all of them identical, would serve him icy-cold frappé after icy-cold frappé. But, in reality, he never did bolt down that main thoroughfare. He always made the first turn, then the next turn, and so on, just like he was supposed to. As for the airport, he had

been there exactly once in his life, with his father, when they went to pick up an uncle from America who turned up unexpectedly. And he had never even seen a Hawaiian girl up close. He had seen only the gaunt, ugly-skinned migrant women who always had dark circles under their dark, slanted eyes and who never had green cards. The women whom his benevolent colleagues would quite literally drop-kick into the dark little holding cell across the hall from his office. These women he saw often, without ever feeling charmed by their nonexistent, or perhaps just well-concealed, beauty.

And so this morning, at seven o' clock sharp, as he dragged his weathered frame through the front entrance of the station, he found himself once again face-to-face with dozens of Hawaiians from every conceivable corner of the planet, all of whom smelled strongly of curry mixed with old skin and sweat. They would not stop yammering in their strange languages that reminded him of the sounds that seagulls make in mid-air as they fight over the last fish in the sea. And yet, they never stopped smiling. They smiled with those small, slanty eyes of theirs. Even though he could have sworn from the tone of their voices that they were all furious. "Operation Clean Sweep," he heard some sour-faced colleagues mutter as they attempted to squeeze their way through the throng. "At one of the plateias." And what exactly was the point of dragging them down here to greedily suck down the last few droplets of cool air? Huh? What was the plan? What would they do with them and, for that matter, what would they feed them? He knew very well that no one at the station could cook up a curry to save his life. He also knew from experience that situations like these don't just resolve themselves but take days, if not months, to get over and done with.

By the third day he was beginning to suffocate, surrounded by so many bodies and plagued by a spiteful fan that would not stay on. The coffee was not enough to cheer him up and

the constant sound of incomprehensible gibberish, which, to be fair, was gradually dying down, had drilled a permanent hole in his skull. The unadulterated smell of sweat coupled with the acrid stench of their breaths, a stench that betrayed malnourishment (though someone had been down to feed them at least once a day), made him sick. He sat in that small and (thankfully) doorless office of his wearing little more than a white, sleeveless undershirt that was ever-so-slightly frayed from countless wash cycles. No longer burdened by the cumbersome sky-blue button-down that was presently hanging to dry from the window sill, he was free to sit and stare at the clock. And, on account of the passive mental state he was in as he sat there wasting time, he initially failed to hear, or perhaps heard but chose to ignore, a loud banging on the door. Nanoseconds later, however, he sprang up from his seat to face the disapproving countenance of his supervisor. Miraculously, his supervisor's glare foretold not censure (*that* would have been trouble) but a complicated set of demands, delivered curtly. Despite the complexity of these demands, however, he understood perfectly what he was expected to do and how he was expected to do it. What he failed to comprehend was the thought process behind the official request. Someone, and that "someone" most certainly worked in another office in an altogether different part of the building, considered it imperative that someone else, with the help of a translator (or translators, if necessary), compile a detailed record of the human mass currently corralled on the ground floor. There were forms to be filled out with various pieces of personal information, and there were polaroids to be affixed to those forms. And, to make things even worse, the forms were to be delivered to the supervisor first thing in the morning.

He seldom looked up from his paperwork over the next few days, hoping to get each and every one of them out of there as quickly as possible. He paused on occasion, remembering that it was, in fact, July, and July was when his local café hosted a backgammon tournament of which

he had not missed even one second for the past six years. He expressed his resentment by cursing. And he made no real attempt to muffle his curses, since he was certain that none of the words he uttered would be understood by any one of them. India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Taiwan, the Phillippines, South Korea, China, Indonesia, and many others he could barely recall. These were the country names that danced dizzyingly across his paperwork, country names that he, with the dutifulness of a faithful hound, copied onto form after form, right next to where it said COUNTRY OF ORIGIN, and right below where he had already copied three or four or five or six boxy and bulky names. He could not help but notice that, sadly, not one of them was originally from Hawaii. This made sense, considering that Hawaii was, at least in his imagination, a tiny little island that was not nearly big enough for all of them put together, not to mention the twenty or twenty-five family members that each of them surely had.

They came from so many different, far-away (perhaps even from each other) countries. But they all looked exactly alike. A hundred or more round, generic faces that had somehow arrived (only they knew the ridiculous reason why, and only god knew by what bizarre means) in the country of his birth. And now there they were, sitting across from him in his cramped office in this department of this police station of this neighborhood of this unknown, at least to them, city.

His hands dripped with ink from a ballpoint pen that had just exploded. His mouth teemed with minced oaths. And his legs jittered impatiently under his desk. Just then, the first one of these unintelligible beings that he could have distinguished (if he wanted to) from the hundred or so others just like her walked through the doorway. Five feet tall at most, weighing in at around ninety pounds, she was (he assumed) about seventeen years old. Her name, based on the translator's approximation, was just as unpronounceable as all the rest. Furthermore, she

appeared to be, based on his own observations, and not the translator's, pregnant. It was hard to explain why, but she seemed at once so similar and so different from the others. Perhaps it was because she was the last one to be processed and the rest had already gotten the hell out of there. Or perhaps it was something more, even though he couldn't quite put his finger on what that something more might even be. At any rate, she was the only one that could have featured (if he wanted her to) in his strange recurring daydream. She could easily be one of the girls serving him bottomless iced coffees in Hawaii, despite the fact that, either due to personal preference or sheer ignorance, the girls he dreamt of, all of them native Hawaiians, always had platinum blonde hair and green eyes. After all, everyone on a beautiful island like Hawaii should be stunningly beautiful and not look at all like the people he saw every day selling garbage and washing the windshields of imported luxury cars.

That night he went to bed feeling relieved. And that feeling of relief gently cradled him until he fell into a deep sleep. He knew that the next morning he would return to the comfort of his banal existence, without all those people buzzing constantly, annoyingly in his ear. And while he couldn't say for sure, he might have dreamt about her a little. He might have dreamt about her striking the same pose as the one she struck when he took her picture that morning, her eyes barely open, her belly bulging, and her arms hanging dead by her sides. It was one of those momentary dreams where nothing actually happens. Maybe he never even dreamt of her at all. He could just as easily have fallen into a sudden, deep, and dreamless sleep the same way he did every night.

The next morning he woke up far too early with a troubling thought. Actually, it was more of a recollection. And it was swirling around the depths of his half-dozing brain. He was unable to concentrate on his shaving and stood motionless in his windowless bathroom staring at

the reflection of his own face in the tiny mirror, mouth agape, with the clock ticking away and the distinct possibility of a late arrival looming over him. This was of no real consequence, though, since he had never once been late all these years. So he stayed there, observing his wild, jet-black whiskers angrily jutting out of his chin. He examined the rest of his face looking for a sign. But it was all in vain. There was nothing there. Was it all a lie then? But who would tell such an absurd lie? Such an inconsequential, absurd lie? And why?

Lies. He himself had certainly lied. He had lied about how many times he had gone to the airport. It was not just the one time, however many years ago, with his father, when they went to pick up his uninvited uncle from America. No. He went back to the airport again, one month later, this time without his father, to send the uncle back home to America somewhat earlier than they had originally planned.

The hard, chestnut-brown suitcases were already crammed into the tiny foyer with the mosaic marble floor and the small wooden telephone stand. He had just woken up from his siesta in no mood for any of this. He found his uncle standing in the kitchen trying to smooth out his white linen suit, as if that made any difference. Meanwhile his father, clad as always in his striped summer pajamas, was sprawled out on a chair pretending to be suffering from a bad back. There were no tears shed, no insincere bear hugs given. Just awkwardness. Awkwardness from the moment the two of them stepped into the narrow elevator with the two suitcases severely limiting their personal space. After a long, insufferable silence punctuated only by grunts, heavy lifting, and mumbled goddammits, the uncle started to fill that silence with a monotone monologue consisting mainly of stories from way back when. Not uncommon behavior among those who have advanced considerably in years.

He can barely remember now what his uncle had babbled on about. How when they were kids he and his father lived next door to each other and played ball together from dawn to dusk. How he spent four long years in the army because that's how long conscription was back then. "You're lucky. You guys have it easy now. You couldn't possibly imagine what it was like for us back then..." He can't even piece together the story about the girl next door, the love of his life, who rejected him and married the grocer, or the one about how he took off for America with just a few coins in his pocket and how his hands became so rough from all the years washing dishes. He does remember the streets they drove down, though. They were empty, deserted because it was the very middle of August and everyone was on vacation, everyone except him and his father. They never took vacations, the latter because he never saw the point and the former because he never questioned the latter. And even more clearly than the empty streets he remembers the metallic grinding sound that the gear shift made whenever he tried to put the car in fourth. That grinding ultimately signaled his inability to do the one thing that he wanted to do in that moment, namely to step on the gas, perhaps even blow through a couple of red lights, just to see (using his peripheral vision, without turning his head, and possibly while whistling absentmindedly) his uncle turn beet red and start sweating from fear, a fear that he would never dare express. He had no idea why he wanted to just gun it like that. Was it payback for the comment about conscription? His uncle had let that one slip with a tinge of superiority in his voice. Clearly he had no idea that his boyhood dream was to attend the Icarus Academy and become a fighter pilot. He couldn't have known that, at age eighteen, he discovered that his vision was not perfect, though not bad enough to require corrective lenses. But it was just imperfect enough to land him in the miserable Hellenic Police Academy (that was the only alternative he could think of on the spot). Maybe it was that, after all. Or maybe he was just

pissed that his father resorted once again to faking a back injury. Yes. Maybe that was it. Or maybe not.

The heat is insufferable. The car windows are rolled down. All the way down. The light is red. The light has been red for ages. Suddenly a dark, dirty hand soars through the open windows and violently shoves two frozen water bottles in their faces. He jumps. He curses. He pays. He takes the water bottles. And he almost chokes. In fact, he only narrowly avoids a collision when the light finally turns green and his uncle launches into another story with that grizzled, muffled, and increasingly unpleasant voice of his. This story lasts only a few minutes. Maybe just one minute. Then he transitions into another equally irrelevant tale, during which he manages to casually drop a little truth bomb that was not necessarily pertinent to the broader narrative.

This was a piece of information that he had been entirely ignorant of before the drive to the airport. He could, of course, have brought it up with his father. His father, though, would most likely, and without hesitation, have feigned another back injury, or worse: a cardiac episode, a hematological emergency, or a diabetic shock. He concluded that this likely had something to do with the quarrel that had erupted between his uncle and his father a few days prior, a quarrel that had led to a noticeably tense atmosphere around the house. He couldn't be sure, but for some reason he remained steadfast in his assumption that these two incidents were related. He could have let it go. He could have moved on, forgotten the whole thing. On the other hand, he could just as easily have conducted a thorough investigation. Wasn't that his job, after all? To investigate? To look for clues like the detectives do on TV every afternoon? In the end, he opted to do nothing at all about anything. But every once in a while he would take a few minutes in the morning to examine his reflection in the mirror, or try and stealthily study his

father's face. That face was long gone, unfortunately, hidden under thousands of wrinkles. He didn't keep this up for long. Just for a few months. Then he started to forget. Who cares. Nothing but a weird, trivial factoid. No point holding onto it. Even if it were true, what difference would it make. Then it came up again. Years later. Coincidentally. Because of the petite Hawaiian girl he saw that one morning in his office. Because of her, obviously. Because of that tiny, skinny, pregnant girl. And so, without even wanting to wonder again, he started to wonder again.

The first street-muddying rains of September came and went, leaving the pavement dry and intact, save for the occasional murmuring drizzle. Actually, a few of these drizzles failed to keep themselves in check and got a little rowdy, but without any major casualties, except for one old lady: an unknown aunt who slipped and would have found herself in the ground, buried alive next to the coffin if it were not for the handbag of another, slightly younger old lady. The unknown aunt grabbed hold of that handbag and steadied herself, mere feet away from the bereaved son, the white wreath from America, and a small gathering of sundry relatives and neighbors. His father had recently moved into what would be his last home and promptly descended into eternal rest.

He is sitting on a chair made of the hardest commercially available particle board. He is sipping from a small cup of bitter coffee into which no amount of added sugar could possibly dissolve. He takes a few odd bites of a stale biscotto that someone or other handed him. And he waits impatiently for the moment when he can finally go home and be far away from all these ancient people he has never even met before. His father was also ancient, apparently. He became aware of how ancient his father was, in fact, on the afternoon that he discovered his corpse lying in bed (thank God), having died, as he was later informed, from an acute myocardial infarction

three days earlier (thank God). It could have been much worse considering that, after he moved out of his boyhood home and into his own apartment, the two of them had fallen into a routine of speaking to each other maybe once a week.

He was offered condolences, hand shakes, and kisses that left trails of saliva running down both cheeks. Before too long it was over. He had done what was required of him as the bereaved son and, since he had nothing more to do and no real desire to sit and reminisce, he went home, put on his uniform, and went straight to work to take it easy for a while before punching out.

Later, as he makes his way back to his desk from the facilities, a green ballpoint pen in hand and a jumbo crossword under his arm, he is shocked to be once again staring down a strange, familiar face, a face so similar to and yet so different from the faces that he sees every day on the street. He struggles to determine whether it is, in fact, her. But perhaps he is mistaken, considering that he still finds it impossible, if not painfully so, to distinguish them from each other. But as soon as he sees her, this time in handcuffs and no longer pregnant (many months have gone by), he is convinced, as convinced as he can possibly be, that it is the same person. At first he just observes her, somewhat casually. But before long he is engaged in a thorough examination, moved by a surprising, foreign feeling of curiosity. He learns (accidentally—he had no desire to ask anyone) that she's being held on suspicion of murdering a man who probably lived near (with?) her. Minute by minute he watches her, soaking up every detail about her with his eyes, scoping her out from the relative safety of his office, but sometimes hiding behind doors or pacing "hurriedly" down the hallway stealing glances. He notices her not talking, notices her not eating the disgusting food they bring her. He notices her getting paler and paler. He notices her dirty fingernails, her ripped jeans, her patience (or maybe her resignation) filling

up the space around her. Expressionless and exhausted, she opens her eyes and looks around the room. At other times she uses both hands to violently scratch her unwashed scalp. But most of the time she looks as if she's sitting at a train station waiting for a train that stopped running years ago.

That afternoon he goes home only to pass out on the couch with the TV still blaring and the remote still snug in his palm. He forgets about her. Or so he thinks. The next morning he walks into the office and the first sip of coffee reignites his curiosity. He starts looking for her, hoping he can begin to study her delicate movements, the movements that make her look like a large taxidermied bird. Shit! He just remembered. He was planning to bring her a plate of leftovers from last night. He had the whole thing planned and then he forgot. Not that he thought about it very intensely. But he did figure that it was the best, the only way he could be of some help to her. Then today he walked in and she wasn't there. Clearly, someone came and got her at some point and moved her someplace else. He will not see her again. That much is certain. Nor will he ever learn anything more about her. His curiosity will be subdued, forcibly, over the next few days. Or maybe not. Maybe it will disappear altogether right away.

Not long after that, he ventured back to his father's house one afternoon. Because he had to. He had to clean up, to empty the place out. He wouldn't be doing the cleaning himself, of course. He would hire some woman to do the job. In a worst case scenario, the place would have to be painted. He wouldn't be doing the painting, either. He would hire some guy to do the job. But he would snoop around. Snooping around was a job for him, and not someone else.

He wonders where to start. Standing in the middle of his father's tiny apartment, which once was, and is again, his own, he feels a lump forming somewhere between his throat and his heart. He always hated doing the dirty work. So he decides, on a whim, to start in the kitchen. It

seemed like the easiest quadrant to tackle. He starts dumping everything, all these useless old things, into huge black garbage bags. Loudly. Silverware, dishes, glassware, cookware, brikia (what even was this single man even doing with all this stuff?), serving spoons, coffee, expired soup cans, pasta that has definitely grown worms, fruits and vegetables rotting away in the yellowed mini-fridge. He yanks down the ratty curtains, which were already full of holes on the day of his last visit to his father. Eventually he opens the balcony door to find out just how badly the balcony is faring with its assortment of rusty broomsticks and squeaky old ladders. This would be a good time to take a break, he admits.

