

Translated excerpt

Tom Schulz
Reisewarnung für Länder Meere Eisberge

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Tom Schulz
Travel Warning for Countries Oceans Icebergs

Translated by Henry Holland



III

RITSOS ON LEROS

and, with finger-nails in the wall,

the poem

J. R.

In order that the stones burst and no shadow falls,
that the grass catches fire, that a wire is wound
tight over the earth, that a goat, thin as the little
bone in your hand can graze, that pain you can laser
stops at last, that all, all humans, lose sight of each other
and find each other again in the dark, that paying guests
get a complimentary hemorrhoid cushion, that deep knowledge
is locked into a pine cone, that the olden days
do not return, that the three words, one of which is Leros
that the penal islands built from stones, fences and grass bow down
in the wind, that we, too, are outside the Agora.

Ritsos, Jannis.

Greek. Poet.

Born on The Peloponnese Peninsular, 1909.

Communist.

Deported to the islands of Lemnos, Makronisos and Agios Efstratios,
1948-1952.

Name: as above.

Smoker.

Locked up in camps on Gyros and Leros, islands for the exiled,
1967-1969.

Name?

Placed under house arrest on Samos, 1969-1973.

Survivor.

All Lerosians are forgotten folk, the island
as wide as a bar in Cork or Dublin, as long as
a goddess's hair in the dawn's red, her lips fleshy
and full of blood—on the street stands a German shepherd,
wags its tail, tugs at a trouser-leg, or at a bunch of keys.
Wears a collar with an engraved number. The waves
smack against the cemetery wall of the British company,
buried near the spot. Under the earth the holy dead are
burdened with upright stones: *a soldier of the 1939-*
1945 War. The fig tree's fruit is juicy and green.
Known unto God.

The village Partheni, the church—says the woman—
thorn trees, wild sage, thistles that shine
you lie down, a field. An unambiguous blue
behind barracks, *the sea, tranquil, with invisible contours.*
The burnt field, with the gold of thistles
torn from the breast—sun, boulders, the black earth.
There's no causality between us and the oracle.
Behind the temple (to Diana) and the blue shrine
is the grating, the burnt field, two exits to shafts.
In the dresser is a plastic box, a candle lamp, a lighter
the saints (icons), dried flower or water-plant
Christ, sprayed red, subjected to the grave's light.

A deep knowledge is locked into the cone:
time stored useful things, that which is divided from dust,
like branch, pebbles, an ant street, sense and insect.
What we read in books is what is handed down:
a man walked, bent-over, across a field, he found rough stones,
tiles and fire sand—the dried out earth
in the furrow. Glittering, and the limbs inflamed.
He searched for a tree in the distance. The sea received
and sent white letters, whose contents he couldn't understand.
The sun never sleeps during the day.
To match his hands he wished for a head, which he could
take off, an undergrowth, or a bandage. Animals crowded
under his skin, and built nests. Dry dung stuck
to his foot-soles. The horse collapsed under the burden.
A heap of bones, he could still stand upright
till he was covered up by moon and boulder. He was found
between the cypresses.

Stones, bars, fences, the NATO-wire forms nooses
at the harbor, the tanks stand parked in rows, no entry.
The camera buzzes under our shirt, soaked in sweat, we are
foreigners, they scrutinize us like we're convicts,
black tunics with shiny buckles.
500 meters behind the concrete runway, where once
a day, the propeller craft lands, 1 km to the camp.
The sea's surface has a crack, washed out by the wind,
raddled by the sun's tannins—rags, the flags,
dried sheep droppings where the barracks stood.
Pick up a stone, call out to the water. No one apart from
the goat, thin as your hand's bones, a woman, all in black
out of a Angelopoulos film.
Nothing stirs, blisters on the skin, the red ants
discharge their secretions. The wrist-watch under the heatstroke.
1 p.m.

Out with the Agora, where the laws hurt, where they
expose someone, turn someone in. Without a street, or house-
number, without an account, a passport—a subject, not predicate,
object unknown—name, not recorded. Answers to dog or
Black Bloc, is familiar with the sweeper truck, and the container.
Consists of 50 kilos of water on average. Breathes, sweats and
excretes. The rest: solid substances. Whoever lives on the street
wears the fur of a cat. I'll believe you.

