

Kalimera, glyka, to diavasa, ligo viastika, giati den eixa xrono xtes, kai viastika tora sou grafo, mipos kai theleis na to steileis: Proti aisthisi Nai. Doulevei. Einai omorfo. An to ksepsyriso: fantazomai oti tha eixa kapoes paratiriseis, tha stis grapso, alla einai viastikes kai isos lanthasmenes: to proto keimeno-keimeno "Islands, yes, do sink" klp, to xano ap' ti mesi kai kato kai den katalavaino tipota. Mipos thatan kalytera na ksekiniseis me to deftero, pou einai poly pio straightforward? i na epemveis kapos sto proto -- giati an katalava kala, exei kapoia sxesi kai me to postscript(?). Episis, to kommati tou Vassili me ta carobs, einai omorfo alla oxi toso sxetiko me thalassa -- mipos (leo, mipos, de thymamai kala) tha tairiaze kalytera to simeio pou paei na skotosei to glaro? Afta, sta viastika. An thesa kati allo tora pano s' afta, pare me tilefono. A. exei kai merika typos, pou ta exo simeioseis kai mporo na sta po telefonika. S'a. Eisai omorfos. Steilto.

## Commonwealth of the Sea A compilation of waves

By Stratis Haviaras

I have gone back and forth in time, traversed the thin, mountainous land between shorelines, walked up and down pebble and sand beaches, and noisy harbors, spoke to seamen, fishermen, bathers, gulls....

Thalassa: humankind's amniotic fluid, now full of fish, iodine, plankton, and all-time ship wrecks. We think we own it. We love and mistrust it. We treasure and dread it and dump in it. We keep going back to it for more.

I will tell you a story someone else once told me, when I was someone else, alone by the sea, and yet one of many sharing its riches.

### **Fishing**

I was born in a refugee settlement, by the sea, and raised in the war. We used to take the nets out in two boats spread them crescent-like, then bring the lines back to the shore. Five in the morning, the two teams would drag the net a foot at a time to the captain's call:

Eeeeeop! Eeeeeop! In an hour's time or so the sack would be brought out, loaded with fish that leaped in the air, slippery, silver. We'd divide the catch and take it to the streets. Broad, shallow baskets on top of our heads -- first to the restaurants and the taverns, then to the neighborhoods. The baskets made a fine shade in the summer, but as the day wore out, the fish smell got ever stronger, so we were glad to have sold out by noon. Later in the day, we repaired the nets, replaced the lead and cork that was lost, put things in order for the night, got some rest. Our skin was tanned, cured by salt and sea wind. No one else's skin shone like ours. Walking out of the boats at daybreak, our arms and legs sparkling with the fish scales, we looked as if we'd turned into fishes ourselves.

### **Sailing Out**

This land, a narrow strip between rocks and seas could afford only so many of us. It had no trees, no water -- only an illusion of trees

and water. Even when our crops and livestock were not being taken away, nor our springs filled with corpses and muck, a dozen or so young men and women would gather once a year, first at the promontory, then in the bay to wait for the ship, while parents and other relatives consoled themselves by saying, They'll make a fortune in exile, and they'll come back one day. No one ever returned. The ship came back empty, came back for more. This land can afford only so many of us, the rest will have to go.

### War, Occupation, Famine

How long ago and far away were those hot summer days when we had enough to eat and offered some to the gulls! **Now, with the end of fishing for us**, the gulls had so much shellfish that when they dropped one that didn't crack on the pebbles they didn't bother trying again. **I did try, but every one** I saw was hollowed out. Circling overhead, snow-white, fattened seagulls were bolder than ever, confident that no one would even think of making a meal of them. Ha!

Now, take the pebble out of your mouth, load the sling, take aim! They're so many of them that even with shaking hands I couldn't miss. Fire one! Missed. Fire two! They flew off, cursing, leaving one of their lot down. He was dead enough to pluck and gut right there, so it wouldn't draw unwanted attention from the sick and the infirm at home.

I was rinsing bloodied pocketknife, bird, and hands when the rest of the seagulls came back and noisily began to devour the innards of their fallen brother, in all-brotherly cheer. It was then I realized what was so appalling about them, why nobody ever stuffed them with chestnuts and raisins and stuck them in the oven: like the Fritzes, they fed even on their own kind.

As if this stomach-turning spectacle wasn't enough, I heard a sound of boot steps behind

me. A German sentry was behind me, staring at me, a stern expression in his bleached eyes.

