

M I C H A E L M A R T O N E

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## Thucydides at Syracuse

I carry a shield-shaped *ostrakon*, a fragment of some vessel, with me wherever I go. On the empty side, my name, *Thucydides*, is scratched into the blank black back of a wine amphora. On the reverse, a red figured head—all curly curls, laurel-leaf crowned, glazed and unblinking almond eyes—vomits at someone's feet. A symposium, I suppose. A document—evidence of Socrates himself corrupting the flower of Athens's youth. He's dead now. Pericles too. The plague. I survived it somehow. The dying leaking blood from their eyes. Alcibiades, Nicias, Demosthenes, all, the whole lot of them, gone. The Athenians gave me a bag of these ballots when they bagged me, sent me packing after my less than stellar performance at Amphipolis's defense. I also have those other shards, the sack of cracked pottery that made me a general. Democracy, a bunch of speeches then a vote. It keeps the potters in business. I keep the more interesting scraps on my desk as souvenirs.

Lame soldier, I am a writer, now, writing what I call History, my own and this endless war's. More often than not, I draw a blank, and must make up some great oration or debate or detail, the Persians always just over the horizon, yet another conspiracy or betrayal, and when I'm blocked, I fidget, try to fit the bits of crockery together, imagine I can make all these cracked pieces whole again or patch them up enough to hold water, or no, a cup of disappointing pinot noir, or, better yet, a bitter dram of bile, pushing the memories around on the empty battlefield of parched parchment.

I was in my cups. I am a writer after all. And—here's a good one—banished from Athens, I fled back to goddamn Amphipolis where I first hit bottom to hit it again. My people had some land hereabouts—a rotting olive grove, a spent vineyard, a played-out silver mine. So I have a front row seat to compose my own narrative of fucking up. I am in recovery. One day at a time. Sure, I work the program here. I go to meetings down at the Dionysion, a Doric ruin on the south side. My name's Thucydides. Hello, Thucydides.

The shield is the not so secret weapon of this war, the most important part of the whole panoply. I hang mine on the wall. The little owl's two big owl-eyes look like shields on the shield. You strap the thing to the forearm instead of holding it in your fist. Heavy with all that hammered bronze, its rim has the curved lip to rest on your shoulder. Big enough, it covered the guy to your left and the guy to your right covered you. All together, rushing at the enemy's phalanx—the ash spears splintering on the shields. The clatter. Sophocles puts that in all his plays, that thrill. The shock, then, of shield on shield, and then the leaning into it, the *othismos*, the rank behind you pushing forward with their shields, the *aspis* cold on your ass, and the rank behind the rank behind you, now, smashing into the back, and the whole massed mess slowly beginning that pivot, a drunken herd stumbling over the litter of popped-off greaves and the mud of men who have stumbled under the scrum, stomped upon, finished off by the lizard killers on the reverse end of the pike. The *agon*. All of that. And then one line or the other breaks, and the first thing you fling is your 30 pound *hoplon*, chuck it at the guy behind you, unsheathing his sword to run you down now that you are running, and you have no armor on your naked back. With the shield or on it.

So much of what has happened hasn't happened yet in my History. I lag. I rehearse each trauma at the meetings as I draft it—this battle, that skirmish, the siege here, the slaughter there. Fall off the wagon. Invoke the muse. Lubricate my tongue. At night, after I have wrestled with a passage, the massacre at Syracuse, say, I retire to Phoebe's on the plateia, overlooking that wine-dark sea, and toast the German tourists, drinking Jagermeister, with burnished retsina in my super-glued-together *ostrakon*. I dance, a regular Zorba, smashing plate after plate on the paving stones beneath the plane trees.

I have been stuck at Syracuse for a long time, the 19<sup>th</sup> year of the war. Last spring, I made the trip, a scudding trireme under Hermes's protection. The banks of Assinarus, I stood there. The Athenians there, pelted, pressed on all sides for days. Missiles, javelins, harassed by cavalry. They made for this river, thinking they would breathe easier once they crossed, driven on by fear, by exhaustion, by thirst. Thirst.

They rushed in here, all order gone, each wanting to be the first to cross, the enemy now on each shore making that impossible. Huddling together, they trampled each other, some killed by arrows, bolts, darts, others tangled in the baggage, drowned. Missiles rained down on them (I can see that), most drinking greedily, heaped together in the hollow of the river. The Peloponnesians followed, butchered the Athenians in the water, now instantly fouled, running red, but which they went on drinking just the same, mud and all, bloody as it was, most even fighting each other to have it.

How to write that?

Recovery. They tell you, and you are to repeat, that you are powerless—at the mercy of nature, the universe. The disease metaphor allows one to abandon free will, self-control. There are plenty of higher powers—all the goddamn gods and goddesses, the nymphs and spirits. It's a crock. Impossible to give oneself up, to get over anything. I dip my hand into the cloudy Assinarus, drink and drink and drink. Always, there's never enough, too much.

Back in Amphipolis, still ostracized, old Thucydides (that's me), must suffer random drug tests. He pisses history into a cup.

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**MICHAEL MARTONE'S** newest book is *Four for a Quarter, fictions*, published by FC2.