

FROM
THE SUMMER OF
AGIOS DIMITRIOS

By Peter Hughes

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7.1 Wednesday 24th October

wriggle through a gap in Kalamata
take the awesome Sparta road
driving higher & thinner & tighter through passes
where rare temperature drops you breathing
& winding up the window against cold
& ash from burned out sheds & tavernas
the ghost of a weighing scale hangs above
a blackened table as we park in a cloud
the windscreen wipers smearing damp red dust
in seeping arcs to show a rectangle
of charcoal on the ground beside the road
a bent metal sign whispers Honey
in grey ghosts of Greek & English script
where impenetrable thorn cover grew
a hunter steps through black calligraphy

7.2 Thursday 25th October

empty dwellings haunt cavernous clearings
in woodland by the side of the road
still smelling of smoke & smouldering tyres
the roadside shrine that whistled in the fire
lets peeling paint fall with autumn leaves
where trunks & branches have been cleared away
from the road & verges using chain saws
you see the fire has left the thinnest of black rings
around an untouched core of perfect wood
we watch the sky raining over Mystras
an important outpost of Narnia
& stop for petrol in Magoula where there's
a toilet just past the inspection pit
then left through the grey metal doors
you can buy any make of car in Sparta

7.3 Friday 26th October

we pulled in to photograph the mountains
too near an army base full of Spartans
having a fag in camouflage jackets
rattling down the Evrotas valley
we admire the productive greenery
& the range of cement mixers for sale
in builders' merchant every half mile
while frequently checking the rear-view mirror
& spotting the biggest stockpile of bricks
outside China the rain stopped in Githio
we reversed up a steep back street to park
then walked down & across to the island
the site of Paris & Helen's first night
surrounded by small fish & a duck club
there's a scruffy wood a boatyard full of wrecks
a lighthouse & a man fishing near his car
a Mercedes left blocking the footpath
by the sign saying no cars or campers
we finished the figs & on the way home we bought
half a kilo of goat bells & a mop

7.4 Saturday 27th October

I dream in a chair made of canvas & wood
on a terrace with lemons & basil
above the noise of inner-city traffic
& I have no idea of where I am
& I have no idea of who I am
except clotted scents & a whisp of air-brakes
the jab of a church spire sharp through the gaps
in a soap opera from somewhere down below
I know the light is becoming thinner
& I should have called someone by now
maybe my wife or my son or daughter
my parents or an editor back home
the first stars emerge in a mid-green sky
somebody knocking at a distant door

7.5 Sunday 28th October

a church high above the Ionian
as the first windless day for a week ends
in a wide stillness in which sounds emerge
lapping this ledge: a woman talking to
a neighbour hundreds of feet below
a gun dog chained to a rusting tractor
barks with a hoarse & mournful hoot
a lizard flicks through a crack in the locked church
three different sheep bells neither harmonise
nor clash but inhabit the darker sound
of the sea far below which almost gasps
almost continuously & so it should
carrying for miles & years through the scrub
of this old basket of litter & stars

7.6 Monday 29th October

not much sleep up early not much food
eat yoghurt on toast for breakfast & throw
things we didn't know we had in the skip
ducking to avoid ejector-seat cats
drive south before dawn to Areopoli
to head north on the Githion road
& onwards up to the mountain village
where the road momentarily vanished
in a cold high square & an old woman
selling chestnuts in blue carrier bags
moved around the square bent almost double
by age & aches & her absence of weight
we spotted the road & drove north again
on a glorious switchback through limestone
cliffs & trees coloured by autumn & fire
more bare deserted charcoal tables perched
by black diagrams of woodland showing
it's too late for a while for honey
we descend to wide dried-up river valleys
& on to meet the spirit of renewal
near the oil depot in Elefsina

7.7 Tuesday 30th October

I got the mosquito with an orange
then I ate the orange: justice is done
in airports the blues is turned to trifle
& because travel makes you really thick
why not buy four kilos of Toblerone
& a bottle of Scotch for eighty quid
the engines start up so do the babies
howling over the lights of Piraeus
then we & the babies are swept up to
twenty-six thousand feet over somewhere
too much like Switzerland for its own good
above the earth in the dark thoughts turn
to Norfolk winter saltmarsh & footpaths
meeting at the edge of Brancaster woods
where colonies of snails roost in the trees
mid-evening over a place like France &
from this height the world is decorated
by humanity with gold & silver
lights of habitation embroidered over
the rich dark cloak of earth with moonlight
flowing down our rivers past the churches
schools & hospital blocks to the lighthouse
poised by the shimmering acres of sea
I foolishly thought that writing this poem
would make me happier & it did

PETER HUGHES is a poet and painter who was born in Oxford, worked in Italy for several years and is now based in East Anglia. His books include *Blueroads* (Salt, 2003), *Berlioz* (an Intercapillary Space e-book) and *Nistanimera* (Shearsman, 2007). The highly original collaboration with Milan-based poet Simon Marsh, *The Pistol Tree Poems*, continues to unfold on the Great Works website. Peter Hughes' paintings can be seen in several galleries, and on the covers of various books including his own, John Temple's *Collected Poems* (Salt, 2003) and Kelvin Corcoran's 2008 Shearsman collection *Backward Turning Sea*.

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