

The View from Greece by Mark Sargent

Contributed by Mark Sargent

LETTER FROM GREECE#23: More density to the groove. "My father always used to say to me, "When you have success, just taste it and spit it out, because it's really poisonous." Alejandro Iñárritu has called for the overthrow of Assad in Syria, but is fighting his enemies, the ISIS or SIC or Cowabunga in the Levant; the US is standing tall against the Iranian nuclear threat but is willing to pour billions more into supporting the Iranian backed Shia government in Baghdad and, essentially, fighting Iran's enemies. What possible benefit can US citizens expect from these efforts? Or anyone else, for that matter, though we know there are always the ambiguously swift ready to turn a profit in such situations. In Hillary Clinton's new memoir, *Hard Choices*, she describes a meeting with Obama, David Petraeus, then heading the CIA, Leon Panetta, then Secretary of Defense, the usual suspects. Hills and the rest are arguing for arming and training "certifiably moderate" (How the fuck do you certify that? A survey I suppose: Excuse me, when you execute prisoners, infidels and the like, do you completely decapitate or merely slit their throats?) Syrian rebels. As a Syrian journalist recently wrote in the NY Times, anyone who picks up a gun in the Middle East is not a moderate. Obama asks for "examples of instances when the United States had backed an insurgency that could be considered a success." This query was met with dead silence. As Joseph Lelyveld writes. The idea of success has to be redefined. It's not to overthrow Bashar al-Assad, Obama is told; it's to take the initiative away from Qatar and Saudi Arabia, which are "dumping weapons into the country," in order to have "a partner on the ground we could work with." It was, Clinton writes, "the least bad option among many even worse alternatives." Leon Panetta, Gates's successor at the Pentagon, is on her side. "He knew from his own time leading the CIA what our intelligence operatives could do." Yeah, right. The gang that can't shoot straight is going to figure it all out on the ground. This is the organization that never sees it coming, except for when it's time to cover its ass. It appears that in these situations the US foreign policy elite when planning action considers three results: achieve nothing, make a problem worse or damage an existing good, and makes their decision. Mr. Lelyveld again. "Hillary Clinton belongs to the Yes...but school on foreign policy whose basic premise boils down to this: Yes, our interventions in other countries don't always or often work out the way we mean them to, but we have to get involved, have to uphold the leadership role history has assigned us, for we are the "indispensable nation." That self-glorifying slogan, usually attributed to Madeleine Albright, Bill Clinton's second secretary of state, rolls easily off her lips: "Everything that I have done and seen has convinced me that America remains the "indispensable nation." No opponent will ever get away with accusing her of not embracing the doctrine of American exceptionalism, a civil religion to which every recent president, including Barack Obama, has had to pay homage." Churchill claimed to have drawn up the borders of Jordan on a Sunday afternoon. Iraq resembles a post midnight cocktail napkin scribble, though it is consistent with British imperial strategy of control by playing tribes or ethnic groups off each other. Can't imagine the Kurds were considered at all, even though there are thirty million of them straddling the borders of Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria. All duplicities are tolerated, praised as pragmatism. Just remember, my American friends, if you vote for Hillary you are voting for endless war. All you have to ask yourself is: Is this policy working, or is it multiplying the enemies of the US? Nevermind all the other suffering. "The only global order than has any chance of keeping the peace is a pluralist one, which accepts that there are open and closed societies, free and authoritarian ones. A pluralist order is one in which we live with leaders we can barely abide and societies whose principles we have good reason to despise." Michael Ignatieff * "Existentialism does not assume a behavior." A. Camus, *Notebooks*. We needed more density to the groove. We gathered at Kanello's fig farm by the Mavrovouni (Black Mountain)[see *The Lefka Tree*], to lay down a po/jazz kinda thing. I've sent the poem, *Pleasuring Jane*, out previously. Check your files, comrades. We'd rehearsed a couple of times and we were ready, but I should have realized that the man I had engaged to video and record said jam required a good deal more supervision, but success is an illusion I tend to ignore. Or perhaps, a better way to put it is that I court failure. Earlier in the day I had gone to his apartment and viewed his previous footage and discussed what I wanted. When I arrived I encountered him in the street pushing a pram that held his adorable daughter. He said, by way of hello, "I woke up this morning and I still had on yesterday's clothes." He shrugged. I gave him a second look. Yes, those were yesterday's clothes. When I related this to Mirella later she quite sensibly asked, "And you're depending on this guy?" I poo-poo'd her, as it were, prophetic concerns. As the great critic Manny Farber wrote: "Good work usually arises where the creators... have no ambitions towards 'gilt' culture, but are involved in a kind of squandering-beaverish endeavor that isn't anywhere or for anything." I had remind myself of that, as the man in question had come to the session utterly unprepared and so while the band swung pretty good on the material nothing was filmed. And there was no question among the five men in this small room why. 'Twas a long ride back to Sparta though it's less than an hour. I put on some Alice Stuart, an acoustic country blues singer. We cruised. Finally, after a few tunes he says, "All these songs are about failure, aren't they?" As many have pointed out, we create the world we see and hear. I watched the white line dividing the two lane road disappear into the emptiness of night for a minute or so and then said, "That's certainly one of the themes." I was of the persuasion that platitudes about mistakes, getting back on the donkey, etc. weren't in order, that when you screw up as an adult, this guy's about thirty, it's best to consider that *contretemps* at length and see what it reveals. I wasn't about to berate him but leaving him on simmer felt sound. His vibe was penetrating. Tough muthafucking love, y'all. * "The proof of the pudding is in the eating" means one can never intimately know the interior of anything without ingesting it." Joanne Dominique Dwyer. Fucking death. First Bill Shively, Oregon poet, of brain cancer and then, last night, a car accident. Queen and her youngest daughter Arek, wearing seat belts, are essentially unscratched while the husband/father Paul is thrown from the car and ends up crushed beneath it. And there are three other children. Though they live in the city the accident occurred between Sparta and Tripoli and they were at the Sparta hospital. We zipped