He knows, though. He knows that what he came here to find is in the crawl space. He has to climb up. He knows he does. Moments later he is standing on the highest rung of a squeaky ladder, having already found what he believes to be his intended target. Keeping in mind, of course, that anyone who lived like his father did could not have been anything but predictable. There among the cobwebs, the barely used luggage, the busted black-and-white TVs, his mother's yellowed wedding dress, his father's diploma in that horrid frame (which once graced the spot on the wall right next to his mother's diploma and which his father took down at some point between her untimely death and his early retirement—he can't remember his father ever being anything but a retired high school teacher who had spent his entire career at the same school), the random photos from their wedding and his baptism (in which everyone is wearing otherworldly clothes and sporting ridiculous hairstyles), is what he maybe, probably, should have found, or at least gone looking for, however many years ago. It isn't hard proof. There are no familiar faces lurking in the background, and there's nothing written on the back as there is on most of the other photos in the collection. And yet he is now sure that his uncle hadn't been lying on that hot mid-August afternoon. The photo (actually, there are two) is strong enough evidence.

And even more incriminating is the haphazard attempt that was clearly made to keep them hidden from everyone. Without any difficulty, he found them shoved into the crudely made secret compartment of an ancient women's shoebox. And now he's convinced that he really had seen them before. When he was little, he discovered them while his father was out cold on the couch one afternoon and he started carelessly rifling through the old man's dresser drawers. His father woke up, crept up on him without making a sound (not intentionally, but because he had not put on his slippers), and delivered two hard, cheek-reddening slaps when he caught him with a photo in each hand. They were snatched away from him and he never saw them again until now.

Two small, black-and-white prints, virtually duplicates, each framed by a white, lacy border. Obviously taken many years before, and obviously within split seconds of each other. A young man (his grandfather) and a young, pregnant (with his father) woman, practically still a child, standing there with her eyes barely open, her belly bulging, and her arms hanging dead by her sides, as if she had forgotten them there. She is the spitting image of that other young pregnant woman, who was also still a child, and whom he saw only twice but, it turns out, never forgot. The couple in the photo is posing. A serious pose, at a serious photo studio, where they had their photo taken on an unknown day of an unknown year. But after an unknown number of days the tiny, skinny girl with the huge belly decides, for an unknown reason, to leave for good and go back to that unknown country she came from and never again show a single sign of life.

Now he is back to the task at hand, emptying the apartment with this strange truth and a few most likely unanswerable questions hanging over his head. Standing in front of the TV, he takes the occasional break to surf the channels before he resumes his chores without an ounce of

motivation and with considerable fatigue. He hopes to finish up sooner rather than later so he can lock up and, if possible, not return until a new owner is found.

He heads home in the mustard-yellow car. He fails to make yet another light. He feels transparently melancholy, with the ripped-up, dark-colored, dusty-smelling, withered, pleather back seat loaded with boxes of junk he was unable to discard. It's late, but not late enough for the streets to be this empty. Strange. It's not raining. And it's not scorching hot either. The stray dogs that always bolt out from nowhere seem upset. They can sense a disturbance. The typical ordeal with the immigrant and the squeegee feels more exhausting than normal. This guy looks similar to the squeegee guy at his own intersection. So similar, in fact, that he feels a tinge of sympathy and hands over a few loose coins before wondering if these people really are all related. His back hurts. His uniform, which he never got the chance to change out of, is digging into his crotch. His stomach is completely empty because none of the food at his father's house was edible. He's dreaming of the pizza and beer that he will be ordering from the closest pizza place the second he sets foot in his apartment. It's not the instant gratification that he craves but it should only take half an hour. Actually, more like an hour. Or maybe even longer, since his decrepit car chose to break down in the middle of the street at this precise moment.

He gets out. The sweat on his face is moving much faster than the car he's pushing down the street. He hopes that, despite his shortness of breath, he can at least make it to the curb and wait for someone to drive by (not a single car has gone by even though it's only ten—bizarre) and give him a jump, or, more likely, start honking and cursing instead. He is finally able to pop the hood under the glow of the streetlight and start investigating. He has not made much progress. But he hears them running towards him and wonders what that sound could even be. All of a sudden they materialize. They make a sharp turn towards him. There can't be more than

ten or fifteen of them, but (how fortunate for them!) they emerge from the darkness and find themselves on the same tiny side street on which he happens to be futzing with his engine in a vain attempt to get his old car back up and running again.

They descend on him with their gummy tennis shoes, their painfully tight jeans, their sweat-soaked black tee shirts, their long, filthy ponytails, their switchblades, and their chains. He's still elbow-deep in grease trying to make something spark under that hood, blissfully unaware that the car is just one of the many challenges he will face in the very near future and will likely be facing for the next few months. This is why he doesn't look up, or even wonder who these people are and why they are barreling down the street like a herd of bison kicking up dust and dirt. It is obvious that he has no idea that it is exactly two days after the middle of November. And he won't be made aware of that fact minutes later when, unconscious, bleeding, missing several teeth, and, perhaps, with multiple limbs broken in multiple places, he'll be rushed to the nearest hospital after two of his own, sporting helmets, riot shields, and night sticks, notice the mustard-yellow car stopped (totaled, actually) in the middle of the street, with its doors open, its windows shattered, and with the last few mementos from his father strewn beside it. The rest of his colleagues will keep running behind the angry mob that had been trying to evade an almost certain interception but then spotted his blue shirt in the darkness and made an unexpectedly violent (even by their standards) pit stop next to his vehicle, slamming his unsuspecting head against the hood of the car and kicking him in the lower back even before he hit the pavement hard and received countless lacerations from thousands of pieces of recently cleaned but now broken glass, shards digging into his skin, chains pummeling his windshield, and one of them shouting "God fucking dammit, man! You're all the fucking same!"

PART TWO

The Yellow Dog: A Monologue

by Misel Fais

2009

The stage is dark. A voice. A woman's voice.

"And so the king blinded some fifteen thousand Bulgarian captives and decreed they be thus delivered to Samuel. And out of each hundred captives, one was spared a single eye so that he might lead the other ninety-nine."

The white tiles on the floor are illuminated. Neon lights. The sound of subway trains in the distance. A woman sits on a metal bench. She is holding a plastic bag. She is well put-together.

"And upon witnessing so many arrive in such a state, Samuel—valiant and of tender age—could not bear the pain and was overcome by spells, falling to the ground in a fainting-fit."

She takes off her coat, folds it neatly, and places it on the bench next to her. A yellow light shines down on her. Her head hangs low.

От Черно море до Охрид,
от Дунав до Бяло море.[1]

The yellow light is turned off. She glances down at her wristwatch.

I had an uncle who was a secretary back then, not to mention a driving instructor. Sekretar! That's what everyone called him back in Polograd. I must have told you this before. We're originally from Kavakli, in Eastern Romylia. You didn't know? I never told you?

She takes off her shoes and pulls out a pair of sneakers from the plastic bag. She begins to lace them up.

People were always asking him to play his kementze for them. It's a kind of fiddle. Your boys always made him play marching songs. There was this one tune in particular. I'm trying to remember the name. Anyway, they made him play it for them. They forced it out of him.

She puts her shoes into the bag, grumbling.

От Черно море до Охрид,
от Дунав до Бяло море.

She re-folds her coat, meticulously. She stands, facing backstage.

It was a Sunday. You all came barreling down from the forest with the Germans in tow. It was crazy. The women all went berserk, started banging on pots and pans and pulling their hair out.

She opens a hidden closet door.

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[1] From the Black Sea to Ohrid,/From the Danube to the Aegean

Then they came into our house. Got my dad with the butt of a rifle. Must have been dogwood. Took him down right there. You understand me? They took the house. My dad was gone. I had these vases. Glass ones. One of your guys snatched them up. "Spomen," I told him. And this is one of your troops we're talking about. Please, something to remember me by.

She hangs up her coat in the hidden closet. She shoves her bag in there as well.

Then he started slapping me. A Bulgarian beat-down, as we used to say. How did we even survive? How did we survive? Three women without anyone to protect us. We didn't even know our way around a Bulgarian beat-down. Imagine walking right by your own house, with the garden that you planted in full bloom, and being too scared to even walk through the front door.

She puts on her blue uniform.

History isn't supposed to warm your heart, kyria Hariklia, okay? History rips your heart out and eats it up. Devours it in the same way that my son and your grandson plow through those chocolate croissants.

She puts on rubber gloves, yellow ones.

Crrrunch! There goes Panayotis. Crrrunch! There goes Emanouel, too. Before you know it the croissants are no more. Have you ever peered into history's mouth?

She takes off one of her gloves. She scratches her nose and rubs her neck.

Better just leave it alone. I can't very well ask you to give me back my great grandfather's eyeballs, can I? So let's just move past *your* 'Slayer of the Bulgarians' and *my* 'Bulgarian beat-down." Water under the bridge, right? Isn't that what they say?

She puts the glove back on.

"Gone and forgotten and erased from the heart," as the song goes. Hariklia, Hariklia, Hariklia. Didn't you know that memory is nothing more than a blip in the bloodstream? The only thing that's a given in this world is me, stopping by your house on Christmas Day to bring you that zucchini pie you love so much. Crrrunch! There it goes.

She reaches back into the closet and pulls out her cleaning supplies.

Will there be borders in the afterlife? That's what a woman asked me the other day with a chuckle. She was selling herbs.

She turns to face the audience. She mops the floor with a gentle touch.

She really caught me by surprise, too. She was yelling at people walking by to "drink the mountains of Greece" while she stood there grinding chamomile, oregano, and sage all with her fingertips. "I've got lavender for your closets and lemongrass for all your troubles. And thyme!

Thyme from Taïyetos." The smell around her stand was intoxicating. So sweet. Now if I could only get the smell of bleach out of my nostrils for good!

She stops for a second and leans on the mop.

"What afterlife, lady?" this old guy blurted out as he walked by her stand. Another vendor. He was selling socks out of a bag. "You close your eyes for the last time and then..."

She starts cleaning again.

...And then he went into the train station. He vanished. What does that even mean? That there *are* no borders if you're dead? I sat there and wondered. Isn't life a border in and of itself? I hate when people just bail like that mid-conversation. What did he mean? That this *is* the next life? And where are you rushing off to anyway, man? Finish your sentence!

She's almost dancing now.

That's our lot in life, though. Picking up after people. Your scrap paper, your table scraps, your cigarette butts. We pick things up, we clean things up. We gather up your half-finished sentences, the words that get swept away like particles of dust.

She shakes her wet mop at the audience members.

Want some dust!? Here you go! "Eating. That's all we're good for." Summer, scorching heat, two guys sitting on the bench with their shopping bags and the taller one starts rambling on about his purpose in life. Then the shorter one chimes in with this: "What else can we do? We live to shop. We live to shop at the supermarkets." As a matter of fact they were sitting on this bench right here [*She points to it*]. This one.

She props her mop up against the wall and grabs a rag.

I started choking up. And not because I was sad, mind you. I was pissed! Right on, boys, I thought. What a pleasant topic of conversation to start the day with. Have a great one, guys! Live it up! Actually, part of me wanted to give each of them a little push. I thought of telling them not to give up. After all, life has its ups and downs for sure. At the same time, though, I told myself "Better leave it alone, Rouska. You have enough on your plate as it is." But I want to know. I want to know if this is how they behave themselves at home, too. Or it just down here that they drag their filthy shoes across the floor after stepping in dog shit and jumping in muddy puddles? God forbid any one of them should walk across a clean surface for once. "Don't get involved, Rouska." Alright, guys, alright. Stay negative then. It's your funeral. Whose fault it is that they're living for the likes of Veropoulos and Vasilopoulos and nothing else? Whose?

She pulls the gloves down all the way and dips the rag into a bucket. She wrings it out and starts cleaning the walls.

Then I noticed that the taller one was wearing flimsy house slippers instead of shoes and the shorter one had a huge stain on the back of his pants. And that was what did it for me. I started thinking about everything we went through, about how we took our first steps out of prison and then walked right into the jungle.

She puts her hands on her waist and stretches. She tries to touch her toes

A month ago I noticed this little blond guy passing through the station. Actually, not just passing through. He was up to something. I was on my shift and he was taking pictures. He even stopped to swap out his lens every so often. I saw that he wasn't shooting beautiful women, so what the hell was he doing? He kept pointing his camera at the floor. Alright, alright. The floor *is* stunning, I know. You can just about see your reflection in the tiles after I do a pass or two [*She looks down and straightens her bangs*], but even the cleanest, most pearly-white tiles can get boring after five hours of shooting, right? He must be nuts, I thought to myself. But right before my shift was over and I could barely take it anymore I asked him.

She takes off one shoe and hobbles across the stage.

Guess what he was taking pictures of. Shoes! Random strangers' shoes. Sandals, pumps, sneakers. Scuffed-up, brand new, freshly shined. It didn't matter. He was Belgian. A Belgian photographer from Bruges. He even took a picture of someone digging through the trash barefoot and drinking the water from the half-empty bottles. He asked to take a picture of mine, too. Knock yourself out, I told him. I'd love to shoot you in heels, too, he said.

She rubs her calf with her bare foot, then takes off the other shoe. She continues to clean the walls in her socks.

And fishnet stockings? I asked. Poor little guy turned beet red. Before he left he asked me for my address to send me the prints. The photos of my work shoes, my beaten up Stan Smiths! Why would I want them? "I'm preparing for a show in Brussels," he said. "It's called *The lower limits of the city*."

She gets down on all fours to tackle a tough stain.

Times change. We're done with faces, places, and monuments. We've moved onto shoes. And why not, right? Haven't we already stopped looking above the waist? People are nothing more than cropped photos now. Free-standing, self-powered pairs of legs walking down the street. That's how it is. If we were designers, we'd have only two templates: pants and skirts.

A yellow light shines down on her. She crawls towards the audience members' feet and tries to shine their shoes.

On my knees. On the floor tiles, in the shitter, in the trash. On my knees. Knee-deep in the scum of the earth. On the streets for hours. In the cold, in the heat. On the streets. I'm there. Hospitals, graveyards, soccer fields. There I am. At the protests, in the jails, on the holidays. We are silent,

well-behaved, and invisible. Cleaning up your messes. We're there. That's who we are. We are the fifth labor of Hercules!

Still on all fours.

Careful, Augeas. Watch yourself. Actually, all of you Augeases better watch out! Watch your backs 'cause here we come! Here. We. Come. The nothings, united. Just sit and wait! Here comes nothing!

She submerges the cloth then wrings it out. Angered, she throws it on the ground.

We will drown you! Hey, listen to me when I'm talking to you! We know we can't get to the Alfeios and the Pineios. But we *can* unearth the Ilisos and that cesspool you call the Cephissus and we can flood your whole world! Your villas with their manicured lawns. Your custom SUVs. Your dull, grey ministries with their sham bureaucracies. Your banks with their smiley branch managers. Your vacations, your philanthropies, your ephemeral immortality.

She stands up and sprays the audience with cleaning solution.

We will flood your dreams with beautiful nightmares.

She puts on her work shoes.

Are we cleaning ladies or are we women? Are we women or are we immigrants? Are we immigrants or...what the shit are we?

She approaches the audience and gets right in their faces.

We are the very picture of municipal love.

The yellow light is turned off.

Okay, so you're laughing. But that's what we are. And *that* is why we clean the streets as if they are the hallways of our own apartments and *that* is why we take care of the parks as if they are our very own terraces. So go ahead and laugh. Keep on laughing. But just know that that's why we decorate the plateias like our living rooms. Stop it. Stop laughing.