Time to put a dumb grin on your face, I thought to myself.

Unconvinced, the soldier wagged his forefinger at me, saying, "*Nein, nein!*"

"Eh, Fritz, look," I tried, lifting my shirt and showing my sunken stomach. "Hungry, *vostein?* Great Aunt Martha *Malato, kaput!*" This was what we called "Occupational Greek," mixing in any foreign words we happened to know – German, Italian, French, and English – to put a message across. Having exhausted my vocabulary, I shrugged and took a reluctant first step toward home.

"*Obviedersen, belle ami!*"

"*Halt!*"

I'd better stick 'em up, never mind the bird's getting heavy.

"*Komm!*" He coughed, and put his hand in his coat pocket and produced what seemed to be a small, round piece of candy, wrapped in cloudy paper.

I couldn't believe it. I'd heard sometimes they did that, and as soon as you reached for it they'd let you have it on the knuckles it with the rifle butt.

He meant it.

"*Ach, fankyoun, kamarat soldat.*" I grabbed it and I ran.

In the kitchen I cut up the bird (tough meat, dull knife) and put the pieces in the pot. When the water began to bubble and the lid to play music and dance, I could tell from the smell that this meal was going to be a challenge.

Add a leaf of sage that spansky taste to domesticity, cook poultry slowly to be tender

and melt in your mouth, but cook it fast enough to revive Aunt Martha before paramyth-time.

I filled a tin cup with broth, and the whole kitchen, already warmed up from the fire, became alive with the mouth-watering smell of cooked mackerel.

Aunt Martha stirred, sniffing the air. She had a taste of broth, smacked her tongue against her palate, and made a face like a mask of disgust.

“Bliah! Dead fish soup,” she determined.

“Have some more, Aunt Martha, you need it.”

“No, I won’t” – stubbornly, but already perking up. “What in the Name of God is it, anyway?”

“Chicken,” I said.

“Ha!”

“Pigeon?”

“Not on your life! I haven’t seen a pigeon since Noah’s ark!”

“I’ll slice some breast meat for you,” I offered.

Suspicion but no objection. She sucked on it for taste. “Crow,” she burped, but choked down a few more spoonfuls of broth, adding, “I can’t say that you didn’t try, you can’t say I didn’t. Now, if you don’t mind, I am going to rest.”

### **The Children’s War has Ended**

One summer day, I felt the sea rushing into my body from every pore, filling me, and inside my veins I recognized the tickle of seaweed and minnows. And then mermaids and tritons, sea horses and ancient ships began to surface in my eyes, and I may very well have cried from pleasure for I knew that

this was the first and last time that the sea was taking a swim within me. I wasn’t wrong. At age 14, I was one of 255 juvenile political prisoners being delivered to the Greek Royal Navy for deportation, possibly to a small, uninhabited island. My number: 227.

### **On the *S/S Lemnos***

Suppose there is no island left for us in the Aegean, I thought. Suppose the *S/S Lemnos* was only meant to anchor and rust in the middle of nowhere, with us slowly rotting in its bowels... or suppose they sink the *Lemnos* and its troublesome cargo – us prisoners... The Germans had done this just before their surrender, sinking their prison ships in the Baltic, and the English just after the war, sending down half the population of Megisti, also known as Kastelorizo, a tiny island between Rhodes and Cyprus. Why shouldn’t the Greeks do the same? Ah, to have been a Gypsy! To have nothing, neither country nor island, nor even a handful of dirt! For beyond blowted words and emotions, that’s what countries were: handfuls of dirt with fancy names and flags.

### **The Detention Islands**

Many of the Greek islands have little children islands by their side: Skyros, a mother island, has a little daughter island, Skyropoula. And Spetsae has Spetsopoula, and Serifos, Serfopoula. Anaphi one of the prison islands, then, has a very little boy island, Anaphopoulo, which was too little even for a little boy’s prison. Then there are a few parent islands that have disowned their children because their children opposed them: Paros – Antiparos. Psara – Antipsara. Melos – Antimelos. Paxoi – Antipaxoi. Kithera – Antikythera. Kalamos, a parent island, was named after the reed that had thrived on its soil for centuries. Antikalamos, its unprincipled child, stood about four nautical miles to the east, and it detested the reed and anything growing on earth and water.

