



islands

dave calder

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AMORGOS

1.

the dust on the stones in the dust

the sea's mouth soft sucking
the many-tongued brown island

light thrust and sharpened
on whitewalls blueshutters

fragrance of herbs bursting
from twisted thirsting bushes

slow heat and silence
on the breezeless peak of the day

2.

of the brothers: one is building his boat
the younger is shouting down his telephone

the boat will come at midnight
the boat will sail next year

these are islands of sound as the sea and dark
close in: the ducks among the pebbles are another.

there is nowhere on this island you can hide from the sea:
the mind is always drifting out, the land is afloat.

lights in the houses are as sudden, scattered as fishing boats:
even the shepherds dream of ships.



ASTYPALEA

not to speak is best. to feel the stone muffle you.
not to hear the incessant clacking of the wind
echoed, trapped in your mind.

half-asleep in the cave, a woman sits on her cot,
inside her head she thinks smooth unspeakable words:
the man stands at a window of the cafe on the ridge,
his greeting a dark clash of flailing cymbals.

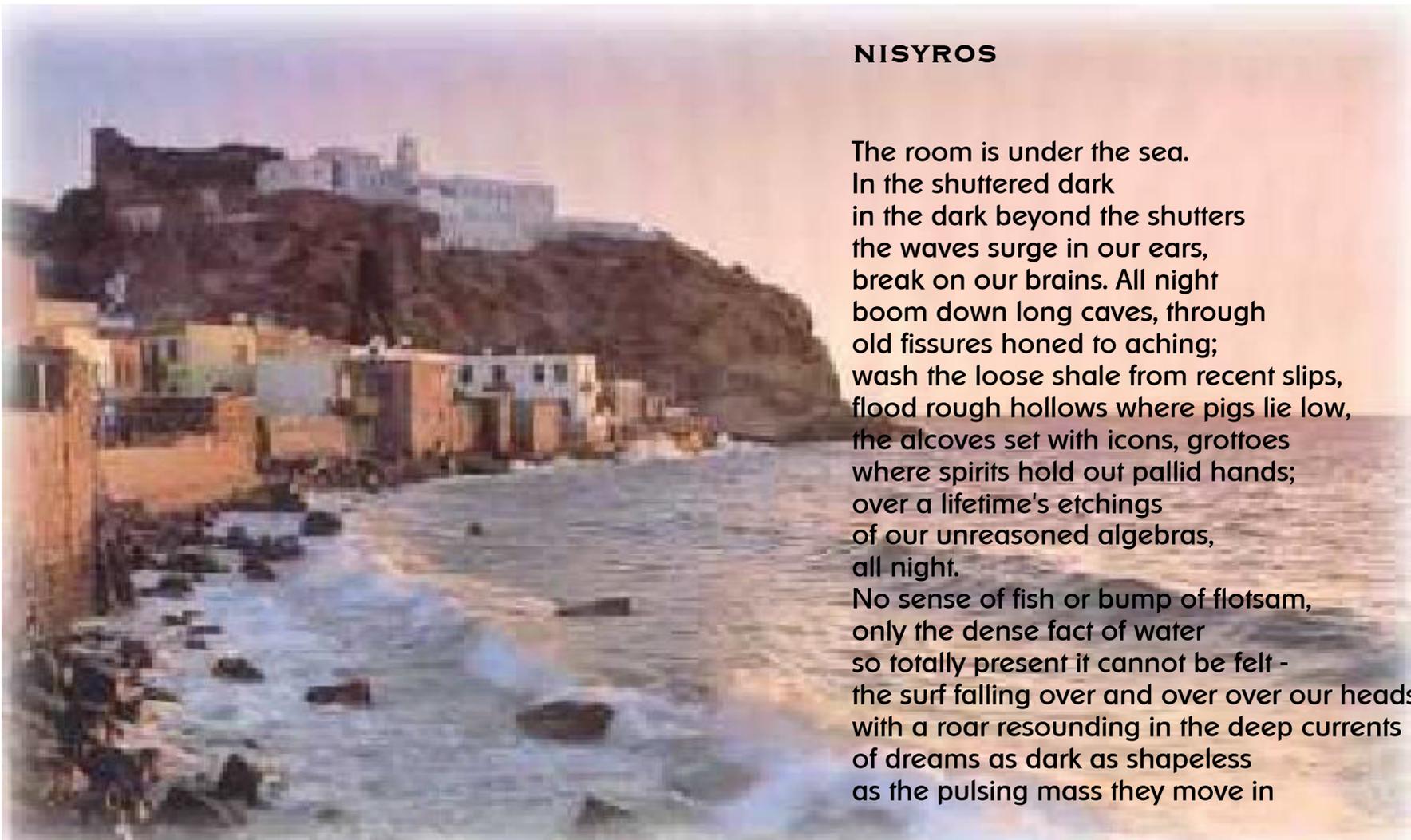
the strangers come and go for hundreds of years,
the husband pours the whisky, offers chocolate;
the mute man stands behind the half-open stable-door,
the weary light behind him lifts in a stone-cold dawn.

