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Into the Underworld

Life is built on mysterious shifting sands.

I look out the plane's window at the earth below, the sun raking hot and brutish across the Argolid plain. Old, weathered hills, brown, scrubbed, smoothed down by eons of pelting rain, but mostly by the sun: that unrelenting light with the power to wear down, to weather...to patinate.

The sea comes up suddenly, jarring—turquoise, violet and emerald layers swarm the suede coastline. The enormous metal carcass banks over the Saronic Gulf, gliding over the seaside villages south of Athens on its approach to the airport, a pink sheen dusts their whitewashed veneer. The sun is setting; a wedge of moon illuminates a purple eastern sky. I know to expect these extravagant sights, yet under my breath, like a tormented child rocking herself to sleep, I am muttering familiar words to myself, over and over.

I hate this place. I hate this place. I hate this place.

A knot tightens in my stomach. Greece and I are engaged in a battle, and it is my destiny to search for myself in this landscape, to stand on these slippery rocks and feel the earth inhabit me. I want to be that conduit, that Persephone, that mistress of the in-between. I can feel the

water...it is transmutable; plasma. I can touch that rock and hear its ancestral sound. For reasons I'm not sure I'll ever understand, I have chosen to return—again and again—to a land that I hopelessly manage to both hate and love.

The writer Lawrence Durrell tells a story that captures the quintessential paradox of Greece—it warns the uninitiated that this is not a postcard destination; is a place with a seamy underbelly, dirt under its fingernails, and voices in the wind that are not always benign.

An acquaintance of Durrell's was backpacking one afternoon, the story goes, in the mountains of Corfu, in search of a plant specimen on the central ridge of the island. He stopped to enjoy the view from a famous outlook when he found himself suddenly surrounded in a white mist, which had risen off the sea. He described it as an emanation with a distinct outline; inside he heard the cries of seagulls and the calling of human voices. The experience was so terrifying that he grabbed his belongings and fled the scene, panicked. A few months later, he was found dead, having fallen from a high apartment building in Athens, the phone, torn completely off his apartment wall, still clenched in his hand.

Such tales betray the soul of Greece. It is a place that, if you are not prepared, will tear back your skin and expose your soul to the elements. If you survive this baptism by fire, you are eternally addicted to this numinous, often unforgiving and utterly seductive earth.

Mythology has a way of creeping into modern terminology, and the root of the word panic is found in Pan, the god of the noonday sun. It is the idea of something scary making its way into your waking life, the way shepherds are known to fear the arrival of the cloven-footed god as they doze under the olive groves in the mid-afternoon. Beware, they say. Pan will get you. I know it is true, because he found me in an Athenian apartment, one September morning in 1976.

The sun slants through the shutters, thickly shellacked with dust. My view through the balcony window is a tangle of ugly concrete buildings stacked on the slopes up to Mount Imitos, barely visible beyond a jungle of television antennas and clotheslines.

Flying out over New York harbor a few months before, on July 4th, I celebrated my own independence day by leaving behind all that was familiar to study in Greece. But now I am second-guessing my decision.

The director of the program has a motto: “drop kick me Jesus through the goal posts of life,” and her curriculum resembles a version of *Outward Bound*. Instead of leaving you alone in the woods with a book of matches to see if you survive, she sent me to live on a remote island with no knowledge of Greek, and now I’ve been dropped into the wilderness of Athens for the rest of the year. In these initial months since my arrival, the everydayness of life here is still so foreign, so strange—I wonder if I will ever get used to this place.

It seems like any other day, the sun rising like a yellow smear over the concrete of Athens, reflecting acid orange off the rooftop water heaters. I lie under the rough blanket and listen to the sounds outside my door—I am next to the kitchen and can hear my roommate, Paki, opening the refrigerator, scooping yogurt into a ceramic dish and sliding it across the table.

It starts slowly, insipidly. A crawling sensation of terror, making me break out in a sweat—I feel as if I’m being pulled into the floor. The sensation of dread increases, my pulse racing, wondering what will happen to me. Will I evaporate in this room? Will I run screaming into the streets? The balcony—I am five floors up. What if I fell off? I hear the call of the vegetable vendor far below, his three-wheeled cart making its way up the street behind the apartment, a megaphone on the roof. “Fresh vegetables,

come buy, eggplant, peppers, tomatoes...” the voice intones in a raw, blunt stab. Car horns honk, a woman calls out from a balcony, “*Boree...*” she says to a woman across the street. “...*could be...*”

This psychological descent began, a few weeks before, with an actual journey underground. A few friends and I had dined at a favorite downtown taverna, famous for its enclosed patio and densely trellised arbor, offering an oasis from the chaos of the surrounding city. There, beneath the filth of the streets, the sounds of traffic and the cats climbing blood red bougainvillea, splattered like a mob hit against the brick-walled courtyard, I had an experience that changed my life.

After downing a couple of tiny copper pitchers of *retsina*—the resin tinged wine specific to Greece—I stepped out in search of the ladies room. The waiter told me it was “down there,” and pointed to a hole in the floor. For some reason I hesitated, glancing around at the packed tables of the lunchtime rush hour before peering down the winding stairwell leading into a crepuscular doom.

At the bottom I was faced with a long corridor. Breathing in a mixture of damp earth and cooking oil, I crept down the hallway, my hands touching the moist stone walls for guidance. When I got close to the end, I heard a voice in the darkness.

“Do you want to see something interesting?”