Antikalamos could afford no soil or fresh water on its back. It had a head, a back and a tail of stone, but the head and the tail were submerged, and all we could see from the ship was its bent back of stone, a hard, reddish stone swept clean by the strong, briny wind and disinfected by a cloudless sun. If there had been a prophecy that after so many centuries of isolation and punishment by the elements Antikalamos would someday be inhabited, that day had come, because Greece had run out of large islands for manmade isolation and punishment.

### **Children Changed to Stone**

In Antikalamos, one morning I awoke, sensing on my face the increasing light that each incoming wave brought to the shore. The night before, we'd walked the rest of the way down without incident. The flashlight beams had not been able to reach us, and in a little while even the shouting stopped, the guard having probably given up and returned to the barracks to plan the next day's operations, how to round us up and herd us back to the assembly room, or force us back to work at gunpoint. At any rate, the next move was theirs. I washed my mouth and face with seawater, and although I felt weak and dizzy from hunger I decided to walk around exploring this forbidden corner of Antikalamos before everyone else was up. The barbed wire came all the way down to the sea on both sides, and along the wire were two rows of tall boulders that had either been part of the formation of the rock or been raised as protective walls hundreds or thousands of years ago. Some of the boulders bore chiseled recesses that seemed to be as old.

"Throughout its glorious history our country has used several uninhabited islands such as this one to rid itself of subversive and seditious elements," Ensign Tsakalos had mentioned in his welcoming speech. Could it be that the ancient Greek deportees had also been forced to mine and cut stone? Somewhere in the parent island, Kalamos,

probably in the foundations of the Church of St. Thalassios, the foundations of the Temple of Poseidon had also been built with stones from Antikalamos. Far to the left, the sloping rock had been cut vertically and hollowed, if one was to believe that the small wooden door that hung from two rusty hinges and an old-fashioned latch on the face of the rock weren't fake. I pressed down the cock of the latch with my thumb and pulled, and the door opened, creaking, letting out into the sharp morning air the dark of untold nights. I stood at the entrance, sniffing the musty history of the cell that deepened moment by moment as my eyes grew accustomed to the dark. And then a shiver ran through my entire body and I had to close my eyes and rub them, and when I opened them I shuddered again. Strewn all over the floor or leaning against the walls of the cell were about two dozen boys and girls between six and fourteen years of age, and the more my eyes became accustomed to the dark the more it looked like our hiding cave in the mountains: in one row the dead and in another the dying; lean limbs freezing in sleep never to thaw again, a fine web of frost spreading slowly to cover every part of the body, even the hair, so neatly and evenly that each dead body turned into a smooth, white statue. Here, too, the bodies had turned into statues, though not from the cold. They'd turned into stone, into cool white marble as if they'd seen the head of Medusa or some other Greek beast, never again to leave their cell, never to return to the quarry to cut more stone for the Temple of Poseidon. And the authorities let them stay in their perfect tomb, for the rest of time, leaving it up to the Department of Ancient Antiquities to send a carpenter once every so many years to replace the door.

### **Peace and Reconstruction**

The Truman Doctrine was followed by the Marshall Plan, and an era of "peace and reconstruction" ensued, with our seas open again to fishing boats and the Sixth Fleet.

Where prison tents and barracks once stood, beautiful tourist hotels began to rise. Half a century later, the once unprincipled child island of Antikalamos, is a place of sufficiency and remembrance.

### **Postscript**

I went to the edge of the sea: a wedge of water splitting the torso of a rock. A row of boulders, a row of cacti. I stood against the open sea and said, You and I at least and perhaps the frost of the salt and the crumbling roe of rust. I said, at least. But the sea was silent. I said, I was here when you pulled and vomited the foliage of your depth... There were blossoms here, sea-apples, crab shells, and suddenly, half-bound with drying weed, a death, a girl – remember? But the sea said nothing. I said, Once I dreamed that you had your own aesthetic, its exceptions, your own book to hide your knife in, that you gobble up and disgorge and sleep knowingly. And now that I think of it, if you always knew, why memory? And the sea said nothing. Once I saw the same girl rising to the surface weeping. She was crowned with the same flowers, eating the same apples – it was awful seeing her cry with her mouth full. And then she touched her mouth and said, Remember? But the sea remained silent. Was it me she'd addressed? I touched my mouth and said: so I was the sea and the foliage of memory, I rust of lethe and the relic of salt. I was the crowned girl, the drowned, eating apples, crying, and I, I the voice.

Speaking to speak, remembering in order to speak, the more I speak the more I remember. And the book grows thick. And the knife sharper.

•••