She laughs nervously.

Stop!

She goes over the walls again.

They're always laughing. Why do they laugh, Rouska? Are we just a joke to them? Irinka works for this leftist lawyer in Kifissia. He's handsome, pleasant, generous. And he's running for office, of course. He's always going on about poor people's rights, foreigners' rights, gay rights, animal

rights. But what about the rights of old school junkies? You know who I'm talking about, right? The guys that don't have veins left to puncture or nostrils left to snort with. He never mentions those people's rights. And this is one of our employers. This is where our salaries come from...

She goes over the walls again, starting from the other side.

Irinka's hilarious. All they do is laugh, she said. And flash those teeth. They're always flashing us those whitened teeth. When they pay, the teeth. When they don't pay, the teeth. Why do they do it? To scare us? I don't get it? Is it because when your teeth get whitened they take longer to rot?

She stands still for a moment then puts her hair in a bun.

Eventually their parents, the parents whose turds we dispose of, die. But they keep on whitening. Their children move out but they keep on whitening. They divorce their wives but they keep on whitening. They make it work and stay together and they keep on whitening. When they cheat they whiten. When they break it off with the mistress they whiten. You can't erase that white smile. And they never stop laughing. They laugh so hard that their veins bulge. They start beating their chests like literal apes. What could possibly be so funny, am I right? They're keeling over like they just got kicked in the balls. Hey man, let us in on the joke! We could use a good laugh over here, you know!

She sticks her hand under her shirt.

It's not like I never laugh. Sometimes I stop and have a chuckle when I see a funny slogan spraypainted on a wall. But I never get like that. Actually, the other day I saw this one in Exarcheia:

MY PUSSY BURNS HOTTER THAN YOUR MOLOTOV COCKTAILS

She rubs the back of her neck.

Who wrote that one? A horny cop? A feminist in crisis? An old hippie? A poet who can't get published?

She extends her hand as close to the wall as possible without actually touching it, as if her hand is magnetized.

Some slogans destroy me. That's why I like city walls. You can drag your hand down the side of a concrete wall and then lick the wound. Like we did back home with the beech trees on the Danube. I want to take the wall's temperature with a thermometer and feel the 'pulse' of the city, as they say. I want to lean against the walls like a little girl, like a bum, like an old woman.

Then there was this one...

She erases the first slogan with her cloth.

AUTHORITY = SHIT

Actually, let's flip it and see what happens.

She erases it.

SHIT = AUTHORITY

Do you know what Emanouel did on his birthday? This was before we came to Greece. He put his little turds on a plate and brought them to the dining room. He couldn't have been older than three. He put them right next to the cake. They looked like bite-size chocolates and I wanted to eat them. Are you getting it?

She erases the slogan.

Can you really imagine yourselves writing phrases like LOVE YOUR SHIT and SOLIDARITY WITH SHIT all over Athens? I didn't think so. You can't even stomach your own shit. As soon as you catch a glimpse of it...

She mimes regurgitation.

Ala una, ala due, ala tre. Nowhere to run, nowhere to hide.

She takes a deep breath and exhales indulgently.

I'm falling in love with other people's shit.

She starts cleaning again.

Everything else is...wait a minute...have you all been sitting there this whole time waiting for *me* to reassure you that the longest road of all is the road that leads to the afterlife? Maybe it would be better if I just casually pointed out that you're all walking down a road that doesn't exist? Come on, people! What if it was a road paved with shit and rose petals? Aha! Gotcha!

She cleans feverishly.

You really think we get up every day and go to work hoping to get nothing more than the stale breadcrumbs you occasionally toss our way. That's actually what you believe, isn't it? Admit it! You're all absolutely certain that we clean up your filth for that and that alone. You have my deepest sympathies if that's what you think. All of a sudden you're all economists, but the economy you believe in is a stagnant fantasy. Get out there and find me one person who can live off of three euros and ten eurocents an hour. And let me ask you something else: do we *look* homeless? One person! We get ripped off, we get no benefits, and we get furloughed. Comrades, comrades, please. You're disgusting. I hate to break it to you, Mr. Slovenly, but this is just a gig. It's a way to pass the time. Sorry to burst your bubble! Anyway, the bottom line is that our job is to love, and loving is a dirty job. Every last piece of your trash has a place in our hearts.

She approaches the audience. Her hands are inches away from their bodies and faces.

Migrants, vagrants, lunatics, junkies, perverts, criminals.

She distances herself from them and starts cleaning, calmly.

Our children are the children of Kaiadas. That is our secret strength. All of those children belong to us. That is the secret oath that every cleaning lady takes. The only trash we polish with cold hearts is your luxury trash. The garbage that makes you puff up your chests. You know what I'm talking about you fucking garbage people with your golden plumage. There is not enough Ajax, Cif, or lemon-scented bleach in the world to cleanse you of your personal filth. But there is love. Love is the strongest acid. Love could even show vitriol a thing or two.

She dips her mop in the bucket then wrings it out. She leans on the mop.

Two days ago I got so mad an Emanouel! He was studying for a chemistry test. "What is vitriol?" Easy, right?

She points to the wall as she lists the multiple choices.

A. Sulphuric acid
B. Nitric acid
Γ. Hydrochloric acid
Δ. Sodium hydroxide

She forcefully presses her index finger against the wall.

He picked beta.

She takes her finger off the wall.

My blood started boiling. Nitric acid...nitric acid!? My sweet little boy. What about the tinner? The gypsy that used to come through town once a month. Remember? The guy who used to pass right outside our door when we lived in Silistra? "Tin, tin, tinnnnnnnnner! I can coat anything!" Remember he was black as tar, sitting cross-legged in front of the fire wrapped up in the smoke and vapors? Don't give me that stupid look, answer me! Didn't grandma always give you her old roasting pan to take to him? What did he use on copper pots and pans to get the green stuff off?

She starts scrubbing.

"I dunno, what?" I felt like ripping both ears off his head. Are you joking, little one? It was vitriol, wasn't it? Sulfuric acid? Hel*lo*?

She stops scrubbing.

Then he goes: "Mama, why do they call it 'god-like acid' in Greek? Is it because that's what the Good Lord drinks to unwind after a hard day?" Ha. Good one. Maybe I should spring for improv classes on top of the music lessons I'm already paying for.

She checks her watch, rubs her neck, and stretches. She leans forward, heaving.

—So where will you go?
—Anywhere.
—Anywhere?
—Anywhere.
—Are you telling me there's an actual place called "Anywhere"?

The streetlights go on, the stage lights go off. She is back-lit.

—Will you stop grilling me if I say yes?
—So you're sticking with that. That there's an actual place called Anywhere?
—Yes I am. And Anywhere is far away from you!
—So you can't see me if you're in "Anywhere"?
—Right. And I can't hear you either.
—Really?
—Yes, I can't see or hear you when I'm Anywhere.
—I think you'll be able to do both, actually.
—What are you talking about?
—You heard me.
—What are you talking about?

She opens the hidden closet door and takes out a thermos. She sits down on the bench.

—You heard me.
—So?
—You can't not see me and you can't not hear me.
—Why not? Are you a ghost now?
—I dunno.
—Dunno, dunno, dunno. What don't you know!
—That's what I'd like to know.
—You really believe that I can't leave.
—I dunno.
—What can't I do?
—I dunno.
—What don't I know?
—You don't want to leave. That's what you can't do, and you know it.

She takes off her gloves and lights a cigarette. She pours some coffee into the lid-cup of the thermos.

—That's just your opinion.

—That's just our life.
—That's just your life.
—Our life.
—*Your* life isn't *our* life.
—Go then. What are you waiting for.
—I will...
—You'll...
—I'll what?
—Don't push.
—I touched you, I didn't push you.
—Your touch is worse.
—Worse than what?
—It's the worst.
—You said *worse*, not the *worst*.
—This is exhausting. Can you not touch me?
—Why?
—Don't ask. Can you just not?
—Is that what you want?
—Can you not though?
—So that's not what you want...
—Even if you break my arm, I won't let you touch me.
—There was a time when you wanted that...
—Even if you send me to the hospital I won't.

She pops the cap back on the thermos.

—That's all you have to say, Rouska?
—We haven't had more to say in a long time, Peter.

She exhales a cloud of smoke, exasperated. She checks her watch.

Your name is Peter and you're literally petrified. You kicked us to the curb. Peter, Peter, Peter. You couldn't call? Not even once? Okay, who cares about me. But what about the kid? The other day he had a dream that he was wearing your Panama hat and a cat came and dug its claws into his scalp. The Panama hat you bought in Thessaloniki, remember? We both know who that cat was, Peter. We know the cat by name. We know how it walks, and we know how it purrs.

The streetlights go off and the stage lights turn back on. She gets up and stashes her cigarettes and lighter in her pocket. She puts the thermos back in the closet.

Uncle Georgi always used to wonder: "Who are we talking to when we talk to ourselves about ourselves?" He said that whoever it is, it's not the self. That's for sure.

She puts on her gloves and picks up the sponge again.

Uncle Georgi with that nose like a grappling hook and those yellow fingers that looked they were dipped in sulphur. His mother was a Jew and his father was a Christian. He was half-and-half. He was always saying stuff like "One more cigarette and then we eat. One more cigarette and we're outta here." "One more cigarette and then you're dead." That's what Aunt Elena used to say back to him. He was more than just your average chainsmoker. He was born smoking, born to smoke. We left a pack of Camels on his tombstone. Unfiltered, of course. Right next to the flowers. He was very faithful to very many women, but when it came to Joe Camel, he was truly monogamous. A former communist, a former Christian, a former Jew. "Good is shallow because Good is deep," he said while blowing smoke in my eyes. "That's why Evil is mysterious, enigmatic, and fun."

She cleans languidly.

When I come home from work dog tired and treat my swollen feet to a salt bath, his words are what soothes my aching back. It's like his stories, his hero-less stories, turn into a pair of hands that massage my neck and shoulders. Calm down. That's what they say to me. Then they do my calves. Take it easy, they say. And I'm finally able to relax...

She pauses.

"Love gives love, only love. And love receives love, only love, in return. What do Stalin, Mao, Castro, and Honecker have to do with love? What about Zivkof [*she beats her chest gently*]? Or Ceaușesku? Or the butcher Pol Pot? Pay a little attention to Uncle Karl. Cut the middleman. What does Paul have to do with Christ? Let your thirst for the absolute take you on the path to reason. We agreed to disagree and we called it modern life. Never forget that. Look back on the great narratives. That's where you'll find the meaning in the differences."

She gets into a groove with the cleaning cloth.

"Why do we die sucking on a pacifier? And why do we lust after another man's being? Why do we long for his possessions? It's because we believe, childishly, that Evil always lurks beyond us and now within us."

Georgi was my father's brother. This is a letter that I know by heart. It's a letter than was never written and never sent. But it's been received. It's forever being received.

She touches her hand to her chest.

That's how Adulthood would write if it had two hands and a pencil. This is a letter from an uncle to his nephew, from a childless father to a son whose father wasn't a father at all. There isn't a synagogue, church, or mosque anywhere in the world waiting for Emanouel to walk through its doors. He is the Messiah of his own life, the Savior of his own present. And of my life, and of my present. He is all I have. And there's also Spiros. And my mother, who is my rock, my ever-patient rock.

She cleans and smiles.

Spiros is weirdo but he cracks me up. Weird old Spyros with his three little dogs and me. Milou number one, Milou number two, and Milou number three. And no, there is nothing going on between us. They're my boys, he says, quivering. As far as he's concerned, you're either a cat person or a dog person. That's it. Those three fox terriers are his whole life. A cat is just another piece of meat as far as he's concerned. He lives and breathes for the Milous. "How do you tell them apart, Spiros?" "Exactly." When we first got here, he would teach Emanouel French. But not from a book, from Tin Tin. He is obsessed with Tin Tin. He has stacks and stacks of Tin Tins. "I wish you could have met our cat Pisa, I tell him. The whole village was in tears when she died." But he won't have it. "You know, Hergé hated communists—," I remind him, just to get under his skin.

She stops dead in her tracks.

" —Alright, that's enough of that. Which café should we go to?" I always used to bust his balls. "How about we just meet at Typhoid Fever Station or Child Molester Square?" At first he would dig his fists into his temples but eventually he got used to me. "What about the Roman Baths?" he suggests now. He learned my ways just like that.

She scrubs and scrubs, enjoying herself.

Actually, he never really did get used to me or learn my ways. I think he just stopped resisting. He let it go. People can really let themselves go now with the new Metro. It's nothing like the old disgusting ΗΣΑΠ. Why do they even bother trying to clean up that old line? No matter what they do it still smells like feet and farts. Money down the drain if you ask me. You couldn't even lick it clean if you wanted to...

She yanks on her collar.

Now you can finally let yourself go. You get on the train, then you get off. The crowds of people piling into the train car are like waves crashing down on you, drowning you. They try and keep their heads floating above the level of immediate reality. You get on, you get off. Boom. Actually, no. You don't *lose* yourself. Not exactly. "The labyrinth is the path of the indecisive," said a long-winded professor of mine when he was discussing the Minotaur. You are your own Theseus caught without a thread in underground Athens. A sense of smell without a sense of direction.

She pulls on her shirt as if she is drowning.

If you don't work, you don't survive. Yet you walk around munching on mandarin oranges, chestnuts, and strawberries exercising your right to loaf. *The idle aren't fit to be heroes of this nation.* The right to be bored, to be idle, to be melancholy. *Work makes you free.* You walk and smoke like a chimney. Oh, Georgi. Rights. Something takes over you, something that's from the past but that's not necessarily something distant.

She sweeps up.

Answers took precedence over questions in ancient Greece, said your word-mincing professor in Sofia. He cracked you up. You didn't have a care in the world, or anything else in the world for that matter. Back then you lived in blissful ignorance of your own decline, of decay.

She stops sweeping.

Then, bam! It all came crumbling down like a huge rotten tooth.

She wraps her arms around her legs as if the world were swallowing her up.

After it was all over you made it to *sunny* Athens, with its *gilded* archaeological sites that offered you feather dusters, shovels, hedge-trimmers, sponges, and even G-strings.

She starts cleaning again absentmindedly.

That's how you ended up where the sun always shines.

She cleans and enjoys herself.

Why don't I have permanent resident status? Because sunshine. Why don't the laws apply to anyone? Because sunshine. Why do the higher-ups steal from us? Because sunshine. Why do the lower-downs destroy everything? Because sunshine. No one talks to anyone. There are ten million of them and they're all estranged. Sunshine on sunshine on sunshine.

She's cleaning as if she's dreaming.

One morning it was so cold that the shirts we hung out to dry shivered and waved to the neighbors walking by. It was so cold that the men took up axes and tried to hack up the ice in the frozen wells so that we might have a little water to drink. That was the day that your mother went to school for the first time. She was wearing her little red hat and her little red gloves. But nothing was redder than her little red nose. *It's like a little chili pepper*, said a man layered up like an onion, who observed the passing clouds from below, who looked at the ground instead of at the sky, using the frozen puddles as mirrors.

Her sweeping leads her upstage.

Alright, boys and girls. Who can tell me what Grandfather Stalin is looking at? Before she began, the teacher had inspected their fingernails. Clipped and clean? Good. Then she instructed them to open their Alphabetaris to page one. *At me, at me, at me!* They all raised their hands, all of them believing that the moustachioed man was smiling right at them. Your mother was among those children. *Just at you? He's not smiling at me, too?* the teacher asked them. She seemed sad.

She marches back downstage as if she is in a parade.

That's when your mother first learned that Ioseb Besarionis dze Jughashvili watches over everyone, not just her and her classmates. He watched over her dry-as-a-broomstick teacher and her pain-in-the-ass principal, too. He even looked out for her grandpa Misha, who she never knew. And that's just the tip of the iceberg. He looks after our little chickens and our cat Pisa as well as the mice that Pisa chases. And our cities and our forests and our rivers with all the people and the animals and the fishes. And the members of the Central Committee. He watches what they say and what they don't say, what they think and what they don't think.