to be here is to be imprisoned by ancient defences:
something secret has gone missing and cannot be spoken of:
houses and castle hide by becoming this exposed hill
on a bare island seeming barren, worthless, voiceless.

the wind is trying to speak of blood, of despair,
of the years of submission, mute rage in the heart:
the shapeless voice is trying desperately to rouse us:
far below grey waves batter the sheer wall of the ridge.

close the door. smile at small things. not to speak
is best.





NISYROS

The room is under the sea.
In the shuttered dark
in the dark beyond the shutters
the waves surge in our ears,
break on our brains. All night
boom down long caves, through
old fissures honed to aching;
wash the loose shale from recent slips,
flood rough hollows where pigs lie low,
the alcoves set with icons, grottoes
where spirits hold out pallid hands;
over a lifetime's etchings
of our unreasoned algebras,
all night.
No sense of fish or bump of flotsam,
only the dense fact of water
so totally present it cannot be felt -
the surf falling over and over over our heads
with a roar resounding in the deep currents
of dreams as dark as shapeless
as the pulsing mass they move in

In the morning to wake worn,
eyes vacant as beached fish,
as gouged pits in the cliff.
To open the shutters, watch the swell
whacking the wall
 all the bones
of my skull are coral, a delicate net,
mindless, brittle in the wind's grip,
drained, scoured out, stranded.

SYME

the sea licks its sloppy lips
in the coarse jaws of the crags
& sticks its tongue furry with fish
down the dry throat of the town

like snails the houses cling to the rocks
so many empty bomb-burnt full of dust and debris
mazes of streets leading again & again
into blind private labyrinths
of roofless rooms & corridors

& in a house here by the sea
some men signed papers that stopped the fires
but the sea does not argue
does not call truces or sign agreements

the sea sticks its tongue
a little further into the town
& the town square becomes a salt river
& the small fish can swim on the quay
unbothered by fishermen or cats
for the fishermen are in the cafe complaining
drinking ouzo & playing cards
& the cats are at the backdoor of the cafe
in the bins & stale bread

& the sea goes on licking
with a slow rhythmic passion
a little more each night

& in the gullet of the land
you can't see the sea's face
but only its tongue lapping
at your feet as you walk the street
the salty water pushing



the orange-seller up the hill
the cafe-man to bring in his tables
the wedding procession to wander
the back streets with flowers & guitars
while the sea laps contentedly around the shipping office
laps the old stone like a thirsty traveller sucks a pebble
hardly missing the slight weight of the painted skiffs
or the tickle of the nets on its fine bone flecked furriness

until it fires (maybe it has some other place to go)
& slips away inch by inch stone by stone
until the fish flicker again below the quay wall
& the fishermen scull out their skiffs
& the cats snatch the fish once more piled by the cafe tables
& the ferryboat comes
that has seen the sea's face
wind-crazy & wrinkled
drawn by its old insatiable passion
into the decrepit arid lips of the land

THIRA

a sunset of molten metal
the island is deep in a vast smouldering hole
toasted earth & bony lava
riddlings at the bottom of the oven.
the sliced cliffs ring the ironed sea,
the sea surrounds the island ring
& at the centre of this scorched circle
a volcano's snout nuzzles brazen sky

here we sit at the edge of eruption
on the rim of land
awaiting a tremor to remind us
why we are & who,
or move in tangled ways that cling
above the abrupt drop to
the waters' eye, its steaming pupil.

