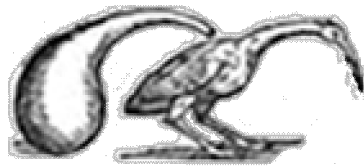


Segue

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Cavafy

My husband's friend, the one whose house we stay in on the island, says that the old neighbor woman next door is the only woman who takes care of him, who isn't looking for his wallet. No sooner are we through her balcony door than she is offering a small coffee and a homemade sweet on a spoon, a bitter one like an exotic jam. Her cookies are especially healthy. They are made with olive oil only, no butter or eggs although she keeps chickens in the yard that lay plenty of eggs. For our friend she'll bring out a blood pressure cuff to take a reading. He expects to be healthy on the island. He gets disappointed when he walks the mile and a half from the harbor to his house and his blood pressure rises. My husband tries to tell him that he should take his blood pressure when he has been at rest and not after a brisk walk. At night after a meal of local fish and tomato salad our friend reads Cavafy in Greek to us on the balcony of his island house. It sounds like good poetry and although I don't know what he is saying, it seems like a very good reading.

Pieces

On the island the neighbor woman and her husband are broad bodied with enormous worker hands. They have a pureness, not a clean kind of pure, but one that comes from being clear like glass is clear. The husband's face and especially his long large nose are a ruddy red. He fishes for squid and octopus and other local fish many times a week and never protects himself from the sun. He also has goats that he allows to run free day or night. They come back to him when they are ready to be milked. He makes goat cheese that he gives to the neighbors. One evening he brought over a few birds, something quail-like that his wife had prepared for our friend's dinner table. We had to be careful not to bite down on the shot pieces that were embedded in their bodies. They were tasty and we left the shot pieces and tiny bones on our plates. On the island we always talk about fishing and where to find fish. We feel we are living real life and always sleep restfully in our friend's island house. In the morning we step on the stone floor and walk to the window to open the blue shutters, never knowing what to expect from the weather. If the eucalyptus trees are not blowing and the sea looks calm it does not mean that the hydrofoils to the mainland are operating. The sea could be dangerous out in the open and we wouldn't know it. The last time we were leaving the island, there was an earthquake that was only felt with any force right above where the plates had shifted because its center was thirty to forty miles below the sea.

Orthodoxy

The neighbor's wife suggests we visit a nuns' monastery on the other side of the island. She is a believer in orthodoxy as is our friend who is becoming more and more spiritual as he grows older. We decide to visit the monastery and so take a boat to the other side. There are more than three hundred stairs to the top. At the top before entering the church the women in our party take sack skirts off hooks near the bells to wear over their shorts out of respect. The nuns ask the women if they are orthodox. They lie and say yes. The men had warned the women that the nuns would not accept anyone who was not orthodox. Then they offer lunch for a small donation in a dining room that is reserved for special visitors to the monastery complex. The dining room is full of embroidered cloths, samplers and pillows with crosses and unknown texts. Photographs of severe spiritual directors decorate the walls. We eat a simple meal and do not say too much in order not to give away the lie. The men and the nuns share one language and the women and the nuns share another. The nuns are capable in both languages, but no one knows if they think the women share a language with the men. On the way down we pick greens for salad and rest in the shade of overhanging rocks. Before we leave the two nuns agree to let us take a photograph of them. They are laughing in the photograph and the lilies from their garden with their trumpeting faces toward the sun are in the background.

Bratsera

They converted a sponge factory to a romantic island hotel. The woman who owns it inherited it from her family. Each room has a balcony, some overlook a courtyard and some a winding stone road in the center of the island's only town. All the rooms are painted with a warm burnt umber watercolor wash. Someone applied it with a sponge and brush and left lots of streaks and texture. Their hand and rhythms are everywhere. The rooms have double beds with mosquito nets draped from the ceiling. Guests leave the balcony doors open without fear of bites. Some think that the owner made some mistakes—she devotes too much space to the bathrooms. They are almost as large as the bedrooms. And then she hires young people, who look like models to staff the front desk. They know nothing about service or find service below them. They do each speak three or four languages and use them in discourses with the tourists. A pool surrounded by an arcade of thin white columns is long and narrow and dramatically lit within the hotel's outer walls. The hotel is called Bratsera, the name of a vessel where the sponge workers rest after their harvest on the sea floor. A dry well with a wooden bucket stands near the entrance. The water from that well was once used to clean the living matter from sponges. Sponge diving used to be the island's main occupation. It no longer is. Still sponges are sold everywhere and few know they are using what is a skeleton to absorb fluids or rub off dry skin.

Oracle

A group of tourists visited a sacred place where once there was an oracle. Not having had any experience with oracles, they enjoyed it as much as they could. The night before they were to leave the hotel and the area, they went down to a seaside restaurant for dinner. There they met a very old man who was a fisherman by day. His clothes were a grey green including his hat and jacket. His clothes were old like he was. When the dance for old men started, he danced with his coat over one shoulder, swinging his free arm and snapping his fingers like he was young and sharply dressed. The next day the manager of the hotel chased after the tourist bus on his motorbike as they drove away from the site of the ancient oracle. He would not allow the bus to continue until each person who had left with a white terrycloth robe from their room, opened their suitcase and returned it. After they turned over the robes, they left in shame and no one said a word. What were they thinking?

