

In the air

Eyeless in Euboea

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I am eighteen. I have nine months' freedom before going up to university.

Steeped as I am in the theatre of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Co., classical mythology – and Mary Renault's *Mask of Apollo* – I am emotionally desperate to go to Greece: ancient Greece, really, I know little about the modern state.

I plan to get a job with the National Theatre in Athens: I've trained as a stage-manager parallel to school and have practical experience. I also dream of touring a Shakespeare play, *Troilus*, perhaps, round Greece, playing on stages improvised in taverns and ancient sites ...

By a series of far-fetched coincidences, the desire becomes reality. A month or so later I find myself taking the wheel of the friend of a friend of a friend of my sister's left-hand-drive Triumph on top of a snow-bound mountain in Switzerland, en route for Greece.

The friend owns three bungalows overlooking the sea on the island of Euboea, between Chalkis and Eretria; he wants company for the drive down and, perhaps, help with the house and garden afterwards.

I was allowed to go on the grounds that C. was 1) gay, and 2) a Scorpio (my mother). I don't remember my father saying anything.

We took the ferry from Brindisi and I saw my first arching dolphins off Corfu. We landed at Piraeus on a Monday morning; the port smelt of petrol, bricks, sawdust, wet cement.

We drove 90 km up the *Ethniki Odos*, crossed the bridge into Euboea, passed through Chalkis and out into the country, and eventually turned off up a steep cart-track.

At the top of the hill were three low white houses in a scrubby garden of low plants and weeds.

And beyond, down below, the stirring sea.

It is a bright day, cold.

It is February 1969.

I have been told Greece is in the hands of dictators, who are persecuting the people. I hear the words, only I do not connect. In the peace above the shining sea, such sound and fury seem unreal, Athens far away.

I have been told the junta is helping Greece. I have no idea. I am stupid politically: our history lessons ran into the sand over the Causes of the First World War; I've had my head buried in books for too long, been too busy with exams and theatre, to understand what was going on in the world.

Around us in Euboea there is no outward sign of anything unusual.

I did go to Athens and even met people

from the Theatre. But it went wrong. Instead of talking about work, I was dressed up as a fairy and taken to a party by an actress who spoke to me of love.

I went back to the garden by the sea. And stayed to help make it grow.

The State was giving away trees if you could prove you owned land.

We drove up into the hills of Euboea to collect firs, poplars and fruit trees.

We planted them, hacking backbreaking holes out of the hard ground. We also put in a banana tree, bougainvilleas and some flowers, for colour.

By day, we whitewashed and cleaned up the houses and cared for the garden; we read and wrote and swam, gazing downwards: I'd never seen such miraculously clear sea. Sometimes jellyfish covered our legs with itchy red webbing.

I taught English to Spider George and little Thanos and learnt Greek, like a child.

In the evenings, we listened to bouzouki-music and danced in the local tavernas. My favourite songs were *Stalia, stalia* and *Anixe Petra*.

Some Sundays we ate with „our“ family in Chalkis; Kiria Irini roasted the meat in the communal oven at the baker's down the road. At Easter, we celebrated with them, the dark church bursting into midnight light; „Christos Anesti“, the incense, the lit candles carried home: „Chronia polla“.

I fell in love and P. and I talked of marriage; our son was to be called Charilaos.

The garden grew and was constantly thirsty.

Water was a problem. Ours came from a neighbour's well and most days the tank had to be topped up. You hauled yourself up one of the tall metal poles it was perched on and checked the water-level. Then you waded to the well through wild thyme, which scratched and tugged at your legs and turned on the tap that fed the tank.

The water pulsed through the pipe and you fell into a hot aromatic dream: the sky fixed and pale, the pulsing scent of the thyme, the cicadas' dry percussion, the sea glinting and shimmying down below, the reddening sun vibrating stilly. Moments out of time.

My father wrote letters about lotus-eating. In July, buying bread and oil in Chalkis, I



Photo: AWP

Ascrubby garden of low plants and weeds

joined a crowd gathered round a TV in an electrician's shop-window: the Americans were landing on the moon.

Another day, a crowd turned out to welcome Spiro Agnew to Chalkis.

Once or twice we went to Athens to buy stuff for the house. We took the ferry from Eretria, with its amphitheatre, to Oropos ...

... With its concentration camp. *Oropos!* Where Mikis Theodorakis was to be interned just a few months later.

But then we didn't know it existed ...

Once, students came from Athens and glancing left and right, talked quietly of torture.

I listened and connected.

We drank too much in a pub on the *Paraleia*, I shouted „shit to the army!“ as we passed the police station, but it was late at night ...

Late August: we stared upwards as grey wisps gathered into clouds, breaking up the blue. The first rains came and the garden was out of danger.

I told P., one Sunday, shouting over the din of his lorry, that I had to go home to study. You must fix up your life, he said. We said goodbye under tall sunflowers with bent heads.

I went back to England to study.

At university, between two rehearsals for *Henry V*, we saw the film *Z*, music by Theodorakis.

Twelve years later, I was to meet him.

He sang: „Don't forget Oropos“ ...

He told us one of the worst horrors of Makronissos was seeing the mainland in the distance, with people going on with their lives, apparently unconcerned ...

I had been young, naïve, dreaming in the garden by the sea while on the outside, people were living a nightmare of torture and oppression.

That is the bleak truth.

This text has taken 37 years to write.