

Athens, 430 BCE

Gail Holst

Plague fell on Athens in the second year
of the Peloponnesian War like
a thunderbolt hurled by an angry Zeus.

When Spartans attacked the countryside
farmers abandoned olives and vines
and fled for safety to Athens where they found

disease had ravaged the city. In the agora
where men once strolled discussing philosophy
in fragrant pine-shade beside the temple,

bodies were heaped like scythed wheat.
Soon the farmers succumbed; no-one
was spared – rich or poor, artist,

soldier, doctor, baker, poet.
*No human art or science was of any
help at all* Thucydides wrote.

Funerals, for those who had someone
to bury them, were quick and quiet;
most Athenians died unwept, unsung.

Nothing protected the great city
or its citizens clustered under the Acropolis.
The historian caught the plague himself.

He had seen what war could do
but groped for words to say *what seemed
too much for human beings to endure*

*people felt a burning in their heads;
their mouths bled; their voices grew
hoarse as crows, their chests ached*

*worse was the thirst no water could quench,
a fever so fierce they couldn't bear
clothing to touch their skin; some leapt*

naked into water hoping for relief.
In despair Thucydides tells us, the people
turned against Pericles, but their leader

was a man who knew how to handle
a hostile crowd. *I know that war
and now plague have taken the heart*

*out of you, he told them. Just realize
that the Spartans will go, the plague will pass
and you'll still be citizens of a great city.*

An Evening in Kingfisher

George Economou

"ENTERING KINGFISHER OKLAHOMA"

the road sign reads

"THE BUCKLE ON THE GRAIN BELT."

We drive to the Elks Club
where we join third hundred men
with big buckles on their belts
to boost the Sooners & our university
in what is traditionally OSU Aggie territory
drinking and mixing with them, eating "fries."
also known as prairie or mountain oysters
scooped up barehanded
as you hold your beer or bourbon in the other
followed by steaks, ranch style baked beans
homemade cracked wheat bread and more beer
salad fixings with no dressing whatever
strong coffee & no fooling around with dessert.
After the obligatory welcome speeches
the winningest active coach in college football
runs the play he will this spring
a hundred times throughout the state
and then field questions:
—"Barry (pronounced Berra), how's the Texas
game gone turn out this year?
—"One thing I kin tell you 'bout the Texas
game fer sure—
it's gone be one tough sumabitch!"
—"Barry, could you use a sixty-
six-year-old guard?
—"Give that man another drink."
Somebody does as coach Switzer
closes this appearance with a herpes joke
and a hopeful, if not over confident
predication about the coming season.
The macho party & male ritual complete
(except for those with expectations

based on their consumption of fries)
 we move for the doors or bartenders
 and I am almost out into the night air
 when the sixty-six-year-old guard pulls
 out of the line at the bar & squints
 at my crimson-bordered OU name tag
 offering his hand to mine which he begins to squeeze
 and asks me where I'm from.

—"The University."

—"Well, I kin see that. I mean with a name
 like that where are yuh from?"

Looking back at his tag
 which reads "'Huck' Rice"
 and understanding which he's getting at,

—"Just moved here from New York,
 but I was born Montana."

He squeezes harder.

—"But that's not an American name."

—"Sure it is from Greece. (And making a good guess)
 When did your people come here from Germany?"

Easing up on the squeeze,

—"Oh hell, we big here forever."

—"You mean you're native American?"

—"No, no Indian. What d'yuh do at OU?"

—"I teach English."

—"With a name like that yuh teach English?"

—"I run the whole show in English, Huck.
 I'm chairman of the department, brought in
 from New York."

The handshake ends in a tie
 and I'm grateful for the summers
 spent opening oysters in Wellfleet.

—"Well, George, how d'yuh like workin'
 here among all these Americans?"

—"I told you, Huck, I was born here."

—"I like yuh, George, I'd like to talk
 to yuh 'bout your beliefs."

Remembering Roy Roger's characterization
 of Reagan when he was nominated in 1980.

—"Why, I'm a fine Christian gentleman,"

just like you. Only my kind is the oldest,
Huck, Greek, you know, right back to the
language of the New Testament (making another
good guess) while you Lutherans are pretty recent.

Shaking his head.

—"Greek, and yuh teach English
and you don't even have an accent."

—"No, no accent, Huck, perfect English
You've got the accent. But give me a
chance and I'll be back next year
sounding just like you."

—"I'd like that, I like yuh George

—"So long, Huck, see your next year."

Leaving Kingfisher, I try not to hear
the obvious literary echoes
and focus rather on the odd sincerity
of my dialogue with Huck,
and definitely name him
to my first team offensive line

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