it had been so easy to forget
(walking the streets on the backward slope
among bright energy & dark wine,
moving voices, creeping wind,
desperate tourists & tired donkeys)
to forget the toiling cliff the past fell into
the few yards grip of stone that holds the present



KOS

we wake to the big bed
in the small room
at the end of
the dark corridors

we wake to sunlight
songs of children shouts of soldiers

we wake in a venetian bed
inlaid with painted saints
wood as wide and knobbly
as the mattress

wake to children playing
in overgrown rubble
that could be thirty or
three thousand years old

to the drum of army lorries
taut rattle of metal
meaningless curse of orders

we wake in the small room, its door
a false exit from the gloomy
decaying maze of the old hotel,



to find a small owl
perched on the balcony
next to our towel

so self-contained, so seeming
watchful in sleep, awake in dreams,
that generations of lovers
of soldiers and children,
of sunlight on carved rubble,

went and came, came and went,
as we lay on the big bed
beneath the round eyes of the saints

KYTHERA

1.
this bed is damp across the road
raise voices as the taverna closes
she shifts under his arm
pale-painted
narrow room high and black-raftered

in the hall outside someone shuffles
falls about coughs vehemently beside the door
not like a knock, not a threat

2.
The bays are heelprints, hoofmarks or like where
pastry's been punched out, or . . .

from this hidden garden in the ruined battlement
we watch the cafe, the taverna,

the closed houses, odd little beasties that are
people, working, wiping their mouths, talking.

It's all a long way down. We lie in the walls'
shelter, drowse where the sun

sprawls through bushes aching with young fragrance
and insects drone and thrum. No doubt

it's the same down there, but not so perfect; the world
is amazing, but far too below. We laze,

we watch without need, without desire. Is this also
perhaps what gods do?



3.
no-one has fished for weeks,
the boats are hauled up under the trees
by the dusty road in the quivering haze.

everything as usual:
the jetty, the pebbles, the road up the hills.
the bus has taken the school on a picnic.

What to do? walk
along the shore, sit at the shuttered cafe.
nothing moves on the hills, on the sea

- in august this road is like syntagma -

MONEMVASIA

1
five scrawny chickens scabble in the yard
in the dry the powdery earth
scatter in a parody of panic among boxes
over high walls among dense creepers

the walls are crumbling and the house too
boarded windows flaking skin

in the forecourt above the main gate all
words are stifled in our throats
to shout would be an insurrection

the cars parked at the road's end
gleam fit to burst aflame

and the sound is heat like a heavy hand
slamming
stone and wood tightening
yellow dust in the doors of deserted houses

the desperate fanning of innumerable insects
whimper of shade smashed against the wall

we are exiled from ourselves, our voices
will not come, the past has filled our mouths
with golden dust: among the stones these plants
learn to fight, flower where and when they can

2.
The steep walls twist - nowhere is not enclosed,
but over these ramparts hidden gardens are escaping:
although only their trees can be seen and the
ungraspable glimpse taunts through narrow grilles
creepers spill over wild as waterfalls
and tiny flowers claw footholds in the stone.

By this buttress the air swells with growing
its fragrance overwhelms the walled-up world
seeding its pores, crevices, parched mouths
with promises, enough for being made.
She is beautiful, her eyes are bright. Without a word
at the turning of the lane, she touches his arm.

3.
What is dead a thousand years?
her voice rises through the stone.
Under the bush a lizard shuddered
The cisterns are cracked, the walls are broken
Webs flower over every opening and path
Thorns scourge her, stones open her way
Her voice is the one thing alive
all I hear in the thousand years.
They moved from the mountain to the island shore
from the island to the unprotected bay,
their houses are rough gardens of rock and gorse
the past has sunk into soil.
The dead are only dead when they die
after that they become other things:
useless to talk of being dead, of being not being
for thousands of years.
No-one watches us. The world too is dying.
Lift sunlit lips to the shadow of my face.

MYKONOS

in summer it seems the island
gets no wider, but its narrow waist
bulges with bellies, rucksacks, wallets;
plump boys prance around the port
in glossy pants

 lost irishmen
sit waiting for friends to pass
joke with edgy cafeowners
about last year's wild parties

*

in winter we walked the back through
pitted scrub & rutted lanes
as wet & windy as the northlands

sharp smacks of light split sky & sea apart
an old truck bellyached up from the coast:
we visited the airport's wire. the power station,
the rubbish dump

 it was a driech north day &
it knew us well

returning we found cruise boats, the passengers
striding the streets for a souvenir hour
unsure of whether this was what they meant to see

stray sunlight runs down brown scarps of earth & wave:
drizzle & woodsmoke, clack of feet in the stone maze,
two cups of coffee on a damp table in cold half-light,
a small white village huddled against a lurching sea.