She keeps sweeping.

You know, kids, when Grandfather Stalin died all the clocks stopped ticking for a whole minute, the teacher told them. *Of course, none of you had been born yet. Ask your parents, though, and your grandparents. Ask them what they were doing on the 5th of March of 1953? I'm curious to know. What were they doing at precisely ten minutes before ten o'clock in the morning? I'm honestly so curious. What were they doing for those sixty seconds?*

She closes her eyes as she cleans right up against the audience.

"The Tale of Little Chili Pepper." These were your bedtime stories. The adventures of little Rouska and little Emanouel. That was the only way you could get him to fall asleep. Nothing else worked. He was always too wound up. Dragons, pirates, aliens, spiderman. Nothing ever worked. It's as if he was stuck in church chanting the Akathist. But as soon as he got a dose of Little Chili Pepper, bam! Out cold.

She opens her eyes.

One day he came home with a cut on his eyebrow. Who hit you, my baby? Silence. Any chance you got into a fight with Panayotis? Leave me alone, mom! But he confessed after some more prodding. We were playing killers and hooligans at school. I just stared at him. Someone hit me with a stick. What kind of game is that, my baby? A game kind of game. And which one were you, Emanouel? He laughed. What are you laughing at? I was concerned. I talked to Spiros about it. He laughed too. What can I tell you, Rouska? We used to ask ourselves how we ended up with kids like this. Now our kids ask themselves how they ended up with parents like us.

All kids are different, though. With Emanouel the only thing you can do is let it go. I can't just stand here and pretend to be some alpha-mom. You just let it go.

She plants her hands firmly on her thighs.

I'm losing my mind. It's like I'm a little kid too. Listen to what he said to me once. This was when he was just a little guy, before elementary school. We still lived in Sofia actually. I want us to die together. That's what he said. Peter and I were still together. What do you even say to that? You and dad can die together instead? No? Then what? Grandma is going to die after me? You don't say anything. You let it go and wait for him to grow up. With Emanouel you always let things go. All you need is the will to listen. And he has a lot to say. Just let it go. But there's one thing I never allow. Nope! Not on my watch!

She puts her hands up.

I will not have him speak like a little grown up. No way!

She puts her hands down.

I'm a real stickler when it comes to that. You're a kid, right? So talk like one! There's a right time and a wrong time for everything. Got that? The situation here is out of control. Do you hear me? You are a child. A chi-i-ild. The real world doesn't exist as far as you're concerned. It's like they're living in another world. It's crazy. Taxi drivers talking like congressmen. Congressmen talking like businessmen. Businessmen talking like baristas. Baristas talking like philosophers. Philosophers talking like civil servants. Civil servants talking like...

She is glowing.

So does that mean that you're supposed to talk like a cleaning lady? That's what the little shit hit me with one day. You're making me sick, I told him. Okay, so stop kissing me. You're contagious. Sick from too much happiness, I meant. I'll get you an aspirin. I've got an illness and I need a cure!

She checks her watch.

I'm not actually checking the time. I've been doing this job for five years. I could do it in my sleep. I don't even need a watch. I can feel when it's time to clock out and when it's time for my cigarette. I'm just looking at my watch. I'm not checking the time at all. I can feel when it's time for my coffee. I only look down at my wrist as a force of habit. I could even tell you what tile I'm stepping on at any given point without looking down.

She wipes the face of her watch on her pant leg.

It's a Russian watch. Surprised? It's a "Spava." It did tell time once. But now it's just an empty face. "Spava." He was wearing it when they came and got him. He was wearing it on the day they took him to Lovech. It was the first of April. Now it's broken. I've gone through five straps since then, since that day. Five new straps. April first and then I never saw him again.

She gives her wrist a twist mid-air. The yellow light falls on her.

So what was he like as a little kid? It feels like a lie to say that that was the last time I saw him. Emanouel is exactly like him. They're like twins. It's as if he's only Peter's child and not mine too. April first. His birthday. He was drunk. I was twelve going on thirteen. I feels like a lie to say that he was drunk. I was Emanouel's age then. He downed a couple of Miskets because he just *had* to have Zhivkov's favorite wine on his birthday. It feels like a lie to say that he burned through half a paycheck just to get drunk on the same wine as a dictator. When he was totally wasted he went out into the street, covered the bottles with a towel, and started dancing on top of them. It feels like a lie to say that I still wear his watch. Shards on shards on shards of glass in the mud. They haven't stopped sparkling yet.

The yellow light goes off. She checks her watch again.

My little baby-boo. There are lies and then there are *lies*. Do you think I would lie to you? Some lies get burned by the flame of truth. No lie, no lie. They burn to a crisp and all that's left is a heap of ash.

She starts cleaning the bench.

So, laou-laou. There's no tomorrow. Yesterday was yesterday. From now on it will always be now. Dakar-dakar on my toumbeleki. Little babe, we have so much but we don't have a single thing. Listen to the toumbeleki.

She cleans the legs of the bench.

There aren't any people anymore. It's just jobs now. Dakar-dakar. A whole dizzy of people, as my uncle Dragan used to say. When I sober up I'll get wasted. Played the clarinet in his sleep. Dragan, not dakar. Please my homeland don't be so sad. Everything is wrinkles and memories. Dakar-dakar. My father came to me in a dream just so he could die at his own pace. He smelled like garlic and wine and he was playing a golden accordion. Aaah, a clean gut for a clean soul. Those were his last words. Dakar-dakar.

She cleans the back of the bench.

My first love had a small painted face and a little laughing pig. Oh, Mirele. Your embrace was hot snow and your kiss was honey in darkness. Dakar-dakar. I don't cry to forget. I cry to quench my thirst. It's boiling today. Whatever is said is forgotten. So that's why dakar-dakar. Fuck death. If Mister Death comes around I'll slap him so hard that every last one of his teeth comes out. Who gives a fuck about this fucking planet? Up or down. What's the difference? You don't get a voice in heaven, you know. Dakar-dakar. Dakar-dakar. All there is is cash. Nothing else is real. Stop looking for something else. The cash never sleeps. On the day when the rich finally set fire to their moneybags and the poor finally set fire to their anger, that's when love will break free.

She lies down on the bench she just cleaned.

Three hours in the morning, then three hours in the afternoon. "Pepito la Mallorca." "Paloma." Dinamo București is the best team in the game right now! "Besame mucho." No complaints from me. People love me. I came here on a train that went zakata-zakata down the tracks. I speak Italian, Spanish, and Greek. I could never really talk about myself. So apologies to all the details of my life. What did you say your name was again?

She rubs her face hard. It's as if she's trying to erase her distinguishing features.

Rouska Rouskeva.

She smoothes out her clothes.

A former archaeologist, a former wife, a former bereaved. A red cleaning lady working for black employers.

She starts gathering her cleaning supplies.

Two days ago one of these black bosses, a guy who thinks he's the shit, started talking about some Bulgarian women he met at a "club" on Acharnon. He kept going on and on about them and being as loud as possible, to make sure I could hear from where I was. *Bulgarian women are the best! Am I right? They aren't scared of dick. Am I right? Rouska?* And he was eating a sandwich with extra mayo and cracking up as he said this. *Kyrie Niko*, I tell him, *can you ever really know what a foreign woman is thinking? And I don't just mean the ones that aren't scared of dick but the ones that are, too.* He came close to swallowing his entire arm. I put down the mop and started to recite:

"If someone were to ask me
What I feel when I take my clothes off
Under the lights, my movements beautiful and naughty,
With the golden spotlight following me
Like a stripper,
I would answer: nothing."

Then this other guy who is so girthy he can barely breathe says to me *Yo, Bulgaria! What even was that?* Brecht gets me every time. In that moment it was as if there was no one else in the world. What kind of a reader was Brecht? Do you know? There was no one else in the world. No bosses, no joblessness, no nothing. It was freezing but he was burning up inside. No one else. Not even Emanouel, not even my mom, not even Spiros. They showed us a documentary about his life in middle school. No one else. Brecht and Coen. Those are my two guys.

She moves to the rhythm of the song.

"The woman in blue, she's asking for revenge,
the man in white—that's you—says he has no friends.
The river is swollen up with rusty cans
and the trees are burning in your promised land."

Coen taught me English. His songs always held me close. Like a neverending embrace. Ms. Hariklia's daughter Stella downloaded them all for me off the Internet. He was a such a babe, too! And he's aged very well.

She put her cleaning supplies in the hidden closet.

A bunch of people gathered around us. Liliana was dancing. She's a Moldovan woman who works with us. They applauded. Green eyes, milky-white skin, and body that can send you to another dimension. It was a real performance. The black boss and his black crew left with their tails tucked firmly between their legs. We really put on a show.

"I forgot to tell the milk man not to bring me milk.
No, today I won't show my ass.
I'll just give it a little shake.
Food makes me nauseous at the 'Yellow Dog.'"

Yellow pussy, green dick. One of the guys started messing with him. What's the name of that strip club you go to again, Nikos? "Club Viagra"? He turned to me and shot me a death stare. And not just any old death stare. A death stare worth five pistols and ten switchblades.

She takes off her cleaning uniform. The trains quiet down.

Have you ever seen a yellow dog? A dog as yellow as Van Gogh's chrysanthemums when he cut his ear off? I have and I don't want to see another one. A dog as yellow as the wind that blows through Belene and Lovech. Never again. It's not like a Labrador with its golden sweetness. Never ever again. It's a white mutt. A griffon mix. It's nothing like the yellow cobblestones in Nisiros at "the Volcano," which is the cantina I worked at every summer. No. Not again. Not ever. And it's not like the yellow bike that Peter always shows up with in Emanouel's dreams.

She takes off her gloves.

Once there was a little puppy running around yelping. She was more yellow than the yellow safire of the Devil's smile. This wasn't your average stray dog barking up and down the streets. She was a slow flash of lightning with a snout. A car must have run her over, I thought to myself. Its head was throbbing, its skin opened up to a reveal a map of the underworld. *Don't touch it,* said the periptero lady as she doused it with three bottles of Loutraki. I ran and got the hose to spray it down. *Don't touch it!*

She kicks the bucket of water.

Have you ever seen a charcoal fire get put out? Fssssssht! It sounded like the song of vitriol. And that was it for her.

She sloshes the water around.

Let's reach out to the anarchist who throws his heart, not stones
Let's reach out to the cop who wields his flaccid dick, not billyclubs
Let's reach out to the priest who knows the silence of the immigrant, not psalms

She strips down to her underwear and dances around.

Let's reach out to the politician crying in his sleep
Let's reach out to the TV star crying in his sleep
And in the sleep of the politician crying in his sleep

Let's reach out to the businessman crying in his sleep

And in the sleep of the TV star crying in his sleep
And in the sleep of the politician crying in his sleep.

Let's reach out to whoever stabs the darkness within him
Who falls without making a sound
The average person who doesn't even exist
You who doused me in vitriol

Reach out
Touch
The touch
That cannot be touched.

She gets dressed and is soaked in yellow light. She takes a brush out of her bag and brushes her hair. She rubs lotion on her hands. She sprays perfume on her neck. She applies lipstick.

I'm Zouzou from Petralona and I'm burning up. I'm Amine from Tehran and I'm burning up. I'm Madonna, the crazy boy from Berlin, and I'm burning up. I'm Victor Riesel, journalist for the *New York Post*, and I'm burning up.

I'm the out-of-work tinner of the underworld and I'm burning up.

I have a twelve-hundred-degree fever and I'm
Burning, burning, burning up.

I am the acid rain falling on the factories of Milan, Skopje, Sofia, Drama, Komotini
The factories that all closed down.
I am the balsam of Aphrodite Melainis.

She checks her watch.

I am the king of chemical reactions.
I am the wizard of pain.
I am the green lion of madness.
I am the gift that Medea gave to Glauce.
I am the baryte, the chalcanthite, and the magnesium sulfate
In the bowels of the earth.

Darkness. A voice.

"Thus with water and myrrh they restored his breath for a short time. And once revived, he requested cold water to drink. He received and drank, but his heart was stricken and, after two days, he died."

The actress exists. A yellow light shines on the bench. A voice. A clear voice.

горя. дайте ми малко вода. каэвам се руска и горя.[2]

[2] I'm burning up. Give me some water. I'm Rouska and I'm burning up.

PART THREE

Stories from *Victoria Does Not Exist: A Novella*

by Yiannis Tsirbas

2013

from the 'train story'

Night is falling slowly, slowly. The deep-orange sky is turning purple. I muster up the courage to ask him if he himself would ever do something. You know, something violent.

"If...?" "Would...?"

He laughs. A sort of fake laugh. Then he shoots me a death stare.

"Okay let's start with bread. I have a plan. A plan that will start an epidemic. Or you could call it a trend. Because trends are really just epidemics. They're always telling us that we should wrap up our leftovers, especially leftover bread, in a separate bag. And instead of throwing it out they tell us we should leave that bag hanging from the outside of the dumpster. So people can see it. So people can eat."

I don't know what he means. He's dragging out the syllables of those last few words. For sarcasm. Then he shifts in his seat and repeats one word, softly:

"People."

He laughs again. Or chortles, more like it. Then he closes his eyes. This time I'm almost convinced he'll actually fall asleep. He tries resting his head in his hands. But he can't get comfortable. So he continues, somewhat incensed:

"And where do *you* live, man?"

I tell him that I grew up in Agia Paraskevi.

"Must be nice."

He purses his lips.

"Alright so what if a chicken truck started making stops outside your house every day? Every afternoon at around four. Acharnon and Mamai, right on the corner. And what if the truck was actually a huge cage filled with chickens? Actual live chickens, mind you. And as soon as it

pulls up they all flock to it. Pakistanis, Afghanis, all kinds of little devils buying their live chickens. And then you see them scattering, each of them with a chicken in his hand, running every which way. And this is the twenty-first century we're talking about. This is the city. This is the capital. Oh and, by the way, care to guess where they're all headed with those chickens of theirs? They actually take them into apartment buildings! Which means that I'm living six inches away from some Pakistani's chicken like it's 1950, man. They've turned this place into a literal chicken coop. So, Mr. Agia Paraskevi, enlighten me: is this the kind of neighborhood you'd want to live in? Let me take a second to tell you what it's like to walk around the neighborhood where you grew up, because I grew up somewhere too, you know. The only difference is that now whenever I walk down my own street, the street I've lived on my whole life, I have to walk past a Pakistani holding the feet of his still-clucking chicken in one hand and a transistor radio blasting Arab music in the other hand. Because that's the other thing. It's not just the chickens anymore, it's the radios, too. And if it's not a radio it's a cell phone that can play the top-ten of the United Arab Emirates. Do you hear what I'm saying?"

He's shaking. I find myself scanning the train car for any passengers that might be able to help me if I needed it.