My heart jumped; I stopped, too terrified to answer.

“It is very interesting. Do you like to see?”

Do I like to see? “What?” I finally said, in a pathetic lamb’s bleat.

“Come here. I show you.”

I walked slowly towards the voice, aware of an ambient light flickering softly like a nighttime ritual about to happen. Suddenly I felt like Persephone in the Underworld, wondering where her mother went. There was Hades, my

waiter, standing next to a large underground clearing, pointing to something. I leaned in closer for a look.

“See—there.” Pause. “What you call it in English? A grave?”

I was stunned. Standing right before me, a few feet away, was an upright piece of marble. White, lonely and sacred, it was about five feet tall and projecting directly out of the earth.

“But...how did it get here? I mean, why is it here?” I fumbled over my words, too entranced to be frightened anymore by the fact that I was in a foreign country in a dark basement, alone with a strange man who was now holding my hand.

“Here—I show you,” he responded innocently, pulling me closer to the object. We stopped at a respectful distance, but I could see the engravings on the face of the stone, clear as day.

“It was not placed here...it has always *been* here. You see,” Hades said, animated, his white teeth flashing in the veiled light, and his voice lowering, at once excited and at the same time tinged with an edge of awe, “we are standing in a graveyard.”

All at once, as if Zeus himself hit me with a lightning bolt, I got it. We were thirty feet below the modern Athenian street level, and I was standing in the middle of a Roman cemetery. This was the stuff they couldn’t teach you with slides in the darkness of a university lecture auditorium. The ancient still lived here—thinly paved over by the present—and reached out for our understanding and awe, centuries and millennia later. A streetcar rumbled overhead, sending dirt off the ceiling joists, falling on my hair in a gritty benediction. I had lost track of time as well as the fact that Hades was squeezing my hand even harder.

“You like?” he whispered.

Suddenly, right there and then, I knew what I wanted to do with my life. The decision to become an archaeologist

emerged from that singular moment under the streets of Athens. The landscape groaned under the weight of millennia of archaeological levels, but the atmosphere itself was also replete with layers—a heady intersection of both panic and wonder, where gods and mortals cross paths—and nothing could be more intoxicating than being face to face with something so unavoidably ancient.

As a child, I had been haunted by a recurring dream of being pulled into the earth, taken away from everything and everyone I knew and loved, to a place I did not recognize. And now, just like those nightmares, a spectral hand had reached up from the bowels of the earth, wrapped itself around my ankle and yanked me down. Like Persephone, I must have ingested some unseen pomegranate seeds: because it would become my destiny not only to make this place my home—but to learn to see in the dark. I gathered up my best possible answer.

“I like,” I answered, giving his hand a presumptive squeeze. “I like very much.”

I live out the following months in a blur of ancient marble, smoke, cacophony of traffic, people and language. The landscape is nonetheless perfect in a sort of surgical sterility: bone white marbles etched against Kodachrome blue skies, turquoise seas, half moon slices of beach. Not much green anywhere, just the sharp corners of Pythagoras’ geometry living in the rocks, the staccato cypress slicing cliff faces, the hard edge bracing day and night. Yet the landscape speaks to me: I hear its voice in the stadium of ancient Olympia, whistling through the trees surrounding the sanctuary of Asclepius, and in the water lapping at the tip of Attica, reflecting the slender columns of the Temple of Poseidon in a miasmic ripple of sapphire and ivory.

Eventually, winter arrives, and the Athens skyline melts into a flaccid gray smudge, the streets of downtown thick with the aroma of roast chestnuts. The rains come and we wade through the streets of our neighborhood in waist deep

water. Over time I return, again and again, to a favorite spot on the Acropolis hill overlooking the Theatre of Dionysus, and as I recline against a marble drum, the rigid flutes penetrating my back, I feel as if I am downloading history. Scanning the city around me—a concrete river cascading from the heights of Lycabettus hill to the glittering shores of the Aegean in the distance—I think of Dionysus and his opposite, Apollo, and realize it's no coincidence the ancient Greeks worshipped deities representing both the logical and illogical...the atmosphere of this place remains infused with their essence.

One evening, towards the end of our stay, Paki and I are drinking on the rooftop of our apartment. After a couple of farewell toasts, she impulsively launches her glass into the air, and as it flies over the edge of the building, a missile catching the late afternoon sun, I think of Durrell's suicidal backpacker, phone in hand, placing a call that would never connect. As close to the edge as I have felt myself in the past months, I can't imagine performing such an erratic act, but still I understand: this place makes you a little crazy. Even though it will soon be time to return to the States and my own life, I know one day I will be back...as much as it frightens me, Greece also is implausibly alluring. Now, more than ever, I want to dig in this earth, to be that conduit, that Persephone, that mistress of the in-between, and search for myself in this landscape.

I listen for the sounds of screaming, terrified that her salvo has killed someone on the street far below. Gratefully, there are no wails, no sirens, just the sounds of seagulls having made their way inland, and the late November wind coming off the top of Mount Imitos in the distance...balding, imperious, and looming over my apartment with a wordless immensity.

Amanda Summer Slavin is an archaeologist and writer. For the past 25 years she has returned to the Greek island of Ithaka, where she started searching for the palace of Odysseus in 1984 with a team from Washington University. Her work has appeared in the New York Times, Islands magazine and other publications. Even though she has traced the odyssey of history's most famous male adventurer, she enjoys stories about women who have found transformation through travel.