Greek Stones

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GREEK STONES

It looked like a graveyard, the hot, ill-lit room. Stones stood upright, ancient stele. Some boxes like small tombs, their lids thickly inscribed. Every stone looked heavy, every surface pocked with decay, layers like lace sloughing off. I expected decorations, acanthus at least. Nothing but Greek—letters archaic, lines irregular, uneven, sloped, no pattern of spacing.

Kneading a dark stone as if it were flesh, as if each incision, deep-sharp or shallow-worn, were a knot of meaning loosening, we learned to read distinctions with our fingers.

That afternoon the epigrapher held up a white marble fragment like a small fetus the size of a man’s fist, shaped like the Greek letter delta or, upside down, like the letter rho. A round lump with a curling tail, it looked like a big white comma. He began pointing at letters, then spelling: Alpha Iota Sigma Xi—Aischylos, the name fell from my mouth in the hollow museum. He set the stone in my hands.

Dimly I saw the poet’s tough heart, a glint of his mind like an ax cutting down through bone in the back of Agamemnon. The off-stage cry. His voice in the mask of the furious woman. Resonant, large. The altering pitch of wild singing. Thudding meters of the choric dance.

—from a tablet set up in the agora, the epigrapher said, a list of festival contest winners. For what year—we don’t know; for poet or actor—we don’t know.

At the end of the lesson, he put the stone back in the case he locked with a key.
The next morning from storeroom crates of marble rubble, we picked out fragments with inscriptions. If we found one with a word we recognized, or even part of a word, we considered ourselves lucky. We learned to beat with a brush wet thick paper into the incisions. The dry white documents we read like Braille, backwards.

In my fingers and my throat, the feeling of *aoide*, the word for song, like wind in the lyre, the sound of grieving; and *aidos*, a word nearly impossible to know, meaning something like honor or shame. Some sense of refined morality we’ve lost, some duration and pitch of the voice.