"One time. Once. One time I lost it, man. I was in the car. At the corner of Sourmeli and Acharnon, right by my old school. They call it a 'multicultural' school now. They're really rubbing it in our faces, man. They put us in this mess and they rub it in our faces just like that. Fine, okay: multiculturalism and globalization. I get it. But at the same time I'm running out of gas and I'm making a spectacle of myself at the gas station asking for five euros of gas. Five euros! Have you ever asked for just five euros' worth of gas, man? As soon as the nozzle goes in they have to take it out again. And so I'm stopped at the light, looking at the Masonic Temple

with its gold doors and golden compass, the most decked-out building in the neighborhood, and he walks right by me. This black guy bounces right by me and he's holding a dish filled to the brim with soft serve. And he's got toppings, too. He's got his syrups and his crushed almonds and his everything. A real parfait! And he's eating it slowly, slowly. Really enjoying himself. Savoring it, you know? And he's flipping and flopping with those flip-flops and you can see it, you can just make out that...that whiteness on the soles of his feet and in between his toes...disgusting...And I don't even have gas money, man. I'm digging around for spare change trying to buy cigarettes for one euro. Gold Mounts. Bootlegs, you know? You don't know them. They're trash. There are these Armenian, maybe Kurdish women who hang out on the side streets, on Fokeas, on Filippidou. They flash you a single pack like it's some covert operation and as soon as you give them ten euros they disappear into the building where they have their whole set-up and bring you a case. And I can't even remember the last time I had an ice cream and I'm only buying essentials now and meanwhile this "African people" had his dinner and felt like going out for dessert! That did it, man. I put on my hazards, step out, and go pssst! With the first blow there goes his ice cream and with the second he's getting dragged down the sidewalk and his flip-flops are flying in opposite directions. Friend friend, he says. What friend when he's getting kicked in the face, there go his teeth there goes his everything."

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Now I understand the true meaning of the word "speechless." I sense that everyone around us can hear him, but when I turn my head I see that no one is looking in our direction. I'm starting to suspect that all the passengers are following our conversation but have somehow managed to avoid eye contact with me. He looks right at me for the first time. In this moment, this rare

moment, I try and make sense of it. To make sense of him. But there's nothing there but genuine concern. Concern, though, is not much of a motive. Concern by itself does not entail motivation. I realize that I haven't asked him anything substantial yet. Because what would the point of that be? As far as I'm concerned, if something isn't on the news, it didn't happen. It doesn't exist. There's only one way to digest reality: someone has to serve it to you, but without touching, without the possibility of contact. I need a screen. I wish there were a screen between us. Ridiculous, right? Perhaps not. I hit "select all" and wipe my spam folder clean. I've always believed that everything is rooted in logic. I can't not believe that. That's just who I am. I haven't asked him anything because I have no idea what kind of response I might get. I never ask questions without basically knowing the answer already. "Man, what are you talking about?" Is that why I should ask him? What would his response be? "Come on, man! Don't act like nothing's up." In the end I don't ask him anything at all. Maybe it's my upbringing. My manners. The manners Vaso is always making fun of me for. But I just prefer not to blatantly disagree with strangers. Or with anyone, for that matter. What good would it do me to start bringing up things like democracy and violence and civilization? He starts up again. His voice is noticeably lower now, almost as if he's trying to defend himself. He's aware of how candid he's been. Or perhaps that's just my impression.

"They eat the pigeons, okay? Let's not even talk about the dogs. But the pigeons are gone. All of them. There used to be hundreds of pigeons living in the plateia. The whole neighborhood was infested. We would string together old CDs and hang them off balconies and window ledges just to get rid of the fucking pigeons that covered everything in shit, and these people ate them. They've been spotted hunting for pigeons, stalking them. Face-down in the bushes, on the sidewalks, wherever they can snatch them up. This is where I live, man. In a place where they eat

pigeons and keep live chickens and buy rotten fish out of cardboard boxes. The bums. And I've seen some crazy fights by the dumpsters, man. I saw gypsy woman get into it with an Afghanowhatevershewas over a half-eaten sandwich. I'm talking about a serious beat-down. That gypsy woman held her own, though, let me tell you. She flat-out decked that Muslim woman, who ended up bawling her eyes out all swollen from the punches. I shouted "Bravo, gypsy!" at her from across the street. Those bums. That's why we'll hit them where it hurts the most. We'll hit them where they eat.

Meaning...? There was no stopping him now.

"Just like we do with mice, man. Like we do with rats."

What is he talking about?

"You don't have any family left in the village? How do they kill mice out there? You don't know?"

I give him a look that betrays my lack of patience.

"Water and cement, my friend. That's all it takes. What do rats like? Cheese, right? Everyone knows that. So you put some bowls out around the house. Some of those bowls are filled with grated cheese mixed with powdered cement. The rest are filled with water. The rat scurries over, has a little nibble, and before you know it he's stuffing his face because he's a hungry starving bum. Then the thirsty rat has a little drink of water and bam! His stomach turns to concrete and that's the end of Mister Rat. All-natural extermination. No chemicals, no nothing.

And what does this have to do with what we're talking about? I ask.

"You've seen it on TV, man. You know what I'm talking about. They're armed with screwdrivers, they carry knives, they throw punches. Cracked skulls, broken ribs, ruptured spleens, punctured lungs, and one or two bodies on the ground. On Anaxagora, on Agiou

Meletiou. Down by Attiki they left two people dead in dumpsters. Talk about dumpster divers. Do you think that if a Pakistanaki opens up a dumpster and sees one of his own lying dead in there that he'll return to the scene of the crime? He'll be staring down his own future and shitting his pants and before long he'll go running back to Islamabad or Nairobi or wherever the hell he came from."

I decide to fuel his fire, just to get this trip over with. I ask him to go into more detail.

"Do you know about the porcelain bombs? The blankets?"

No, I had not heard about bombs made of something as fragile as porcelain. I assume it's just another example of his word play. With feigned patience I ask for clarification.

"What did the white people do when they went to America? To rid the land of Indians, who, let's be honest, had every right to be there. They gave them blankets. It looked like charity but they were hospital blankets laced with smallpox. The disease ravaged them. The Indians needed the blankets, they accepted them, they said thank you, and that was that. Whole villages wiped out. So, as you can see, the secret to wiping them out is to target what they need the most. We can't target the water supply, so it has to be their food."

But what about the porcelain? I ask with genuine interest this time.

"The Japanese, my man. Legends. What do the Chinese eat? They eat rice. So when the Japanese were fighting them they dropped packs of rice from airplanes. Thousands of them. But the rice had fleas and the fleas carried the plague. Now do you get it?

No.

"We bake a little bread. We put a little poison in the bread. We pop the bread in a bag. We tie the bag to the dumpster like the good people that we are. The Pakistanaki takes the bread and that's the end of the Pakistanaki. How about now? Are you getting it?"

My palms are sweating and I wipe them discretely on the armrest. I laugh as though he's obviously joking. Once again I turn to the other passengers. It's possible they didn't hear him considering how much more quietly he's been speaking. What if people find out? I ask.

"Find out about what, man? You think it'll make the news? 'Afghani Dumpster Diver Found Dead, Suspected Food Poisoning.' As if something else could have killed him. Maybe his cholesterol. 'Suspected...' And then the next day it's another one, and another two down the street, maybe a couple of families disappear here and there. Find me one journalist, man, just one journalist who would cover that story. Find me one cop who would get involved. One doctor to connect the dots. What is this? *CSI: Las Vegas*? Come on! They won't even figure it out amongst themselves. Trust me, primitive people don't talk to each other. They're all at each other's throats, like animals. Tribe against tribe. They'll leave just like they came here, without anyone noticing."

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I step out of Larisa Station and onto the street. My legs are feeling heavy after sitting for so many hours. My head feels heavy, too. I put down my backpack and light a cigarette. Finally. The nicotine calms me down. I already feel as if everything I heard on the train over the past few hours never even existed. As if I dreamt the whole thing. Now the dream is retreating, giving way to reality. The real reality. Crowds, smog, noise. It's cold. I take a few more drags.

A young black woman with a black robe and a black headscarf bumps into me. She's carrying a baby in a pouch and holding another kid by the hand. They're walking briskly. She seems healthy, well-nourished. Probably chubby. She's not in danger, I think. She doesn't look like she would eat out of the trash. I stop thinking these stupid thoughts and put out the cigarette. Just then a shopping cart rolls by me, pushed by a man dressed in rags. It's filled to brim with

sheet metal, wires, a radiator, and a rusty hubcap. A Roma woman approaches me. "Can you spare a cigarette, handsome?" I give her one, pick up my backpack and step aside to get away from her. She grabs my arm. "Hold on a sec, hear me out." I yank it away from her and start moving. I practically run over two little gypsies—her children?—playing a game with the clear plastic cup of spare change they've been rattling at people. They make a quiet gesture towards me, never actually believing that I might give them something, and go back to their game. It's a sort of hopscotch. I go around them, walking right on the edge of the sidewalk to get to the intersection, and cross the street as quickly as possible. I feel annoyed. I get to the next crosswalk and wait for the light. In front of me is a family from the country, each of them holding two striped nylon bags. Right next to me an old man is digging through the trash with his bare hands, moving the paper and plastic bottles to one side. White hair, white beard. Greek? I want to tell him to stop and to be careful, but I don't see any bread bags hanging from the garbage can. The light turns green and I cross the street quickly. I make it to the median that doubles as a taxi stand. I head towards the first available cab. The median is narrow, only one person can walk down it at any given time. My backpack is weighing me down. A young man with a leather jacket, probably an Arab, is coming towards me. Without thinking, I step aside, forced onto the street. A scooter whizzes by me, horn blaring, with huge garbage bags stuffed into where the driver's feet should be. The driver seems Asian to me. Immediately I step back onto the sidewalk feeling a mix of fear and irritation. Just a few more to go before I make it to the first taxi. There's a bench intended, I assume, for people to sit on while they wait for their cabs. Right now a barefoot, bearded fat guy is fast asleep on it. He's out cold. A bunch of drivers are laughing and shouting in front of the first cab. I drop my backpack in the trunk and slam it shut intentionally.

They turn and look at me. One of them breaks away from the pack and gets in. As I'm about to open the door I feel a hard smack on the back of my neck. So hard, in fact, that I bite my tongue.

"No goodbye? Come on, man! What was that about? Alright, alright, later. Next time you're in town, come find me in Victoria. If it's still standing."

He winks at me, lets go of my neck, gives me another slap on the back, and walks away, hurriedly. As soon as I get in the cab, my phone buzzes with e-mail notifications. A new day of spam has dawned. |Full-Access Gym Membership| Say Goodbye to Stretch-Marks| Two-Person Massage| Kokoni Beach, Korinthia|. I should tell Vaso. She's been wanting to join a gym. I forward it to her. Hopefully this makes her happy, warms her up to me a little. It's been a while since we've felt close to each other. I've never heard of Kokoni Beach and we could definitely use a vacation.

I tell the driver where we're going and instantly panic. A feeling of regret takes over my brain. What if Vaso, who already assumes the worst of me since things haven't been going so well lately, accidentally receives the stretch-mark offer together with the gym membership? She does have stretch marks. And recently one of them materialized in a strange spot, on the back of her calf. And I couldn't help but point it out. I remember feeling disappointed by this tiny indication of physical decline. As the cab pulls away, I catch a glimpse of the fat guy on the bench. He's awake now, he's up. He's walking barefoot on the sidewalk. Rubbing his face, just like I do every morning.

I pick up my phone again to call my wife and ask the taxi driver to turn down the radio.

It's Monday morning and the sports talk is heating up.

"Between middle and index"

You were the man, right? You were the man during the Junta. At the Lyceum for Boys on Acharnon and Heyden. Cop car parked right outside the school. One of those cars with the single flashing light on top. Like a pimple filled with blue puss. The cops got out to take care of something. They left it unlocked. Who would mess with them? You were bad. The other kids were scared to death of you. But they also wanted to be around you. Not too close, but not too far either. You never beat them up. Well, almost never. You didn't really have to. You'd just grab their noses with your vise-like fingers and twist until the juices started oozing out. It hurts. Anyone who's had it happen to them knows how much it hurts. Your own nose was already broken. You broke it when you were twelve, training. You didn't care. It was recess. Meletis! You know how to drive, man? You jumped the fence and slid into the driver's seat, looking over your shoulder to make sure that everyone was watching. You turned the key, revved the engine a couple of times, and took off, tires screeching. You flashed the light, too. Put the sirens on full blast. Then you circled the block. Right on Acharnon. Another right on Derigni. Again on Filis. And back onto Heyden where you pulled into the same spot. Every single schoolboy's face was pressed into the bars of that fence watching you. Total silence. The guard rang the bell and yelled for everyone to get to class. No one moved. They all wanted to see him. The man. You stepped out of the car with your arms held up high. Applause. Applause blending in with the sound of the siren that you left blaring. Unreal. The neighbors were out on their balconies watching you. The man.

They beat you. Badly. They held you for two days. At the station on Thiras. Fifteen years old and they turned you to mush. Eventually your dad called in a favor and they let you out. It

helped that you were a minor. Not to mention that he was an upstanding citizen, your father. Your boxing coach put in a good word, too.

You went back to school. Lips swollen. Couldn't feel them. Eyes black. Hunched over. Ribs aching. It didn't matter. You'd been through it before. You were the man. The guard opened the gate for you. He started shaking his head as soon as he saw you coming. Well, what do we have here? If it isn't Meletis! The chauffer! Nice mug, little guy. Your face looks like a plate of imam bayildi. Poor thing. You balled a fist at him.

It stung. They beat you up. They beat *you* up. And all of a sudden people started avoiding you. Even Moustroufas, who'd been assigned the seat next to yours. He just got up one day and moved to a different desk. And the teachers never said a word about it. It felt like payback for a stupid prank and it hurt. You couldn't stand being spat on like that. Not for any reason, but especially not for the cops. Goddamn it! There's only one way to get through to people, you thought. When school let out you waited for Moustroufas on Elpidos, right by your house. He saw you coming towards him and he knew immediately. He dropped his bag. Didn't say a word. You punched him until he spat two teeth out onto the pavement. The next morning he was back in his old seat. Everyone got the message. But you weren't satisfied. You weren't done being you.

There was a tattooist in Metaxourgio. I want one, you told him. Kid, please. Go home. You balled that fist of yours. A mistake. But, then again, you couldn't stop making mistakes back then. Okay, man, he said. Fine. Where do you want it? Down there. Down where? On my dick. Get the fuck outta here, man! Okay then show me how to do it and I'll do it myself. What do you even wanna get? ΑΠ-ΕΧ. What the hell is that? City Police-Greek Constabulary. The artist cackled. He convulsed with laughter. It hurt a lot, but you didn't make a sound the whole time. Your boxers were bloody for days.

You whipped it out for a couple of guys in the bathroom. That was all it took. The man. Everyone found out. You were the hero again. Everyone in Victoria knew about Tattooed Meletis. Including the cops. They picked you up again. They found you hanging out at Mimi's, the pool hall on Aristotelous. It was easy for them to find you since all of you hung out there all the time.

They held you for two days again. Only this time, they didn't throw any punches. They just kicked you. And only there, only down there. They had you on the floor, face-up and stark naked. Four of them pinned you down while a fifth one took penalty kicks. Domazos, Antoniadis. He shoots, he scores! Goal! The cops cracked themselves up with those play-by-plays. Actually you knew Domazos. He had a shop in Victoria Square. Glasswares. Your mother shopped there. When he led them to Wembley in '71 the whole city came down to Victoria to celebrate. A sea of people on Tritis Septemvriou. The crowd stretched all the way to Omonia. You thought about your mother while they kicked you. You thought about the smell of her apron. The scent of chlorine mixed with tomato paste. When the cops felt like switching it up, they brought in a different guy to step on it with his shoe, grinding it into the floor. I'll rub it off, faggot! I'll scrape the whole thing off!

You pissed blood for months. Then you tried to do something yourself, just to see if it actually worked. You went to a whorehouse. But the whore laughed in your face. Babe, I know you want it, but this thing...it just doesn't work. You started pounding her. You could feel her nose breaking. You knew that feeling well, the feeling of bone giving way to your fist. She didn't want your money, she just wanted you gone. But you insisted on paying. Like a true gentleman. Finally your father dragged you to a doctor, who tried to laugh the whole thing off. Come on,

Meletis, you've got this! You're a boxer, man. You've been through some stuff before. But he wanted to talk to your dad alone. And you knew what that meant.

The cops picked you up again. This time for information. Some classmate of yours. Some suspicious classmate. After a single kick down there you started choking up. No, guys, no. But that was all it took. You snitched, and you snitched again. And again. Eventually you were even compensated.

