

Letter from Greece: Mark Sargent

Contributed by Mark Sargent

LETTER FROM GREECE #7 Jeremy Harding writing about Frank Thompson) Civil War, writes that it is better to have died young and bravely for a good cause (the Spanish Civil War) than to have lived a long life as a bad poet." Really! Whoa. Well, I'm still hoping for a long life, it all depends on where you stand on the continuum, but at least I know I'm not a bad poet. I'm a good poet. You should be able to say that about yourself. Any praise above or beyond that has to come from someone else. That's my rule. The "good cause," I don't know. What would that have been? Who would chose well at nineteen, twenty? Passion is not the best way to approach a question such as that. We opposed the war in Vietnam but save for a few isolated incidents, this didn't involve risking your life. On the contrary, the ones risking their lives were doing it in a bad cause. And let's face it, growing old scribbling bad poetry has got that all beat to hell. * Born and raised in West Flanders speaking Flemish, Mirella looks up from Mario Vargas Lhosa's *The Feast of the Goat* and declares, "I want Greek to be my first tongue, not English!" But she's buried under a mountain of fiction from the English world and translations from around the planet and the only way out is to read it. "For days I couldn't remember the word for hallucination in Greek and finally I got down the dictionary and as I opened it came to me, pa rays thisees. Beyond feeling. Greek is a primary language, so the words reveal themselves by their parts." * increase the exercise of animal that one deep in that digs to exit paws as pistons churning rotate limb as lamb turning fat falling with hiss coal glow * Yes, you're right. Everything does happen for a reason. What happened before, previous event, is the only reason anything occurs. * People blinded by a stroke who still believe they can see, and cannot be convinced otherwise. It happens. I love this idea, not that I'm volunteering. Greece society has little belief in the "rule of law". Consequently everything functions as an extension of the tribe, of personal or familial connection. Accordingly, there is no will to enforce or obey the law, as though the individual act had nothing to do with the collective good. * Mirella, magenta reading glasses perched upon the end of her fine nose, feet warming before the fire, peers over Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason*. "What does buggery mean?" "It means me penetrating your anus." Repeatedly. "Oh, that." * I finish reading Anne Carson's astonishing *The Beauty of the Husband*: a fictional essay in 29 tangos in the morning sun. The heat of a burning marriage. Residue of passion clouding the window. Her music is paper cutting sharp. And the birds, gentle quaver of olive bough and song. I started to whistle to the birds and they were calling back. It doesn't take much imagination to get the sense that they are responding. I stopped when I realized I was whistling the opening laugh riff of the theme song of the *Woody Woodpecker Show*, a Walter Lantz animated television program from fifties and sixties America. But the birds kept going so I came back in with vigor. Ha ha ha HA ha, ha ha ha HA ha. That shit, it gets in your head and stays there waiting to be summoned. Could be a line from Wallace Stevens, just as likely, a bit from *Leave it to Beaver*. And the wisteria is loud with bees, drunk on mauve pollen. Which brings to mind a play, *The Foreigner*. A light American farce set in the Georgia backwoods; in it a character, pretending to be, well, a mysterious foreigner, speaks cryptic nonsense including the line, repeated several times, "Bees come down." Various things are threatened when they do. I saw a production of this play directed by my mother. A pretty good show. Back in the day when my father and his pals were taking care of the town and each other, my mother had near autocratic control over the community theatre company. It was an extremely successful company with its own theatre and no debt. And to be fair, a goodly portion of that success could be traced to my parent's efforts. Nevertheless, people in positions of unquestioned power tend to look askance at barbs from the *hoi polloi*. One day the daily newspaper runs a review of a production that my mother had directed that was tepid, at best. Not a complete slam, mind you, but not very positive. My mother was livid. She asked my father to call their mutual friend, the publisher of the paper, and have the budding theatre critic sent packing. Off with his head! Fortunately cooler heads prevailed. Namely, me pater. He pointed out that the messenger was of no import, it was the message that required response. He suggested they call a few friends who might wish to write a letter to the paper giving their opinion of the production. She had fans, many didn't need prompting. By the end of the week the newspaper had been inundated with testimonials of fulsome praise from a parade of prominent citizens and they ran an entire page of them along with an embarrassingly lukewarm statement of support for their own reporter. My parents really enjoyed that little pond, but by the time I finished high school it felt toxic. * "HERE IS MY PROPAGANDA ONE ONE ONE ONE ONEING ON YOUR FOREHEAD LIKE DROPLETS OF LUMINOUS SIN" And torture me with your party-line fidelity, your consuming knowledge of failure, the petty day to day rent, the full borne rip, a Velcro partnership severed in one betraying tug. And then another. "How true they were to fear its hazards." * Mirella puts down *Anna Karenina*. "What's nefarious mean?" "Wicked. Notorious, or, as the Greeks would back-translate it, bad fame. Though you could be notorious without being evil. You could, for instance, be notorious for practical jokes, or bad poetry, for that matter. If you're nefarious you are definitely way bad; such as the U.S. government holding 166 un-charged, un-tried prisoners in Guantánamo Bay. Indefinitely." * Simone Weil, typically intense, defined true love as "a pure attention to the existence of the other." Attention was a recurring theme with her. And then they cease to be, love cannot hold them in the land of living. A good friend returns to Greece on the morrow. Two years ago his wife died at the age of sixty and we consigned her ashes to the sea. Since then he has experienced the in-the-wake-of-loss catapult to new creative situations and partnerships. Propulsive pain, a velocity meant for ricochet, bumper flash and ringing bells, life caroms racking up the points. You come out, the wearing down broken by the shock of the new. I know that trajectory, that arc out of the death of the beloved, spirit sensitive as a tongue and raw, everything post, disconnected, fresh and hard. You have the sorrow, of course, the emptiness of absence. If you turn inward with this energy, it will be difficult to get out. Perhaps we who are able to turn that energy outward are touched by lucky fates? In my case I had a lot of time to consider and prepare. And my returning friend is a solid on the ground type of man; I'm not surprised he has taken it out into the public realm, with creative responses to the current situation.

Hard focused attention. It's all hands on deck, my friends, for as Thomas Hobbes put it, HOMO HOMINI LUPUS, man is wolf to man. Of the 166 at Gitmo, some for more than 11 years, at least 93 of them are on a hunger strike and being force fed. The Pentagon just sent another 40 nurses and doctors down there to keep those poor bastards alive. Not allowed to leave, and not allowed to die. * Back in my childhood the bourgeois housewives would have lots of luncheons, which provided an unneeded excuse to buy a posh frock and suck down some wine at midday. Two new arrivals in town are being introduced around. "And this is Anne Sargent, our town thespian." Of course, they hear 'lesbian' and think, "Mildred, were not in Rapid City anymore." No shit, Millie, and we can never go back there, no matter how many pairs of ruby slippers are clicked together. 24 April 2013