down the hill for a visit. They were fully clothed, on hospital beds with IV's dripping. Perhaps a little bruising will occur. I looked at the charts at the end of their beds and was stunned that Arek is nine years old. I remember her baptism, the Armenian community dancing and whooping it up. Arek hadn't been told yet that her father was dead, and Queen discussed some of the details with us in English, tumbling end over end down an embankment. There were other visitors, of course, including Queen's sister and her husband, Hageaz. We were out on the broad open veranda off the room and those that do were smoking them up. Hageaz's phone kept ringing, no surprise there, but the ring was the opening of "Summer Wine," and so every few minutes we were treated to Nancy Sinatra purring, "Strawberries, cherries..." and then he usually answered before "...and an angel's kiss in spring." Small favors, and then I told myself to chill with the search for the odd detail that I was mentally noting. You can turn anything into writing but that doesn't mean you should. I remember telling my son his mother was dead, but he was seventeen and it was not a surprise. Tomorrow we drive to the city to pay our respects. One odd detail concerning Paul, the deceased. Apparently his parents were severely austere, uncompromising in their utilitarian lives as well fierce Marxists, as was Paul. I was at their apartment in the city sitting at the dining table when I noticed Paul on his knees in the living room picking small things off the carpet and putting them in his mouth. "Paul, what are you doing?" I asked. "Oh," he said, "Arek (then three) spilled some bits of lettuce from her lunch." "And you're eating it?" "Yes, of course." * In life, you rarely make too many considerate phone calls. But back to Rome for a mo. While there I had the quintessential Roman experience: I was nicked, fleeced, ripped off, my pocket was picked! Twas midday and we were waiting for the metro in an above ground open air place. We had been warned and instructed in strategy by the concierge at our hotel. Leave your wallet and passport in the room safe. Carry a small amount of cash in one front pocket of your pants and a piece of plastic in the other. The overriding analysis is, they're better at it than you. Proceeding this way, at least, they can't wipe you out in one go. This sounds like something the makers of US foreign policy should consider. Train comes in; the thirty or so waiting move towards the opening doors. And then, for no apparent reason I'm being pushed towards the train, as though the people behind me are in a great screaming hurry. I mutter a "what the fuck" as we jostle into the train. I turn, there are three young gypsy women just inside the door which is beginning to close. One of them quickly sticks her leg in the opening while another grabs one door with her hands. The three of them struggle to open the door, while several faint-hearted ones on the train squeal with fright, Oh, the poor girls! Yeah, right. They manage to get the door open enough to leap out on to the platform, one would almost think they'd done this before; which, of course, they had, the little fuckers. I checked my pockets. Preoccupied with visited sites that had been closed, I was not on my guard. Thirty euros in one front pocket, one lower on the leg but buttoned, had been lifted. They didn't get a debit card in the other. The whole misdirection of it was deftly handled. The pushing before the door is the point of danger for them, one would think. Someone with their wits about them would have reacted either with a return of physical force or a swift securing of pockets, and then the leaping back out at the last possible moment, before I had thought to check my stash. There was a guy on the train, twenties, who might have been an accomplice, he was in the scrum at the door, but how would I prove that? That he had some cash on him? A thirty euro lesson in how it's done. Another happier lesson you might bring back from Rome is a taste for Prosecco. You're wandering around, it's hot, your feet, your legs, all that hard marble and stairs, good Christ, so many. You got to sit down, often, and just watch the flow. But you can't drink a cappuccino every time you sit, you be way too jangly in a hurry. So what to sip? What could be better than a nice light sparkling white wine? I don't know, nor do I need to. Works with the food too. So now, we try and keep an emergency bottle of chilled Prosecco on hand. It's best to be always ready for celebration. * I thought very recently that given my dark analysis of the current situation I should be deeply depressed. Okay, perspective. I imagine someone who was alive in say, 1943 Poland or 1968 Vietnam would not consider this the worst of times. Yet, without a doubt we are despoiling the planet at a horrific rate. Capitalism appears out of control. The socio-political conditions across most of the planet are worsening. There's a sense we're careening down hill towards a precipice. But today I wrote the poem and later I came upon the young man who had dropped the ball at the recording session. I sat down and had a beer while he assured me that next time he would be fully prepared. He easily convinced me, why not? He even bought my beer. I have to remind myself to allow others to treat me rather than trying always to pay just because I have more. I returned to our sanctuary on the hill and put on that glorious French songstress Zaz. What a brilliant young singer, an Edith Piaf for the 21st century. From her first notes bang, your spirits are lifted and you are on the streets of Springtime Paris. Ah, my friends, what to do? Listen, learn, speak, and take the long view. I have taken Auden to heart. Though we are "Beleaguered by the same/negation and despair," still, we must "show an affirming flame." If we in the privileged West do not, who will? * * * 10 October 2014