You're fifty-three now. You're on all fours. Sweat drips down your face and stings your eyes. You can still see your old school from the window. Its rotting facade is covered with a sign that says "Occupy." Acharnon and Heyden. You never left. You're stuck. Agiou Meletiou, Alexandras, Liosion, Patision. These are the boundaries of your world, the borders you carved out for yourself. You're getting fucked from behind. By Georgi. He's a good one. Strong. Hung. Usually lasts a long time. You met him one night when you twisted his nose until he got on his knees and begged you to stop. You were working security at a sketchy club on Ithakis and he was getting fresh with the girls. You're being rocked back and forth, shuddering. Georgi's feeling raunchy. He slaps your ass. The pain takes you out of your thoughts for just a second. Easy babe, you say, slow down. Georgi blows a load inside you and then kisses you on the neck. You lie back down and light a cigarette. Then you take a fifty from the dresser and slip it into his palm.

He says I love you, lougri mou. But with the fifty in his teeth. And his jeans are already halfway up. You watch the smoke rise to the naked lightbulb hanging from the ceiling.

Suddenly you get up and race Georgi to the door, beating him there. I miss you already, you say. Then you gently squeeze his nose between your middle and index fingers.

PART FOUR

Stories from *Plateia Mesolongiou*

by Vangelis Provias

2016

from "Plateia Mesolongiou"

I was born near Tirana, in a village. Fifty minutes away from the city. My mother was an artist. She worked for the government in a factory making souvenirs for the Party. My father was a cop. He worked the beat. We were alright. But then History paid us a visit and destroyed our lives. Actually it was my parents who suggested I leave home. Don't worry about us, they said. We'll be fine. Go make a future for yourself. Just don't worry. You know there's no work here. You know there's no life here. Go eat some bread. And don't worry. So I left and I worried.

I grew up. I made it to the age my father was when he first held me in his arms. So much work. So many jobs. They ripped me off, they stole from me, they insulted me. But they also took care of me. They gave me their trust and they earned my trust in return. And sometimes I was even moved by them. I kept worrying about my parents. Year after year. Finally the work dried up and I had to stop sending them money.

My mother got sick and died. I couldn't even make it to the funeral because of my papers. Plus I didn't really have the money. My father wanted to come find me. But I couldn't face him. I couldn't tell him that I wasn't okay here anymore, that there was no bread for me to eat, that I was living month-to-month, that I lied about having a beautiful home near a well-kept plateia. He died too, though. Thankfully. He died without ever learning the truth about my life.

I'm forgetting my language. I've started to think in the foreign language. This summer I got a job on an island close to Athens. And I'm one of the lucky ones. Thirty-five euros a day. It's an eleven-hour shift renting out umbrellas and beach chairs. I changed my name. They call me Tassos. I'm as old as my father was when I was ten. I never had a girlfriend. Girls from here always saw me as a foreigner and girls from back home were never single. At this point none of

them can even tell that I wasn't born here, but I'm the umbrella guy. I'm still worthless in their eyes.

Every night at eight when I got off work I would go to a rocky, rubble-filled cove on the island that locals and tourists alike avoided. I would swim until late. I would even take off my bathing suit. I got naked. No one could see me. Every now and then someone who didn't know the island would wind up there, lost. But they always left as soon as they noticed the trash heaps. Then it would get dark. And the dark makes the absence of others more bearable.

I try not to look at the beautiful girls lying on my beach chairs.

I remember my mom kissing my dad. And I remember him kissing her too. I remember my dad being mad at my mom. And I remember her getting mad at him. It hurts to think about their anger just as much as it hurts to think about their kisses. I swim naked. I want a woman to get mad at me and then kiss me. I'm one of the lucky ones. Eleven hours, thirty-five euros. They call me Tassos and History paid us a visit. I swim naked and alone. They don't know that I'm not one of them. But I know. I swim naked and alone.

"The Sirian Sea"

He sent a text message. It was in Greek: "Thanasis, how are you? I'm from Siria." When he realized, after seeing the front page of a newspaper hanging in a periptero in Omonia, that the name of his country is written not with an iota—Σιρία—but with an ypsilon—Συρία—he was very sad. He wished there were a way to take back the message. To re-send it, correctly this time: "I'm from Syria."

It is what it is. One thing always leads to another. He can't even remember who it was who told him that he could make some easy money safely, and without any trouble, if he posted a personal ad online. "Massage. Well endowed. Gifts please. Companionship for generous gentlemen." All he had to do was make sure to write his phone number with spaces between the digits, so that the site wouldn't block it automatically. And he had to buy a second phone, with a new number, just for this job, and never use his regular phone for work. To avoid any mix-ups and run-ins.

He did exactly what they told him to do. He went to the internet café and typed in the URL that had been written down for him on the back of his lottery ticket. He hadn't won anything, obviously. Then he wrote his personal ad, in Greek. But he used the English alphabet. Everything according to plan. Except for the new phone. He didn't have the money to spare, but, mainly, he just figured "How bad could it be? It's not like things can get much worse for me." He posted the ad and, two days later, the calls started coming in. This gave him some relief. He saw it as a confidence booster and he was in much need of contact. It was August. The city was empty and there was nothing else going on—except that a lot of men who had sent their families to the country wanted to take advantage of the opportunity and have adventures.

As for the voices on the other end of the line: some were reserved and hesitant, while others were aggressive, asking him "Are you Greek?" and "How well-endowed?" and "What sort of gift are you looking for, exactly?" He responded, truthfully, that he is not Greek. But he lied to them about his country of origin. No, he wasn't hiding. And he wasn't afraid, either. It's just that he didn't want his home country to be part of the conversation under any circumstances. He wanted to keep his old life completely separate from this work. When it came to the second question, the one about how well-endowed he is, he told them "it's big." He was embarrassed, but they kept going. "So how many inches? Thick? How thick?" After interrogating him they always brought up the money, and on this matter he was not shy. He asked for a fifty-euro donation. Without a single exception, they all haggled him, offering thirty, or twenty-five instead. He never put up too much of a fight. As if it didn't matter to him. And if he was broke, he said yes for as little as twenty euros.

He started "working." (He's the one putting the word in quotes, in his mind.) He had no idea what to expect, but he never quite realized just how ignorant he was, how little he knew of what was to come. Like people's homes, for example. The lights, the lighting. The beds. The sheets. The baptismal photos on the dressers. The televisions on mute, or turned down low. Order. Disorder. Disarray or clinical perfection. People's houses, so different, and with so many differences between them. They warned him not to look around, to keep his eyes to himself, to keep his curiosity in check, because a "client" might start to suspect he's casing the place. It is hard, though. It is very hard for him to control himself.

So he looks around. His eyes always wander. And as soon as he leaves another house, he immediately recalls, with a premature and inexcusable yet still tangible nostalgia, the images that he has just recorded. Wall decorations, half-empty shampoo bottles, perfume, souvenirs from

vacations, rugs, linens. These homes have nothing in common with each other but are at the same time so alike. He gets asked the same questions, over and over. "Beer?" He feels the same hesitation, again and again. "Should we?" The difference is in the detail, especially those details that were removed from plain sight. Rotated pictures of children and spouses. Expensive phones strategically placed under a newspaper or magazine. Wallets that are initially left on a shelf but then, somehow, disappear, only to turn up again in a dresser drawer or a closet. He would like to tell these jittery men that he is more afraid of them than they are of him.

He is pleased by, calmed by, and even sweetened by the presence of books in their houses. When there are books to be found he is not afraid. He feels safe even though he is also grieving. Books remind him of his old life. His father had books. Lots of books. And that's how he remembers him: hunched over at his desk, reading and note-taking, surrounded by endless bookshelves laden with double-stacked rows of dusty tomes. Whenever his little boyhood self would peer into the study, his father would never take his eyes off the page, and never noticed his son in the doorway. Then, when his patience wore thin: "Dad?" he would say softly as if he didn't want to be heard—even though to be heard was what he wanted more than anything. Then the skinny man with the thin moustache and the tired, darkened face would lift his head, look at him from behind thick glasses and, smiling, motion for him to come over. The happy boy climbed into his arms and, without saying a word, sucked in the familiar scents of paper, self-isolation, old books, and paternal sweat. This blissful feeling never lasted, though. "Okay, time to go...I have work to do..." his father said, returning to his notes. Those days he hated the books that tore Dad away from him. Now everything is different. The father is gone, lost. One day they took him for questioning and he never saw him again. He never learned what became of him.

The bookshelves are no more. They burned, together with the whole house, with his whole life, with his whole city. And now books are the one thing connecting him with his old life.

Most of the homes he visits don't have bookshelves, or books for that matter. Only textbooks. And children's books sometimes. He can tell the children's books from their colorful dustjackets. The person he sent the text message to, Thanasis, whose name he spelled with an iota—Θανάσις—instead of an eta—Θανάσης—had a great number of books, even more than his father had in his study. He remembers the night he went to Thanasis's house. Even though it was hot that night, the apartment was air conditioned and cool. Thanasis (if that was his real name...) made an impression on him because he was so careless. He left his wallet on the coffee table with four or five fifty-euro notes sticking out of it. When Thanasis went to the kitchen to grab them beers, it crossed his mind to take the money from the abandoned wallet, walk quietly to the door, and disappear with two hundred euros in his pocket. He picked it up and unfolded it. As it turned out, there was even more cash in there than he had thought. He brought the wallet up to his nose. It gave off a sweet, stale aroma. Apart from the money there was also a photograph, a weathered, discolored old photograph, of two boys at the beach. One of them was sticking his tongue out and making a funny face. The other, smaller boy, probably Thanasis, the owner of the wallet, was sullen. He also had a brother once. And they also played together at the beach. They had to travel for hours to get to the coast. He put the wallet back where he found it with care so as not to betray his tampering. The Syrian sea took him out of himself for a moment. He does not know where his brother is now. Thanasis came back with the beers.

"Why do you have so many books?" he asked after taking a sip. "For work," was the surprised reply. "Because I like to read." The stranger noticed the lack of a television in the living room. He yearned for Thanasis to ask him the question "do *you* read?" He would have

responded with pride. He had so much to tell him. Like that he read his father's books in order. All the important authors. But the question was never posed. Instead, the other man asked him "where are you from?" and he lowered his head. He did not want to remember. He did not want to tell him. The Syrian sea would not allow. The man noticed his reluctance and didn't press. "Wanna go in?" he said, after drinking a little more beer.

They went in. The bedroom was dark, cold, and drenched in the sound of the air conditioner. Thanasis left the lights off. They got undressed and fell into the bed. The sheets gave off a cold, chemical odor that pleased him. Just as he was pleased by the taste of the other man's mouth: toothpaste mixed with beer. He was relieved that it was over quickly and without an exaggerated climax. After, they were motionless, quiet. Side-by-side without actually touching. There was distance between them. Their deep breaths were the only signs of life. He would have to get up now, to ask where he could wash up, get dressed, and leave. But he couldn't. So he waited for the other one to make the first move. Instead, a miracle! He detected a faint snoring and timidly heaved his body closer and, once again without touching, allowed himself to dive into sleep, into a sort of sleep that was like the sea.

He woke up a few hours later, worried and panicked. It was daybreak. The other man was fast asleep and his breath was shallow, as if he were running out of air. And in his sleep he had wrapped his arms around the foreigner tightly and even drooled on his back. So he relaxed and shifted slightly to better squeeze himself into that unexpected embrace. It calmed him to be held after so long. He dove once again into the Syrian sea.

When he woke up again, the space next to his in the bed was empty. He got up, put his shirt on, and went to the kitchen. "Morning, " he said. The other man was nervous, frozen, shy. "What kind of coffee do you drink?" But he didn't want any. He got dressed quickly and left,

saddened. He hoped that Thanasis had not acted so awkwardly on account of their sleepy snuggle. He even considered not accepting any compensation.

Days went by. He thought constantly about the books. He sent a text message. It was the first time he had ever done anything like this. He saved the number of the man with the wallet and the arms wrapped around him so that, if he called, he would definitely answer, even if he was "working." "Thanasis, how are you? I'm from Siria." He offered him this piece of information, this gift of knowledge. For a little while he was quite pleased with his generosity. He could see that the text message was "sent," but a response never came. He wanted to re-send it, and take care to write it again carefully, correctly. In the end he never did.

The summer went by. And so did the fall. He got used to this temporary occupation. It's stable. Sort of. Christmas is approaching. He has more "work" now (his quotations), and people have more money in their pockets. Old "clients" suddenly appear after long absences. The houses that he goes in and out of have the same vague similarities, the same Christmas lights, the same trees. Some of them have little Christmas boats. They're all the same. He rarely encounters bookshelves with books on them. "Thanasis, how are you? I'm from Siria." He would like to have not written the name of his country incorrectly. He is not a Christian but he would like to say to someone "Happy Holidays. Merry Christmas." "Thanasis, how are you? I'm from Siria." He does not know that he made another mistake, that his misspelled Thanasis's name. "Thanasis, how are you? I'm from Siria."

I'm alright. How are you?

"Tinsel and Tequila"

Nina rinsed the soap and suds off of three plastic cups and placed them on the wooden drying rack. Finally, the sink and the countertop were both clean, spotless. As she dried her hands in the hope that she could light a cigarette—the skin on her fingertips had wrinkled from all the water and the washing up—Marianna came into the kitchen. The pulsating thud of the music penetrated the kitchen for however many seconds the door was open. This seemed to amplify Nina's fatigue.

Marianna, flushed from the excitement and the dancing, approached the counter. She saw the cups and laughed. "Nina! No one re-uses plastic cups. You don't have to wash them!" She picked them up and, with a cute, dancey twirl, shoved them into the black garbage bag in the corner, humming along to the muffled melody coming from behind the closed door. Nina, still disappointed about not getting to smoke her cigarette, about not getting to take even a single drag, smiled bitterly. For all the years she'd been here, she could never get behind the single-use mentality. She never understood it. The cups were clean, after all. Pristine even! She had to force herself not to pull them out of the bag. In her country there was no single use, even for products that, when she got here, she learned were single-use by definition. Razor blades. Condoms. Paper napkins.

"Nina mou! Make another pitcher of lemon margaritas and in about half an hour we'll cut the cake, okay?" So much for that cigarette. "Fine, kyria Marianna, I'll make one." She was twelve years older than her, had known her for almost a decade, and came into her house once a week with her own set of keys to clean and tidy up. But it was impossible for her to address Marianna with the informal, singular form of "you." She had tried to make sense of it, to understand why it was so. Was it, she wondered, yet another resilient holdover from her country,

where even people who have known each other for decades use the plural, and where the singular is acceptable only among close family members? Or was it, as she secretly suspected, that the plural allowed her to maintain a line of defense against this life here. She could not say for sure.

Marianna left the kitchen—once again opening the door to another bothersome wave of blaring, cacophonous music with no discernible melody—and Nina was left alone. She pulled a bag of lemons from one of the lower cabinets and started slicing them. She thought about the girl, about Marianna. About how she had changed these past few months. She said very little now and kept to herself...as if she had been punished for something. Nina knew the type. She had seen it in lots of people back home. The feeling that it's your fault. That you did something wrong or that you made a mistake. The guilt that comes with struggling to survive. The hopelessness. Marianna had been fired a few months ago and Nina feared that she would be told not to keep coming. If she had been in Marianna's position, that's what she would have done for sure. And she most definitely would not be throwing out pristine plastic cups. Now she really needed a cigarette, or at the very least a quick puff. But her hands were wet again. Hopefully things would go well tonight, just as Marianna had planned.