About the Work

I thought I would analyze the short prose pieces included here, and say first of all, that I submitted them to *Segue* in a document entitled—“Aegean.doc.” This is a reference to their setting and is also a way to tie the work together. *Aegeus*, best known as the father of *Theseus*, threw himself into the Aegean Sea from the Temple of Sounion when he saw black sails on his son’s ship as it journeyed towards Athens. *Theseus* left Crete after overcoming the Minotaur there. The son and his pilots had agreed to hoist white sails as a sign of their success on Crete and black sails as a sign of *Theseus*’s death. There are at least three versions of why *Theseus* neglected to raise white sails. I like to think he was simply thoughtless as he partied after a successful heroic adventure. I also hope that my short narratives sit well under the shifting atmosphere of this mythical history. Although there is no story “about” *Aegeus* among these works, I created the word document after fabricating the narratives.

About my writing in general—I have always enjoyed keeping my prose writing light and unexpected. Authors that I admire are Italo Calvino and Lydia Davis, each for their own logic. Today I wrote about two stones or rocks not speaking to each other although they were sitting on the same wooden table near the flu shot clinic. I found that interesting and enjoyed the absurdity of dwelling in that idea. I’m not sure where it will go, but the narrator must be a little crazy and I usually start not knowing where I am going to end.

Similar to the other writings, “Pieces” presents a narrative line of contradictions and juxtapositions with limited connective tissue. In describing particular moments, objects, locations and details, “Pieces” offers non-lyric and non-meditative elements that move the work in the direction of short narrative. I constructed “Pieces” using the tenses of verbs to get at its core and title. Here is a list of verbs used in the present tense as they appear in “Pieces:” are, have, comes, is, are, fishes, protects, has, allows, run, come, are, be, makes, and gives. Then there is a turn in the work with these past tense verbs: brought, had prepared, had to be, were embedded, were and left. The three short sentences in the past tense are the physical center of the story. The shift to past tense opens the reader to the idea that island life is not be what it seems. There is a quick move back into the present tense but with a change in tone with these verbs: talk, find, feel, sleep, step, walk, expect, are, looks, and mean. Finally it moves back to the past tense as a way to connect the “pieces” of shot embedded in the birds with the shifting plates thirty to forty miles below the sea, the sea where, we remember, *Theseus* died of grief.

In “Orthodoxy” there is again the use of the past tense, this time to unlock the secret of why the female guests in the nuns’ monastery tell a lie about their religious affiliation—“the men had warned the women.” Other than this phrase, everything is in the present tense. Then the two-sentence discussion of “who-shares-what-language” reveals that, in order not to give the lie away, no one talks much. There are also some sexual innuendos in the description of the dining room, the shared languages, and the garden flowers. Another work entitled, “Bratsera” also dances around sexuality and is “the name of a vessel where the sponge workers rest after their harvest on the sea floor.” The theme of bodies and bodily functions lurks in this piece through words like: warm, wash, sponge, brush, hand, beds, draped, bites, bathrooms, bedrooms, vessel, dry, clean, living,

skeleton, absorb, fluids, rub and skin. There is a kind of skepticism about bodily functions, bodily needs and pleasure since the proportion of bedroom to bathroom in a romantic hotel is questioned at the start.

In “Oracle” the reader, along with the writer, might find it impossible to expect tourists to understand the role of an ancient medium or oracle, except through the delight of an old man as he dances “*zebetiko*” and in the persistence of a hotel manager as he retrieves what was stolen from hotel rooms. The old man and the manager each become modern oracles about which “tourists” are for the most part ignorant. In the case of the manager, the tourists are finally helped to feel shame on a monumental level. With an “oracle” one is in the awesome presence of the gods.

Situated again on an Aegean Island, “Cavafy,” has a theme of reading—men reading women, men reading men friends, taking a reading of blood pressure and finally, reading the poet, Cavafy. Reading becomes more than reading a text, especially one that not everyone understands. Cavafy’s poetry sounds good when read aloud, particularly when life, chickens and good health abound. “Abound” is a Walser-like word with which to end this discussion of my work and so I wrote this sentence.

About the Author

Barbara Maloutas won the New Issues first book in poetry competition for *In a Combination of Practices* (2004), and was the winner of New Michigan Press/*Diagram* Chapbook Contest for *Practices* (2003). Her work in this issue of *Segue* comes from *Pronominal Pleasure*, which was recently selected as one of four finalist manuscripts in Rose Metal Press' poetry book competition. Other of Maloutas' work has appeared or is forthcoming in journals including *Aufgabe*, *FreeVerse*, *Segue*, *Tarpaulin Sky*, *Good Foot*, *The New Review of Literature*, *bird dog*, *dusie*, *Gentle Strength Quarterly*, *JAB* and *Greatcoat*. Her work is anthologized in *Intersections: Innovative Poets of Southern California* (2005), *Green Integer* and the *5th Anniversary Issue* of *Segue* (2006), the online journal from Miami University-Middletown. Beard of Bees will publish an online chapbook, *Coffee Hazilly*, in 2007. She teaches book structures in Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles.

Barbara Maloutas on the Web:

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