Lunch and dinner were the two daily meals in ancient Greece. First would come a cup of barley with several olives. Then a bit of grape wine, diluted with equal parts water. Sometimes some fish, still rarer, dishes with chicken or lamb. All they wore was a white cloth against bare bodies. And at night, they disrobed and slept beneath the covers. There was nothing like our furniture in their rooms. Though I profess my love of Greece, I live in relative luxury. And recognize we are as far from Greece as Hades itself.
Everyone was raised in the women’s quarters, in the women’s territory where sun didn’t shine
Under stone, leather, and metal roofs, among the aromas of fire, flour, and fish
Without exception, they were all the children of mothers—poets, orators, generals too
They all were crybabies—this one, that one—spoiled children, bossy at home, shy outside
But as their voices were about to change, they were whisked away to the sunny men’s quarters
Where they kept company with father’s friends and older brother’s bosom buddies
As their mothers and older sisters came bearing food, they responded with frowns
To stop being a mama’s boy, they brought elderly prostitutes and violated them from behind
In the women’s quarters where the breast was once so dear, female genitalia were now suspect
None of this was really anyone’s fault—it all came from men’s absurd sense of self-worth
DESIRE

No matter how strong men may appear to the world,
Deep down, all men want to be murdered—this man, that one too—
By women, their dearest mothers, their wives, their lovers
If not by them, even a crowd of unfamiliar women would do
Like Orpheus, decapitated then tossed into the sea, or Pentheus,
Arms and legs torn from the torso. Men cannot admit this desire out loud,
But the more they hold it in, the more arrogant and ruined they become
Oh, women! Simply ignore them! Wouldn’t a living death—
Neither left alive, nor left for dead—bring them the most pleasure of all?

SYCAMORES

In the suburbs of Athens

Oh, sycamores, stirring in unison with your thousands of wide leaves!
A man of wide wisdom, Plato, was once particularly fond of you
Remembering his teacher Socrates, he gathered the young men he loved,
And sat them in your shade, which stirred like a singing brook
As he engaged them in the joys of endless dialogue, he too took joy,
And far in the future, in the broad shadows of your words, so will I
28  FRUIT OF HERMES

Fig leaves cover the surface of the thin wooden box
Scattered upon it, chunks of ice and the fig’s dark purple fruit
Twenty or thirty, each leaking a dense covering of dew
A young man sits on the ground selling them
I buy the whole box, hurry through the sticky afternoon sun
And devour them all, alone in my hotel
Once done, I return to the street, less sun-colored now
Could the stack of five or six boxes I saw have all sold?
The young man so like the museum’s statue of Hermes is gone
Could it be that I brought him home with the figs
And inadvertently consumed him covetously upon my bed?
Since then, the fig has always been the fruit of Hermes for me

29  BLUE SKY

To rest my eyes from gods and demigods, gravestones and murals,
I go down some stairs to a restaurant, to a table surrounded with green
As I eat a late lunch, a group of tortoises who live outside waddle close,
Shaking their heads, pestering me repeatedly for salad and bread
A hundred million years ago, their ancestors first crawled onto land,
Which means their tribe is far older than any god or demigod
When they tire of my bread, they turn to nibble at the acanthus shrubs
Don’t worry about them eating all the leaves—they’ll grow again
Even if the gods are gone and humanity dies away, still the sky will be blue
30  AFTER A SIESTA

Forceful, strong sleepiness rules the afternoon hours but
It’s not just people who fall sound asleep, dead to the world
The streets, trees, shadows, and the cloudless blue sky above
All stare through open windows into the darkness inside—
An unlucky, young god in profile with winged shoes and winged staff—
Then at long last, the fulfilled sleepers get up and slowly go outside,
Stepping into the cool breeze and sunlight, never quite realizing
The time spent asleep has brought them that much closer to death

31  LIGHT AND DARK

A man who thinks in the summer light speaks as he thinks
He thinks as he walks, stands still, then squats,
And picks up a stick to draw in the dirt, then when
He looks up, he starts going on again without a pause
Once tired of speaking, he goes back home to the darkness inside
But that’s no place for thought—that’s where children cry and women clamor
That’s where the thinker stops thinking and, still sweaty, falls asleep
Only to wake and return to being a thinking man once again
We owe a cock to Asclepius, please, don’t forget to offer the sacrifice—
Those were his final words, so the cock should have been a consecrated creature
But far in the future, folks only thought of the hen as something special
They crammed them into terribly tiny cages and mass-produced eggs
When they stopped laying, their necks were wrung, feathers plucked,
And bodies dropped onto the counter of some butcher’s shop
The cocks, however, were crushed as chicks—too loud if they grow
He too was crushed, even though he called out continually: Cock-a-doodle-doo
The Oracle of Delphi is full of crap, Cock-a-doodle-doo, Know thyself—
After he was crushed, his spirit returned as a cock, and still he calls:
Wake up!
Open your eyes! Yet even deeper, we sleep in ignorance, heavier than ever before
33  TRAVEL

Boeotia

It’s a nice to have a rock on which to sit
It’s a nice to have a spring from which to drink
One rests briefly, stands, then starts walking again
The path before the traveler’s toes gleams with light
As the dry dirt sucks up the walker’s shadow
At some point, twilight settles before the tired traveler’s toes
This is the time to stop, take a meal, and stretch
This is the time to sleep, relax, and commune with the dead

34  ABSENCE

Epidaurus

Why do travelers always want to clap their hands
While standing in the mortar of the semi-circular amphitheater?
As they clap, they raise their eyes to the mouth of the mortar
Even though they’re not there to prick up their ears
Maybe it’s the gods of performance who are there—no, not them,
The bottomless blue sky, or at least, the nothingness we call sky
Oh, travelers, come! Before you know it, you too will fade to absence
As you stand in the non-existent mortar that is the world
IN DODONA

Oh, Dodona, *Dodona!* Even before this was the name of a place,
It was the sound of a ferocious gust of wind, the excited rustling
Of ten million leaves on tall oaks growing at the base of rocky bluffs
But this wind does not arise from cloud-cast skies
This wind blows from the bellows of flesh deep inside our chests,
The bloody, wet darkness inside our lungs—that is Dodona
Traveler! It was to remind yourself of this truth
That you crossed the ocean and summited mountain peaks
All to come here, to the end of the world, to remember
Dug out of the ground, bright beneath the midsummer sun, exposed,
Is the labyrinth. As we enter, we scatter like children in the afternoon,
Taking with us not even a speck of shadow, nothing but our own two feet
The reason we wander, as our bare heads and sheltered armpits drip with
sweat,
Lost along the bright paths through the mysteries each one of us has
brought
Is so that we may learn there is no darkness or ambiguity here—all is
bright and just-so
For that is the true nature of mystery. Once we learn this truth, afterwards,
Everywhere our feet carry us, all roads we tread, will become labyrinths
Even the roads in our own countries leading us to our homes, even the
alleyways,
Even our houses, even the likenesses that stare back at us from our own
mirrors