Nina had already lost three cleaning jobs. One of them was a weekly gig, the others twice a month. Each time she got a version of the same line: "Kyria Nina, no need to come next week...I'll call you when I know..." And each time she caught herself feeling not only upset and panicked about how she would make ends meet, but also relieved. She had cleaned houses for twenty years and was beginning to realize that she could not keep doing it for much longer. Not because of the physical toll. That wasn't the problem at all. Her first few years here she knew that this was a temporary occupation, just a way to make some money quickly. She would learn

perfect Greek and she would find another job, a real job. In an office. Or in a store. But despite all of the Greek lessons, despite all of the television and radio, despite all of her attempts to avoid speaking her native language (and she loved her language), her accent never receded. And this accent, she determined, was the reason that they saw her as...as different from how she really was whenever she went to find a real job. And after all the painful scenes she had endured and the difficult circumstances she had faced, she always went back to cleaning. No one ever questioned her right to clean their houses, nor did they make her fight to secure her position as a cleaning lady. The years went by. She stopped taking Greek lessons temporarily. Though, actually, as she would finally admit, she stopped for good. She bought herself a satellite dish and started watching TV from back home. She abandoned her attempts to find a real job. First she stopped asking, then she stopped hoping. There were enough houses out there that needed cleaning and she made a lot of money cleaning them. But, despite the income, she never got used to being a cleaning lady. Perhaps that's why she never used the singular "you" with any of her employers.

As she juiced the lemons for the pitcher of margaritas, she recalled an afternoon some years ago when a doctor, whose bookshelf she happened to be dusting at the time, informed her that he himself had studied in the Soviet Union years ago. And he was all smiles as he told her this, happy to have a coincidental connection to Nina. On the top shelf was an old edition of Chekov's complete works in the original. A five-volume set published by a government press. The thick, dark hardcover with the surname of the author embossed in gold letters on the spine drowned Nina in nostalgia. She got on her tip-toes, grabbed a hold of one of these tomes, and opened it up. The pages made a ripping sound as they pulled away from each other. Obviously, they had never been read. She brought the book to her nose and immediately recognized the

smell of paper made from unprocessed raw materials. How impressed she had been, when she first arrived here, that the pages of books didn't smell. She would never have thought it possible, and yet the suffocating nostalgia, with its unpleasant scent, grew even stronger.

She remembered the bookstore where she worked up until she left home. Dom Knigi. "The Book House." The only bookstore in town. Pavel, who was in charge of the classical literature section, who was two years her senior, who was slim, and who (exceptionally for his time and place) didn't drink, had told her that she reminded him of the Lady with the Dog despite the fact that she wasn't married to someone else at the time. She was a Lady with the Dog and she was all his. They had gone to Yalta together, on a government-sponsored vacation. One sun-soaked morning, on the boardwalk, on the exact boardwalk where the Lady with the Dog went for her walks, amidst the singing children parading around in their red-and-white uniforms, he told her that he loved her.

History paid them a visit a few years after their Yalta trip. At first they were all excited. They both felt an inexplicable and, as it turned out, unjustified sense of certainty that there would be more than one bookstore in their city, that the books in those stores would be made from odorless paper, and that they would be able to buy disposable razor blades and other single-use products. Pavel was swept up with this novel spirit of liberty and went straight to Moscow. He would write, he said. She should come join him there, he said. But she never got his letter. Dom Knigi became a supermarket, and to get into that supermarket one needed to get past two imposing security guards who wore earpieces, black suits, and aviators and who turned away only the poorly dressed. Now her city has no bookstores. Back then, back there, before History, Nina wanted to write her own book. A collection of short stories. So she put Chekov back on the shelf and from that day forward, right up until the doctor told her that he had to reschedule next

week and that *he* would call *her*, she kept her eyes glued to the floor whenever she dusted his bookshelves.

Nina tossed the juiced lemons into the bag and they landed right above the pristine plastic cups. Then she got a bottle of vodka for the pitcher of margaritas that Marianna would soon be coming back for. And Marianna is so happy tonight! Everything is amazing, everything has gone to plan! Her guests are loving the music and the space that she cleared in the living room by moving the couch is constantly crammed with friends dancing and laughing. Marianna always felt that parties are so depressing when no one dances. But tonight they are loving it! The mezedakia, the sweets, the shots. Everything! She watches tray after tray of food getting polished off, bottle after bottle getting drained. She's happy, but also stressed. What if she runs out of booze? How much did this party even cost? The tree alone cost one month's rent. But she wanted everything to be flawless. No, no, no doubt about it. The expenses were worth it and the fatigue is worth it. She is convinced that something good will come of it all.

Convinced. Four months ago, on the first day back from summer vacation, without warning, without any indication at all, she was fired. Fired by the same person who had hired her, who always stuck his neck out for her, who gave her a raise, a symbolic raise in the tens of euros, just before she went on break. And she doesn't hold it against him. In fact, she barely remembers anything from that nightmarish half hour in his office. What were his exact words? Did he approach her? What was the expression on his face when he broke the news? Did he even conduct the termination as advised by the relevant manuals? The panic and the bitterness erased everything but a blur, a sad summary of the events. But Marianna had this feeling. She felt that he was also very sad. He explained that he had no choice, what with budget cuts, and said that she was an excellent colleague who made him proud. But the company was in trouble, whole

accounts had been lost, and her position was being eliminated, her duties would be divided among others. People had told her they'd been given the exact same speech. But until the day she returned to the office all tan from her time away their stories felt irrelevant to her. She hadn't internalized them but regarded them as mere scenes from an American reality show.

Now she's laughing hard in the arms of the man who fired her. He tells her how beautiful her Christmas tree looks. She is pleased. She was so worried he wouldn't show up. But now that he's here everyone sees. Everyone: old colleagues who disappeared, people in the industry, potential employers and coworkers. They all see that she was not cast out, that she is still one of them, that her former supervisor comes to her home, that she is still in the game.

She is so happy. All night. She takes off her heels to dance. She takes selfies and tags everyone on Instagram. She will send each of them a résumé after the holidays. Who cares about the money, who cares about the stress of party-planning, she thinks. Tonight everything is perfect. Everything will be perfect again.

She leaves the embrace of her former boss to give instructions to the lady who cleans her house once a week and who came here tonight to help out. The lady who has been here since ten this morning making everything amazing. Nina. Nina who refused compensation, who told Marianna that she couldn't imagine not helping out, even though if it were her party she might have gone for a smaller, less lavish get-together. Marianna walks into the kitchen. Nina is drying her hands. On top of the dishwasher she has placed three single-use plastic cups to dry. Marianna laughs: "Nina mou! Make another pitcher of lemon margaritas and in about half an hour we'll cut the cake, okay?" "Fine, kyria Marianna, I'll make one."

That's the theme of the party. Christmas in Margaritaville. Tinsel and tequila. Evergreens and palm trees. Contrasts. She has conceived of it and executed it brilliantly. Candy canes and Jose Cuervo. Frostbite and sunburn.

Hopelessness and hope.

Marianna gave up the apartment on Filopappou Hill. She remembers almost nothing from that Christmas party. She couldn't get a new job, nor were any of her guests able to find her anything. She sent countless résumés and made countless calls, but the people she tried to reach were always in meetings. "When can I call back?" "No need to call back. I left him your number before, he'll be in touch with you." She left for London. She doesn't like it, but tries to convince herself she's one of the lucky ones. She found a job with a telecommunications firm. She's not a cleaning lady, and yet she still doesn't like it.

And as for that night, the night of the party. All she can feel looking back on that night is regret. When she went back into the kitchen to get the drinks, she saw Nina looking hopeless. Pale, worked up, standing over a pile of broken glass and spilled drinks, having just dropped an entire tray of shot glasses and a full pitcher. Marianna's first thought was to get down and help her out, of course it was, but...her arm, her arm lifted itself up. And then that arm, as if it had a mind of its own, delivered a hard slap to Nina's face. "Nina! I told you to be careful! Now we're out of margaritas! It's over! You destroyed my party!"

She can't quite remember what happened next. She knows she was startled and frightened, that's for sure. It's possible that Nina might have gotten up, locked the kitchen door, and held Marianna in her arms until she stopped crying and could go back to the party. But she can't say for sure that that happened. She might have dreamt that part.

"The Lid"

Friday's first steps were summery and temperate, but by midday fall had arrived. Abruptly.

All morning Athens was lazily enjoying the warm sun. And Panepistimiou, its most central street, was drowning in cars. Naked arms were dangling from driver-side windows. Pedestrians, who swarmed the sidewalks, had most of their buttons unbuttoned and, holding bottles of cool, refreshing water, sought shade. The heat, the light, the Friday, the traffic, all of it was beloved by all. Everyone smiled for no real reason other than the weather, the moment. They were all kind, warm. Even the cars honked their horns happily.

However, just when the sun reached its midday peak, and just when it seemed like nothing could dampen that morning of bliss, which everyone believed would...would last forever! That's when clouds, and lots of them, big clouds, thick clouds, appeared. A mean, mischievous, cold wind, with bone-chilling gusts and suspicious lulls, started to blow. Buttons got buttoned and zippers got zipped. Car windows were suddenly rolling up. And those pedestrians, flabbergasted, inquisitively looked up at the sky, angry at the angry autumn that decided to ruin their moment of joy and do away with the sluggish summer. It was October.

Alexandros is gainfully employed. He works for a café that is tucked away in one of the covered side streets off of Panepistimou. He starts his shift early most mornings. Quickly, swiftly he zig-zags up and down those wide sidewalks. He delivers coffee, cheese pies, and sandwiches to customers who place their orders by phone. He carries a shiny chrome tray, laden with to-go coffee cups, which always catches the eyes of those passing by. He dips in and out of bank branches, architecture firms, publishing houses, shoe stores, boutiques, and jewelers. He is

nineteen. This is his first job and the job fills him with happiness. He's held the job down for three whole weeks. The money he earns—his first money—the greetings he exchanges with the busy working people to whom he delivers whatever they had ordered, the tips, and all the details that he secretly takes note of in the offices, corporate headquarters, and retail outlets that he visits, fuel his curiosity about and reverence for adulthood, which he himself is finally entering into. Every day he is more and more convinced that Happiness and Life are kindred spirits. In fact, he is certain of it. If you are kind and you smile, if you don't spill your beverages, if you remember who ordered the sandwich with the extra ketchup, people will be sweet and generous towards you, and they will smile back, even if you're just the kid who brings the coffees in the shiny chrome tray, the kid whom passersby regard almost mockingly. And it's okay that you worry (far more often than you care to admit) about running into an acquaintance, an old classmate maybe (and you *had* classmates up until recently, only a few months ago, as a matter of fact). It doesn't matter. Alexandros is certain that life and happiness are one and the same.

When the weather suddenly and abruptly took a turn for the worst, Alexandros had just dropped off a coffee at a boutique specializing in *sur mesure* button-down shirts, quite a distance from the café actually. And by the time he made it back to pick up the next round of orders he was feeling cold, frazzled. He had always worn short sleeves to work and had never needed to dress more warmly. He did not want it to rain at all. Rain made his job difficult. He would need to cover the beverages, to wrap the cheese pies in plastic baggies. He would get wet. There was no way to hold an umbrella *and* a chrome coffee tray at the same time. He still had three hours left until he clocked out. If only the rain would wait!

Every day around noon he delivered late-morning coffees to a group of reporters at the small, historic newspaper, which occupied the top two floors of an arcane edifice in Syntagma

Square. The building was old, its walls practically begging for new coat of paint, its doors thick and rotten. Two slow, wooden elevators creaked up and down the dusty elevator shafts. Alexandros liked it there. The whole place gave him a sense of homeyness, of stability. One of the reports was a regular customer, whom Alexandros enjoyed seeing more than anyone else. A tall and slim, but fit, man, who wore beautiful, multicolored striped or plaid shirts, of which the top two buttons were always left unbuttoned. Alexandros had to make a conscious effort not stare at his open collar for longer than was acceptable (i.e. for the full amount of time that he desired to stare at it). The reporter was not more than thirty-five, or perhaps thirty-eight, years old, but in the eyes of the nineteen-year-old from the café he was very old, very mature, serious, and with a calming presence. He spoke in a spartan but especially polite manner, always using the plural, and he tipped well. His manner of address, his kindness, the plural...this was not a means of distancing himself, but rather a way to express equality and mutual respect. As far as the young coffee delivery boy who was ashamed of his job (despite how much he respected and enjoyed it) was concerned, the reporter's generous tips were code for "I know. You're starting your life in this particular employment, while your classmates are all in college. You, of course, have other plans for the future, dreams. I know, I can see it, I can tell. But now that you're here, keep going. I see you, and I support you." Alexandros heard all of this in the phrase "keep the change" as uttered by his favorite customer every time he dropped off his order.

Feeling cold, he walked into the bright neon light of the small café. He was freezing and hoped that it wouldn't rain. "These are for Γ. at the newspaper," said the woman behind the counter who answered the phones, i.e. his boss. She handed him a coffee and a *tost*, a grilled-cheese sandwich, wrapped in a paper bag. "And don't forget the lid!" This was the small, inconsequential idiosyncrasy of Alexandros's favorite customer. He wanted a lid on his coffee

cup. But the young man was sidetracked by the changing weather as well as by a bigger, more complicated order that he would have to deliver immediately after leaving the newspaper. He forgot to bring the lid. He realized this as soon as he walked into the office of the reporter, who had seen him coming and had already gotten up to retrieve his wallet from his jacket pocket. Alexandros was not altogether concerned about his mistake, and said, not because he felt a need to apologize but just so as not to seem stupid, "Forgive me, I forgot the lid for your coffee..." He was smiling as he said this. But the man suddenly looked up at him. "What?" "I forgot the lid," said Alexandros, with the same smile on his face. "I don't want it! Please take it back! I won't drink it!" said the man. He took a bill out of his pocket and threw it on his desk. "Please keep the change." Alexandros was speechless. He could not say thank you. He took the money and left. He delivered the next order, the complicated one, then went running back to the café. The air was even more frigid now, the clouds thicker, but he didn't notice any of that, and he no longer felt cold. He asked his boss to make another cappuccino for the reporter, popped on the lid that he had forgotten earlier, and hurried off to the newspaper. He did not explain the situation to her, and he paid for the second coffee himself. He wanted to run, to get there as quickly as possible, but he couldn't run, since the coffee would get ruined with all the jostling. Still, he was out of breath when he got there. The reporter was not in his office. "He left for a *reportage*...he'll be back late tonight..." a short woman with huge glasses informed him from the adjacent office. The first coffee, in the lid-less cup, was still there, untouched, right next to his landline.

The first weekend of fall came and went. And on Monday, Γ. was as polite as ever. He said nothing about the two coffees. Did he ever even see the second one? Alexandros never confirmed this. That Friday, while commuting home on the slow-moving trolleybus with his weekly wages and daily tips in his pocket (it was an amazing shift), listening to pop music on his

walkman, looking at his tired fellow passengers on their way home from work, and watching the cloudy city and its neighborhoods go by, he had a thought that both saddened him and assuaged his sadness. For the first time he thought that perhaps life is supposed to be as unpredictable and strange as that Friday was. In an instant, the sun can get lost behind the thick clouds and give way to a cold air that breaks your heart. What he really meant was that it chills your bones but instead he thought "breaks your heart" to himself.

The years went by. Alexandros found out that he was right after all. Life *is* unpredictable and can suddenly get very chilly. Be he found out that he was also wrong. Life can do way worse than cloudy days and sudden chills. Life has hurricanes, downpours, disasters, and crippling losses that make the sudden harsh words of a beautiful man whom you're falling in love with, whom you regard as a perfect human, whom you think of often and with a warm sweetness, seem wholly unimportant.

The one-time coffee delivery boy owned up to the promises he made to himself. He became very much like that mature, successful man. He wore unbuttoned striped shirts. He was always busy and, undoubtedly, short with people, with the supporting cast of his life, without being aware of it. In the meantime, the small, historic newspaper ended its run. And after that, a lot of other newspapers closed down too, and a lot of jobs were lost, among them the respectable position that Alexandros held, which was a world away from the mild embarrassment of the temporary coffee delivery boy. Despite everything, despite the fact that he never forgot that feeling of embarrassment, he never forgot that on the first autumnal afternoon of 1992 he was working at a café on Amerikis Street. And he felt lucky.