NIGHT LANDING AT SHINOUSSA

20 boxes of tomatoes
2 of beans
10 crates of carrots
5 of potatoes
8 coils of wire
2 boxes of probably 20 cartons each of 200
rekor cigarettes
7 cases of feta
2 beds with their mattresses
64 other assorted & unidentifiable packages
1 man
1 man met by a germanic looking lady in glasses

the fishingboat lurches against the ferry's steel wall.
what do they do over there in that featureless dark where
only one light flickers faithfully?



PATMOS

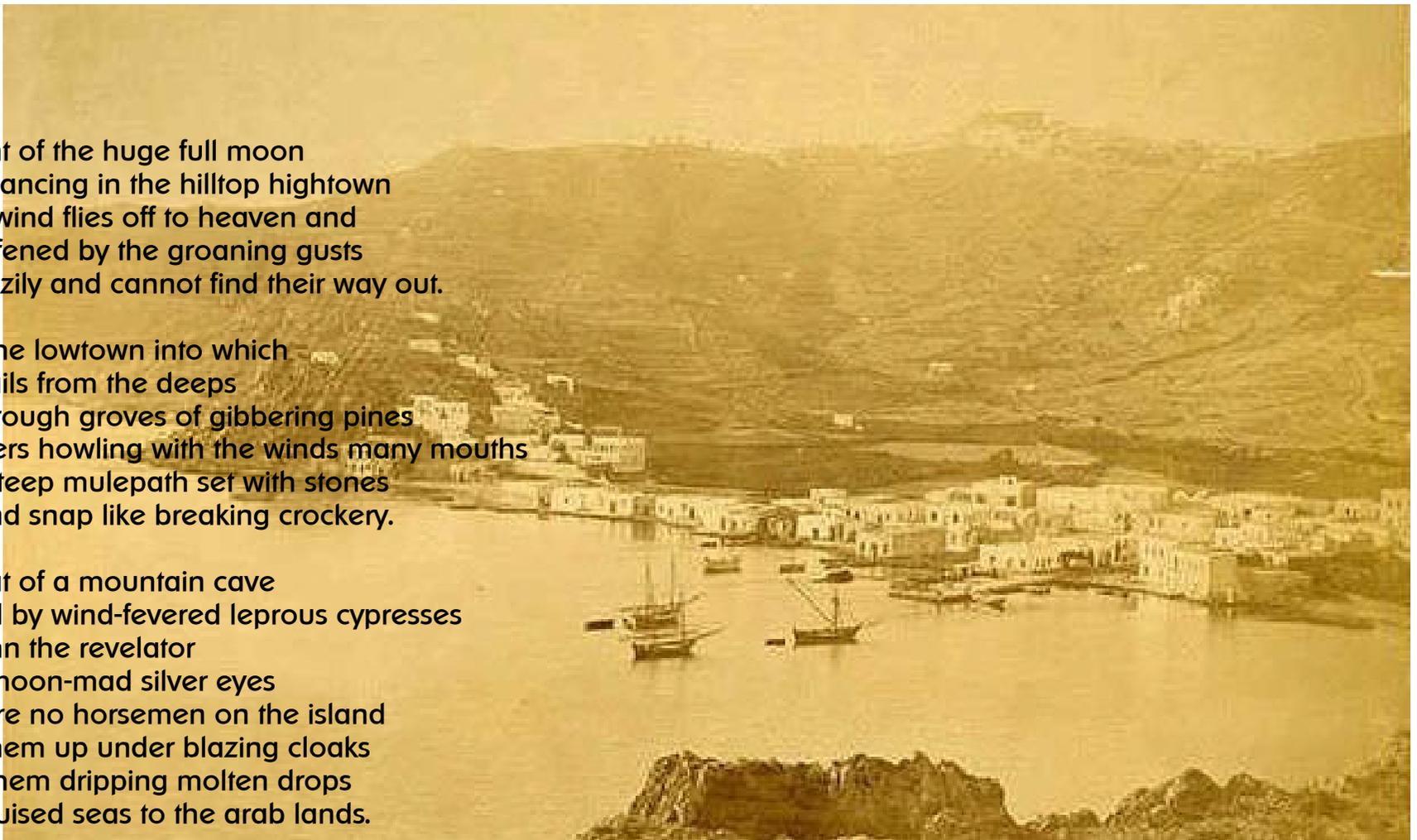
on the night of the huge full moon
no-one is dancing in the hilltop hightown
where the wind flies off to heaven and
streets deafened by the groaning gusts
wander crazily and cannot find their way out.

