

Poetry

Melissa Petrakis

xenitia

It is a harsh landscape
this curved mainland fracturing
into the Ionian Islands
the Sporades, Lesbos, Pirgi,
the Islands of the Aegean,
Cyclades, Santorini,
the Dodecaneses and Rhodes,
Crete holding firm position
to the South.

In the 40s were the ten years of war
when guerrilla armies
under the banner Communism
seemed compelled by a force foreign to us
not of our Gods
to wring out the *kefi*
– the life force, the zeal –
of the villagers
and these fisherfolk people.

The olive trees stood watch
twisted like bodies in an agonised malcontent
not recognising the dualities in the people,
and this is the Greek dilemma
the Greek burden
the tragedy under the shadow of the Acropolis
alongside the illuminating glow
from the marble of the Parthenon
in the eye of this most beautiful storm.

The Greek warmth we term *philoxenia*
– a love of strangers –
is a hospitality that has close friends
out of duty and honour almost do battle
to pay a check at a taverna, has a family
kill its last chicken and on table place its only bread
to offer welcome and strong dark coffee
vari glikos (very sweet)
to a visitor, to a knock at the door.

Of my father and his family
and his compatriots in *xenitia*
– those living away from their land –
I have heard so many times,
have seen, it is in a downcast glance
mid smile while holding a child's foot
cupped in a work-worn hand
while looking at life
through a candle at Easter.

They cannot throw
a black stone behind them
(ensuring no return)
they cannot forget the rocky soil,
the clarity of light, the blue waters
that is the pip of the grape of them
that is the olive pit and to their spirit
the pit of both
the orchestra and the tiger.

Melissa Petrakis

Melissa Petrakis presents poetry using travel to explore the crossing of cultures.

xenitia is a poem about being a first generation Greek Australian woman trying to understand the experience of migration of her family, and the way the homelands' culture and past experiences can be frozen in an historical time capsule, followed by the struggle to keep cultural values alive in generations that follow, distant from the homeland.

At the lingerie shop, Kozani is about feeling awkward returning to one's family cultural roots, and expecting kinship and comfortable familiarity, yet finding awkwardness.

Jakarta salon is a poem about a crossing of culture in a visit to Indonesia to see a friend work in there, being taken to a beauty salon, and an experience of noting differences in interactions there between women of different cultural and class-based positions within the same space.

Melissa Petrakis was awarded The Margaret Connah Award for Poetry (FAW Queensland) in 1997. Her published poetry collections are *The Naked Muse* (Domain 2001), *Attic Dweller* (2002) and *The Earth of Us*, launched as Part of the 2005 Age Melbourne Writers' Festival umbrella event program. She is currently undertaking a PhD with the University of Melbourne School of Social Work based on her work in a national suicide prevention strategy project.

At the lingerie shop, Kozani

Despite tradition and expectations
I come to Greece
bearing no gifts
offering only myself,
my willingness to be open to things,
and my stories
my experiences and dreams
so green on the vine compared to those of this country.

There is a ritual to adhere to here
a process of setting foot inside
each family business
each testament to endurance
and to frugality and pride
and so I am propelled by this my family
to first lingerie shop
then children's clothing boutique.

At the lingerie shop
the women want to give me some token
they want to be hospitable to this girl
despite her lack of language and her awkwardness,
yet I am cup-size-too-large for the delicate pieces
am a woman Melbourne greek
a time-capsule locked 1950s fleshy greek
living nostalgia.

They tusk-tusk their tongues
speak to one another rapid fire
and pull small boxes from high shelves
yet in the end I prove too difficult
and am given instead
two pairs of underpants
and one packaged pantyhose, Kafe coloured
with small bows above the ankles.

At the children's clothing boutique
I am directed to choose an outfit
to take for a small cousin back in Melbourne,
and while my own childless state is unstated
I feel I disappoint once more,
wishing I could more closely resemble these women,
their shoulders back
their chins tilted upwards.

Jakarta salon

Hunching
over their toes
sloughing off
the dead skin
scrubbing up
the flesh smooth
removing cuticles
polishing nails
shiny
colours.

Tending them
these
Bule women
so pale
too pale
it seems
to make eye contact
to in
the native tongue
say
terima kasih
(thank you).