Good morning, sunshine. The young man's called Khalid,
lives in the asylum seekers' hostel. Has a skateboard under his arm,
and says to the lyrical subject: *I have pushed the line of those fleeing
to here. The borders are closed.*

Foxes, active at night, live in the desert, it never gets colder
than five degrees. Always chew each mouthful properly, fifty times.
Buy yourself something nice. The cash-and-goods streams.
Kerosene, the slippage on the horizon, the frozen gold,
the lump of ice. I know, you're North Africans, know all about
that shit, don't have any change right now. You want
some of my cans of beer?!

We don't know how many have lost their lives, we know
how many lose their lives, we ready ourselves for this, we put
something aside, a daily paper with empty pages, filled only with
death announcements, the living no longer fight. I read that in an
old book, *And ye shall hear of wars and rumors of wars: see
that ye be not troubled: for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet—*
I read about winters that are too mild, failed harvests, the earth quaking, the desert living,
the atomic craters are breaking apart. The washing machine is starting to move.
To rinse and to spin, and to see what's lying in the dryer after.
Waiting for the comet's impact, drinking coffee and massaging
my neck: what's Saint John saying? Send an angel.
So that pain you can laser away finally stops.
The Lamb will triumph over the evil. Holy sack of hay.
We know how many people are dead.

Good morning, good morning. Good morning, sunshine.
I wake up and stand with my feet in the earth's crust.
A red-cheeked apple has enchanted my face, and I smile
when the woman unlocks the house. The night remained
concealed from you, but you aren't allowed to be sad. Grapes and
deer lie ahead of me. I bathe in chlorine and milk. And go to the beach
over to the Graces and the bloated bodies, pumped full of
sugar and barbiturates. Only these string players, and no Eurovision song.
What does early music education leave behind?
Minor keys and sadness. I do not know what the Parcae
sing. Hölderlin never came here, never to Patmos.
He stood under trees in a garden in Nürtingen.
The woman locks the door from the inside. White curtains,
the sign: FOR SALE. To lose sight of one another at last,
in the darkness. To sale out to sea, before
the first, short scream. Hauling the nets in, and cutting the by-catch free.
The sun sinks, a dash of fire, as if someone was walking over
glowing coals, across the water.

Leaf through the pages. The olden days do not return.
Just call it what it is: apocalypse. The book made from incense,
take your present. Be embraced by all, anonymous saints!
We arrived at the island, we came across the water, skipped
from stone to stone, we threw shadows. We traveled across
an enclave, and brushed the discredited coast. We strip off
our clothes, we love the white mountains, we love the white
skin, that patch of our thighs, up from the white
pubis, we love the white churches, and the white, flowing
blood, the radiation and the imbibition. We arrive via the sea-
route, we see the harbor, the point resting in the distance.
The island's milky blurring, we see the current's
dark phases, we hear the motor and the breaking wave.
We respond to the machine with language and signs.
We see the darkness trekking on inside us.
We were on dry land, we were thrilled with the stones, and
breathed with the rock. Hornets shot through the trees.

What did Ritsos see that we cannot?
Unsafe boats on the water, between
island and mainland. The guards, wardens and jailers.
Ice-and-silence constellations, above the barrack's roof.
So that a wire can be wound tight over the earth, so that
countries and bodies unite. How to make a
a cleaning-cloth out of a white or red flag.
If we could see the rifle moving in front of
eyes the wall. Three words, sleep and daydream.
An amnesty, the oil and gas magnates expropriated.
The acquittal of the fire ants and of small lizards.
Knocking with hollow wood, voices out of animal furs. Opening
the chest—teasing the spoils out of their claws. Watching
the grasses grow. Finally, finally, leading the hand to the window.
Allowing the fingers to walk. Accompanying the miners
up to the light. Offering fruits to the mouth that has nothing.
Allowing, at last, wild grass to grow over the fences.
Liberating the furred animals and the cotton pickers.

We run through the morning sun. We listen to the poem.
Taxis wait at the harbor, extending the routes of ships.
The poem says it believes in love and death. And in
itself. Pain is an empty word. The workers pull the rope
onto land. The ferry is not a sign—the continent has to
break down first, before anyone will want to save it. If everything
drifts apart, can a few stitches sew it all together?
We're Gold-Partner resellers of doctrines: you've got to
upload every icon. We've got to do a U-turn, deposit
the hired car on top of a wall. Send our insurance
a dodgy check. We've still got 100 minutes phone credit.
We see the natives, the trolley cases, the descendants
of democracy (people's rule). Freedom is called Elefteria.
TVs are on in the hull of the ship, what we drag behind us
consists of petroleum, connections, venality.
In reality, the interests of the workers, smoking on deck,
exist. The morning sun, an catalyst of fires,
sets light to the sea.