and so to the lowtown into which
the wind sails from the deeps
we walk through groves of gibbering pines
past boulders howling with the winds many mouths
down the steep mulepath set with stones
that split and snap like breaking crockery.

in the throat of a mountain cave
surrounded by wind-fevered leprous cypresses
icons of john the revelator
stare with moon-mad silver eyes
but there are no horsemen on the island
to sweep them up under blazing cloaks
and carry them dripping molten drops
over the bruised seas to the arab lands.

and in the port the sailors have stopped singing
yet still the bottles come and come and come;
the wind has stolen the scent of late blossoms -
a fragrance of salt flowers slips into the cafe.
a child with pale gleaming hair finds a dead rat
stiff in the street, its eyes sharp and glinting
as puddled moons - only the wind toys with it:
behind arch-pillars, low walls, rubbish bins,
the cats are cowering from the bristling light

and the old men hunched with their thick coats
riding their shoulders
the old men sure-footed as ships' cats or
mountain mules
the old men with faces rippled with winds
eyes bright as stars
say that tonight everyone must get drunk
to sleep to wake unaware of visions
this night of the huge full moon



TYNOS

across from the tables of cafe number one
across from the coloured tables and the trees
someone lies in bed, behind a wall of glass.
the lady tidies the sheets, comes out to wash the steps.
who is it? i don't know, but my heart aches for this, this:
to die with the waves flecked with blossoms
to die with the trees white with weddings
to be weeded from the garden in the brown bake of day
while the wind rattles the poppy gourds like bones
and the lines of white tablecloths twist and turn:
to die white as marble beneath the brown earth of flesh
while the waiters, the sailors, the mourners
furl and shroud, sails sheets and canopies:
one hand, one dark shadow,
one face above white sheets
encased in glass, casting no reflection:
to die in this room, this sealed box,
across the street from this cafe under laden trees,
the winds gossip, the green tables,
this room facing the church of the annunciation
where the silver icon dies under glass
drowned in silver offerings
dulled by deep lulling chants
deaf to the windshaken bells,
eyes of silver, brazen heart,
heart broken by bells:
to die to ache forever
because of the half-smelt herbs
smell of flowers as soon remembered as forgotten
whipped out of reach of memory by the turning
screw of the wind:



to die with the windows closed
with the sunlight and the want of trees
forever just beyond feel beyond sense:
to die like an icon
imprisoned in silver in the secret dark of the altar,
word become flesh, flesh become thing, beaten
silver under glass, trapped, hidden by gifts:
here we are so silted up by the seas presents
a dredger rumbles night and day in the harbour's throat
yet how can we pass outward if we are clogged and caught?
without such endless dredging how can we clear the narrows
to where the sea ends and our water runs out
and the earth takes first the brown flesh
and then the silver bones?

PASKA, KALAVARDA, RODOS

for Katerina Papamikhail aged 7.

Where's the young goat, Katerina,
you fed with fresh herbs every day?
Its blood-smeared fleece hangs by the roadside,
its head is simmering away.

Do you think of death and suffering
as you chew its coiled insides?
A breeze of flowers and sea-wrack rises,
taps the door and stirs the light.

In the whitewashed fume-filled kirk and
on t.v. in every cafe
packed congregations chant and pray for
new life to rise from the dead.

With a grin you scrape the warm skull,
a little greedy. Up the hill
the village lads lurk with their bangers
to give us all a taste of hell.

Still hungry? Without a word I
give you this tongue that's lying in
my bowl.

Whatever we're fed to eat is holy
an offering that buys us time,
but with the red eggs and good wishes
I'll get by on bread and wine.

