

LOOKING OUT FROM THE ACROPOLIS, 1989

"Each structure, in its beauty, was even then and at once antique, but in the freshness of its vigor, even today, recent and newly wrought. --Plutarch, on the Acropolis

In old town Athens of date palms, of ferned balconies
cascading canary calls, I walked with a Bulgarian friend
up the stony, sunny path to the "high city" where tangles
of cactus and spanish sword poked the Periclean ramparts
and packs of wild cats prowled the brush for mice as wind
whipped the naps of their fur and Georgi's little son, Aleko,
hooted after them as we trailed behind, plodding upwards
through the gate of broken columns to the precincts of Athena,
two poets, from West and East, here for the first time, awed
by the lonely grace of stones fallen, stones still standing.

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On the left, the smiling maidens of the karyatid porch
whose marble robes fluttered in blue sky;
on the right, the massive surge of Parthenon columns
capped by a parade of centaurs, horsemen, gods,
reliving dramas of who we are, who we might become
as pediments marked our battles with beasts, our talks
with gods, our search for ourselves in philosopher groves
of this city on the hill that draws us by surviving

Persian navies, Roman consuls, pasha's yoke, *Panzergruppe*

--holding up like a Phidean model a sense

of the examined life that is worth living, a place

where gods and men can struggle with success, striving

to widen the wealth of the human soul, the size of heaven.

All across the monumental rubble, trailing after tour guides,

Japanese photographed this field of broken stone.

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As we looked out from the Acropolis, we saw

the New World Order the President praised

that winter as caged canaries down below

sang in the sunshine of Athenian balconies:

Both superpowers, bankrupt; the Japanese, our bankers.

Looking east past Yugoslavian slaughter,

the Kozlodui reactor was about to blow.

Further east, in Tbilisi, the shoot-out at Parliament,

the breadlines in Moscow, the dead rivers and lakes,

the black colonels hopping in Rumpelstilskin rage

at loss of empire, as Chechens, Kurds, Azeris et al.

went for their guns to settle old scores.

How much has changed since then?

Merely the killing fields.

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Then it was Israeli rubber bullets and intifada stones.

Holiday shoppers at Clapham Junction bombed by Irish Santas.

German skinheads bashing Vietnamese and Turks.

Bloated African bellies, fly-infested eyes.

Shining Path Maoists beheading Indians in Ayacucho.

And nosferatu warlords in Beijing sipping their elixir
of cinnabar and blood. Pol Pot vacationing in Thailand.

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Meanwhile, it was snowing in Chicago, snowing on the cardboard huts
of the homeless in the land of the free, as more banks failed
and repossessed midwestern farms lay fallow to the wind.

Each in the cell of himself was almost convinced of his freedom
when the Wall fell to cheers of freed multitudes
and one could hear communist and capitalist gasps rise up
in a global shout which circled the earth for a year
then disappeared through holes in the ozone layer.

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The New World Order. The tribes of the Book

are still turned to wrath as the worst of us

would wind time back to savage pasts easier to imagine.

The philosopher's grove is empty; the poet's words gone flat.

Against this, aren't the Japanese, baptized in nuclear fire,
clapping their hands for the Kami of the cash register,
our safest, sanest neighbors?

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These old stones cry out for more.

Surviving centuries, sculpted for all to see,
declaring our need for beauty and laws like love
for this tiny *polis* of a planet spinning wildly,
for my daughter, snug, asleep in her bed,
for Aleko who played in the Chernobyl cloud,
whose father stood near Nike's rotting frieze,
looking out upon the city jammed with cars. Georgi
opened his flask of vodka and poured some on a stone
before we drank our toasts to the new world order
and to whatever muse might come to give us words.

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