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THE TEMPLE OF POSEIDON

1

In the shadow of the Temple of Poseidon I swam once in the salty Mediterranean, slants of sharp light streaming through columns where Byron cut his name, back-lit in the morning glare. I swam, floated rather—the water buoyant with salt—paddled out to where I could see ancient boat slips, long V-shaped gouges carved in bottom rock so far under water you wouldn’t see them unless someone told you where to look, an ancient harbor for epic black ships.

The Temple of Poseidon is so high up on rock so far out on Point Sunion, you look up to it when you swim like an ordinary human below it, and you wonder if the god of the sea, of the world—still dark, changeable, uncertain—if the great god was propitiated, even temporarily, by such labor and beauty, such an architectural feat, not to stir up angry waters with his great oar.

Or did Poseidon himself, when the Temple was newly completed, have a sense of humor, call a party of the gods to celebrate, to wallow around on their backs in these waters, old salty boys having fun, letting their hair go? He could wave his trident and make the waters dance like horses, could make the full-cheeked clouds blow and fill the pretty sails of pleasure boats. He would speed around the harbor, watching the candle of the sky light his birthday cake.

2

There is still a little harbor, some small boats on buoys, and a shack with good fried-up baby kalamari. I was looking forward to eating lunch there,
the Greek fisherman-cook, his rope-carved hands.  
Until the sun was too hot I swam around thinking  
about gods and warriors, how remote they are.  
When salt crusted on my shoulders, I thought of Odysseus,  
his long swim after shipwreck, his hair matted like seaweed,  
his shoulders crusted with salt. Odysseus, who had the wit  
in such a condition, naked, cut-up, to speak to the beautiful  
Nausikaa, who stood tall and unafraid near the washing pools,  
the colorful laundry drying on the rocks. Her friends  
had fled up the hillside at the sight of the beast.

She had a mind of her own  
and knew what he was when he spoke.  
The story is essentially about cleanness,  
the shaking out of salt, preparing oneself for a stranger  
who is noble and instantly beloved.  
And thus in spite of ugliness and exhaustion—  
the brine flakes on his shoulders as thick as fish scales  
he would scrub off in the river’s mouth and emerge clean  
in new clothes the young girl had given him—  
he defeated his enemy Poseidon, old maker of shipwrecks.  
He had a rare voice, a civilized nerve  
to approach beauty, without complaint or apology,  
and to win the heart.

3

Everything here is intense, boiled down, concentrated,  
dried up to salt and rock and the fluctuating waters  
of myth and history. Poets have been drawn to this place  
and men who need war and men who need gods.  
And here, in an easy life, was I once, a traveler. I came  
for the view and the history, the swim and the tender kalamari.