It never rained that Friday after all.

PART FIVE

Stories from *Lathropsychoi*

2018

"The Silent Mummy"

by Sotiris Athineos

She finds a corner. She props herself up against the wall. And she sleeps. She's been in this basement for two whole months now, and there's no telling when she'll get out again. Fifteen shadows are asleep on either side of her. Maybe more. They sleep in shifts so who knows how many there really are. Not that she's ever spoken to one of them. They all think she talks to Death. And they think that Death listens. She frightens them. Which is a shame, since they all stand to gain something from her. She's pregnant. Very pregnant. They call her "the silent mummy." She hasn't managed to get any sleep tonight, or last night, or the night before that. She's been talking to herself and pretending they can hear her back home.

Allah is the greatest and I have everything I could possibly want. Water, lightbulbs, a fridge. The works! Athens is molten hot this time of year. That's why it's better that I'm stuck down here during this difficult trimester. There isn't much light or any ventilation, really. But it is cool down here. Allah truly is the greatest...

The silent monologue draws to a close and she bows her head.

They're looking out for me. My people back home are looking out for me.

Later, a sudden glance up at the ceiling and she resumes her performance.

How did I end up here? All by myself. With men all around me. Foreign men. This is where I'll be giving birth. Seriously? I left that sun-kissed country of mine with its tall trees and colorful parrots four months ago. My mama cried funeral tears for three days and three nights. Her goodbye kiss was like the kiss of Death. "Sixteen and pregnant. Where could you possibly be taking her?" That was all she could say. She kept saying it, not understanding how lucky I was to be pregnant. Not understanding how my situation would guarantee a safe crossing for all

the immigrants on the boat to Italy, where Ahmet would be waiting for me. Ahmet, my husband and the father of the child that I'm carrying in my belly. The child that was to be born in a European country. The child that would have an easier time getting documented than we would. The child that would grow up in a house like the ones on TV. A nice apartment, perhaps, in a big building like this one. And I'm sure this building is nice, even though I've never left this one-room apartment. The landlord's grandson has one rule: No more than three can live here. And we snuck in another twelve at least. Typical, I know. Europeans are so stupid, though. Totally oblivious. Or just spoiled. Whatever.

What was I on about? Oh, right. My mom. She couldn't even visualize the quality of life that we would have. The schools. The weekend drives we would start taking as soon as Ahmet got his car. Poor Ahmet. He's still in Italy. In a detention center on Lampedusa. It's been eight months since he left home and he can't even make a phone call, let alone come find me here. He had hoped that I would meet him where he is and they would release him because of how pregnant I am. Then we could start our life together. A normal life. Even better than on TV.

If it wasn't for that disgusting captain who left us in Crete but told us it was Sicily. Goddamn it!

She cursed with her head hung low. Before long she was staring at the ceiling and making plans.

I'm so out of here. But I'm scared of the police. I'm afraid of those loud sieg-heilers with the shaved heads and the black tee shirts. I've never seen them but they told me that they are terrifying, brazen, and friendly with the police. I have nightmares about them chasing me and my child. I have dreams about my mother. Dreams where she's looking at me but not saying a word. I never dream about Ahmet. I've never once dreamt about him. Maybe it's because he tried to

take advantage of me and exploit my child. But he's just one man, right? How much damage can he really do? I'm afraid of people. I'm afraid of everything around me. It's my first baby and I'm all alone. I'm in Europe. Everyone back home would be so jealous of me but here I am ready to give birth by myself. Worse off than a wild animal in the jungle. I miss home. I miss people's faces. I feel like I'm going to die giving birth to my first child. And I feel like it will be better for all of us if I do die giving birth to this baby.

If there's one thing I want, it's to die so that my child won't suffer. Death will give him a better life.

"Sleep, sleep..."

by Maria Kanellaki

It's summer, which means that tomorrow I'm taking you for a mani-pedi and a haircut. Then, shopping. You'll be gazing at your own reflection in the mirror while a stock boy empties mountains of bracelets into a plastic bargain bin opposite the fitting rooms. You won't even notice him. Which is good, since I know that the sight of overstuffed sacks of fake jewelry hitting the dusty floor would normally send you packing. And at the precise moment that we step out of the store lugging huge plastic shopping bags stuffed with cheap knockoffs, a bulldozer will be hard at work clearing away the decaying remains of dead laborers. Not here, of course. Worlds away. In some provincial town outside of Bangladesh. No big deal. Just a thousand fewer pairs of cheap hands. Meanwhile, the fall catalogue of a mega department store is set to feature images of that couple they discovered in the ruins of a sacrificial temple. You know, the two people locked in an embrace. Eclectic, right? I guess freaky sells. Now sleep, sleep...

We'll sit down for a coffee somewhere near the Metro station. Our server, a girl, will have jade eyes and pearly-white skin. Her name will be Alma and there will be gaping wounds on her back where her wings were ripped out. You'll swear she's a concert pianist if you notice her beautifully-shaped fingertips. You will swear that, had she been born somewhere else, in another country perhaps, she would be flipping through sheet music right now instead of handing out laminated menus with pictures of beverages. Her dream, forever unfulfilled, will soar above us like a helium balloon. And after a few months, her balloon will cross paths with your balloon, which will float above the establishment in which you will be serving the natives of some other country in order to earn your living. No, there is no future here after all. So sleep, sleep...

And dream that you are sinking in endless strawberry fields with the balloons of your relatives from faraway Bangladesh suspended overhead in the cloudless blue sky. A floating phalanx of mute balloons. Magenta, not unlike the color of the berry pickers' punctured bodies after the debacle in Amaliada. Now you're sinking your teeth into the monstrous berries, the blood-red juices dripping down your face. A cop is kicking, rabidly kicking, the berry bush that stained you and you notice that inside his helmet is not a human face but a console with buttons and switches. After he is done ridding the strawberry field of all life, he will kick migrants, strikers, addicts, homosexuals, and vagrants. He will spray tear gas into an elementary school in Ierissos and take particular delight in the suffocating cough of an eight-year-old girl. He will savagely beat the elderly opponents of the mining company who will attempt to stop the gold-digging in Skouries, and he will participate in overnight abductions of "non-mutant citizens," removing them from their homes for the purpose of questioning and intelligence-gathering. And when you wake up in the morning everything will be over and done with. So forget about the nightmare. The bad guys will have been moved into a maximum-security concentration camp. The kind with electrified barbed wire and wild dogs roaming around barking for blood and honor. Sleep, sleep...

Oh, and don't forget to put your compassion up for display by "Liking" the picture of that adorable smoosh-faced baby from the refugee camp in Idomeni. The one who spent his first winter in a box. Years from now, assuming he makes it, they will post a heartwarming interview with a lengthy title. Something along the lines of "He was that little refugee boy living in a cardboard box who went viral. What he looks like now will surprise you!"

It's unfortunate that there is no "Sorry" button to instantly and conveniently assuage our Euro-guilt. And thus, this child will have to get by on "Likes" and "Likes" alone until he finds his forever home. Or his forever tarp, as the case may very well be.

Sleep, sleep...sleep deeply. The last caravan of alloglots has already morphed into a swarm of balloons flying over Farmakonisi along with the Halikoutides, Tourkospori, Karagounides, Tzeftedes, and Xenomerites. You know, the people who never fit into our tiny, pearly-white European living room and whom we branded with the stigma of the foreign element. And, should you wake unexpectedly, don't go to the trouble of asking why the chain-link fence that was not there last night is suddenly right outside your window. Borders change all the time. They constrict, dangerously. The seas are being rebranded as Exclusive Economic Zones. The forests are being cleared to make way for quarries. The islands are being auctioned off. A makeshift raft loaded with balloon people will sink in the waters of the Aegean at the precise moment when you will be trying to follow the orders blaring from the camp speaker system. You'll take off your clothes and leave them beside the door with the rest of your personal belongings. Then they'll show you into the disinfecting room to be "cleansed." Believe me when I tell you that resistance to death makes it less painful for the victim, not to mention more convenient for the victimizer.

The flame of humanity has been snuffed out. Darkness. Sleep, sleep...

"The Uphill Battle of a Life(time)"

by Theocharis Papadopoulos

He looked twenty-five. But he might have been younger. And he looked beaten-down, like he had been through it. He came to Athens with just a suitcase, with the few things that he managed to gather together. "Ahmet" from Pakistan. That's how he introduced himself to Greta, the Albanian woman he recently met. You wouldn't call her beautiful, but she wasn't unattractive, either. Let's just say that she was average. She helped him out with his Greek, with the Greek that she knew. Taught him a few words, enough to get the gist of what people said to him.

The first thing Ahmet thought to do was find a job. So he went to where they needed men, strong men. It was a grind. The work was hard, the compensation was small, and they told him he would have to wait two months for it. He could just barely squeeze by. But he took the job. It would be alright. He could make it work with just a little.

Finally, payday. The boss gave him half.

"Just this for now, man. Then we'll see. Business is slow."

"But, boss. I has work much," he dared respond.

"If you don't like it, leave. It's not like we signed a contract." So what was he to do? File a complaint? He shrugged it off and walked away with his head hung low.

That night, on his way to meet Greta, Ahmet saw something that made him stop suddenly and find a place to hide. It was the gang with the black clothes and the shaved heads. He could hear the faraway sounds of screaming and crying. When he was sure they were gone, he crept out of his hiding place and found Greta in bad shape. She told him they beat her up and would have killed her if they hadn't been afraid of potential witnesses walking by.

"I will went police," said Ahmet.

"No!," she said, terrified. "They'll arrest you and force you to leave the country if you can't show them papers. Not only that but they might beat you up too."

He saw that she was crying and felt bad for her. He held her and something inside him raged. Soon their compassionate embrace became a loving one. Greta let herself go and their lips met. That was the moment when they started fighting the uphill battle of their lives together.

"Across the Hall"

by Theodosis Mantzaris

The front door was closed and it stayed closed for a long time. It seemed as if the place had been abandoned. It was a deaf-mute apartment, an orphan struggling to survive in the teeming capital city. Then, on one of those silent afternoons, a young man came to claim it. He swept the dirt off the balcony and hosed it down. Soon it glimmered, no longer resembling the foundling it once was. The next day he brought a little table out there and sat down on a beaten-up chair to drink his coffee. On account of our proximity, the features of his wizened, sun-burnt face were quite discernible to me. Our glances met and we looked one another in eye. He broke the ice, offering a greeting in broken Greek. Despite his good intentions, one could detect a tinge of suspicion in his countenance up until the moment when it became clear that I would respond.

"Hello!"

"Hello yourself!"

I responded warmly. "Welcome to our neighborhood!" We got to know each other. We almost became friends, the Syrian immigrant and I. He worked as a welder at one of the shipyards in Piraeus. He was good-natured, always with a pure and honest smile on his face. His bright eyes exuded optimism. He had dreams of a better life for himself, for his wife, and for their two small children. Through hard work and sacrifice, he managed to save up more than enough. His car, a shiny "mazda," was especially well-maintained.

I lost track of him for a few days. When we finally bumped into each other again, his entire expression had changed. As if he had covered his own face with a dark veil. I did not see him again. I noticed his car, abandoned at the tiny plateia near the tracks of the commuter rail,

caked in the African dust that pays us regular, unannounced visits. A depressing picture, to be sure. The lady at the corner store said that he had recently lost all contact with his family. He couldn't cope with the loss, so he booked a ticket to some neighboring country and left. But before he did he tried in vain to sell his beloved car. Some dubious neighbor of ours tried to rip him off, initially agreeing on a fair price but then reneging at the last minute. So he locked the doors for one last time and said goodbye, feeling deeply repulsed by the stench of dishonesty. Now the deaf-mute apartment is vacant once more. The ceaseless bombings in his country annihilated his dreams, robbing him of any and all hope for a better tomorrow. Through no fault of his own, an indefatigable Laelaps came and sucked him into the black hole of that most unjust war.

It is the beginning of July now, and Athens is simmering beneath the fiery hearth that is the summer sky. The fifth floor of the revenue agency headquarters is suffocatingly crowded. With all the shot nerves in here the mercury should be spewing out of the thermometer and spelling out the word "scorcher"! But, mercifully, the air conditioners are working overtime to mitigate the pungent smell of sweat emanating from the poor people waiting on a long line that stretches all the way to the elevator doors. The agency staff speak with voices raised almost to the level of uninhibited aggression. They can barely communicate with the refugees who do not have much Greek. One young customer appears to be entirely out of patience. After blaspheming the nation's politicians who have, in her words, turned this country into a "fenceless vineyard," she jumps the line and walks right up to an occupied window. She huffs and puffs, complaining about how much time she and countless others are wasting all so that the agency can attend to the needs of foreign refugees. Eyes bulging, the customer who actually had the window in the first place is fuming like a beast. In his culture it is not common for any woman to take the place of a

man. The altercation quickly heated up, like a wildfire in a pine forest. The supervisor had to come out of her office, fetch the vexed woman, and deal with her one-on-one. And while this did manage to diffuse the situation temporarily, those still patiently waiting on line immediately soured, resentful of the selfish stunt.

The second flare-up happened shortly thereafter. At that very same window, the agent, overtired and short on manners, finally addressed the young refugee whom the vexed woman had interrupted. She unloaded the following rebuke onto him, almost ecstatically: "Just so you know, this pen is for signatures *only*. It's not for you to take and fill out all of your forms with. You get your own pen for that. Honestly, with you people..."

The young man did not respond. Perhaps he didn't understand. At any rate, a gentleman who had been standing by waiting patiently responded in his stead: "How *dare* you talk to him like that? Can you just take a second to think about what this kid has been through? Seriously! Just try and picture where he sleeps. Where he eats. Come on!"

This gentleman then turned to his fellow customers who were waiting in line next to him and said to them, quietly: "Civil servants, right? What do you expect. Must be a fascist..."

Earlier, when I had first stepped into the building on Patision, I was immediately subjected to the silent protestations of the security guard. As he rushed by, he made a gesture to me that indicated just how irritated he was by the poor quality of the people waiting to go up to the agency. There must have been ten refugees in the lobby, give or take. Ten scattered birds banished from their nests, set off course by the ravenous winds of war. In the elevator the guard and I were accompanied by a pregnant woman with her two young children. We pushed seven, she pushed four. The smaller child, a toddler, broke free of his mother's grip and started making faces in the mirror. He pressed his fingers, then his nose, into his own reflection. His mother was

angry, and the boy turned to me, looked me dead in the eye, and put his hand on my pant leg, as if begging me to protect him from her maternal authority. She scolded him in their language. But the plight of the little lad had already moved me to intervene. "Don't scold the child, kyria. He didn't do anything wrong..."

The foreign lady took her little ones by the hand. As soon as we got to the fourth floor, she thanked me politely, one syllable at a time:

"Ευ-κα-ρι-στώ πο-λύ!" "Tank-you ve-ry-much!"

I looked at her, speechless. The sweet-sounding Greek words emanating from the mouth of the lady refugee were as smooth as honey. As soon as we stepped out onto the seventh floor, the security guard, incensed, started to groan.

"I wish they didn't send all these refugees down here. There's too many of them coming in and out of the building all day long. Let's see how we do with our utility bills next month..."

I asked him in earnest: "What are they actually here for?"

"For our language. They have classes in the big hall on the fourth floor."

"It pleases me greatly to know that they are learning Greek," I confessed to him. I left with a feeling of bitterness weighing me down like a heavy suitcase. As if I had just solved a huge piece of the puzzle that is the refugee experience. The vacant apartment across the hall, the boarded-up dreams of a friend, the forced removal of innocents left to wade through the endless desert of the soulless people among us. Pity! That the mercilessness of our unyielding epoch should be so ever-present...

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