

The Naming of an Island

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He laid the body to rest, in a tomb, and the island was named Icaria after his buried child.

—Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Book VIII, Line 235

The fisherman tugged on his heavy nets, expecting a bountiful load of fish, but found only a body. On the body were two wooden frames, one frame smashed and the other intact but warped by the water. The frames looked like the wings of a bird. Clumps of wax and feathers still clung to the intact frame. There were feathers of many colors and sizes, iridescent in the afternoon sun. The fisherman gazed for a moment, amazed by the diversity and beauty of the feathers, but then grunted and hauled the body up to his cabin. As he moved the seagulls swooped down and tried to eat the corpse. There were more birds than usual, all squawking, so the fisherman had to stop regularly and fend off the birds. When the fisherman got to his cabin his wife helped him move the body into the house. They were unnerved by the piercing blue gaze of the dead boy’s corpse and so sat him upon a stool in the kitchen where the body could not be seen from the dining room. The dead boy laid against the wall and his lifeless eyes stared at the pieces of fish as the fisherman’s wife cut them. The fisherman hung the one intact wooden frame on a hook in the kitchen. The wet feathers still clinging to the frame dripped seawater onto the boy’s head.

As the fisherman and his wife were eating dinner, they heard a cacophony of birds outside

and a loud knock on the door. An old man with a wild gray beard and a wooden case entered. The old man’s gray-blue eyes seemed to stare beyond the fisherman and his wife into some mathematical infinity. They took the old man to the body. The old man identified it as his son. The fisherman helped the old man move his son into the dining room, where the boy’s lifeless eyes stared at the old man. The old man cried, ate the fisherman’s dinner, and explained the story of his son’s flight. The old man also took pains to explain the contents of his wooden case. His eyes glimmered as he declared that his wooden case contained his newest invention, saws, strips of metal with a serrated edge that cut through wood like the teeth of a dog cutting through flesh and that a set of these saws could be the fisherman’s, if the fisherman only parted with a few silver drachmas. The fisherman did not buy any saws.

At the end of the meal the old man rose, thanking the fisherman and his wife for their hospitality. He tearfully declared that he would entomb his son on the island and name the island Icaria, after his son. The fisherman protested that the island already had a name, “Ichtheoussa,” meaning “rich in fish.” The old man stood firm. Together they resolved that in the following days a

meeting of the people on the island would be held to discuss the naming. That night the old man slept in the fisherman's cabin and was disturbed by sounds. He winced at the dripping of seawater and the cry of a bird, he thought it was a partridge, outside.

The meeting was convened. Many people crowded into a large wooden hall at the top of the island. The old man had the fisherman and his wife bring the body of his son. They laid the body in front of the fireplace, hoping to dry it out. The boy's lifeless eyes stared out at the audience. The old man also brought his case of saws and the intact wooden wing which he hung above the body. The feathers on the frame continued to drip seawater onto the boy's head. The people of the island started the discussion by verifying the old man's claims. A plowman, who was out plowing his fields two months before planting time because he enjoyed the rhythm of plowing, mentioned seeing a man with wings out of the corner of his eye and feeling slightly impressed. Thus, the old man's claims were verified and the arguments against renaming the island began. An owner of several ships argued that the island was already known far and wide as Ichtheoussa so renaming the island would serve only to confuse sailors who would otherwise visit the ports of the island, bringing trade. Furthermore, he argued, people would not visit the island if the only thing they knew about it was that young men tragically drowned there, as the new name would indicate. Several townspeople also argued against renaming. They said that several people had drowned in the bay waters, so the boy's case was really nothing special. A young girl drowned while diving to the bottom of the sea to see the jeweled skeletons of shipwrecked sailors. A man drowned in the bay a few months ago and many thought his drowning was a divine punishment as the man had repeatedly attempted to romantically pursue deer in the local forest. Why should the island be named after the old man's son instead of these people? The old man

pondered these arguments then sighed and stood.

He proposed a deal. He would provide his invention of wings for free to the people of the island, in exchange for his son being entombed on the island and the island being renamed. The old man demonstrated all of the benefits his wings would provide. He said that people would flock from miles around to experience the joy of flight. Icaria would be known forever as the island where the master inventor Daedalus gave people the gift of flight, where people flew about uniting the upper and lower waters and finally conquering all of the elements of the earth. During his demonstration, the old man attached his wooden wings, still intact, to the body of his son and flapped the corpse's arms, using the fisherman's help to pull the boy's face into expressions of amazement and bewilderment. This pantomime, the old man argued, was but a shadow of the joy that flight provided. The townspeople were not emotionally swayed by his argument, but they saw the value that wings could bring to them. An absent-minded dreamer who was the son of a local farmer gazed wondrously at the wings. He was to be the third and last person to experience flight.

During the next month the old man set up a workshop and crafted a new set of wings. He often gave demonstrations of his crafting technique, highlighting his use of saws, which could be the audience's own for just a few silver drachmas. Local craftsmen came by and watched, as well as the young dreamer. It was decided that the young dreamer would inaugurate the new wings in a test flight. As the old man worked, he was continuously interrupted by the cry of partridges who gathered around him and by the piercing gaze of his son's eyes. The old man ordered that all of the partridges around his house would be killed, and he used their feathers in his new wings. The old man attempted to move his son's corpse outside of the workshop, but birds continually attacked the corpse, so he had to move the body back inside.

Finally, the day of the test came. All of the people of the island came, except for the lone plowman out plowing his fields. The boy's body was moved up to the area of the test. He was laid against a tree, his eyes gazing into the horizon where sky and ocean met. Birds swarmed his corpse so two hunters were assigned to protect his body. The birds fought each other over the corpse and the hunters shot hundreds of birds out of the sky. They found dead birds still locked and together in a passionate struggle, like lovers embracing. The old man took the old, warped wing and hung it over his son, hoping that it would dispel the birds. This did not work but the feathers that still clung to the wooden wing dripped seawater onto the boy's head.

The old man took flight first, followed by the young dreamer. People stood amazed as the young dreamer mastered the wings naturally. He fluttered in glorious loops in the sky. His wings flashed with an iridescent light in the sun. And the smile on his face was radiant, outshining even his wings. The young dreamer flew out over the ocean and repeatedly dove down to the water, pulling back up at the last second before he hit the water, cackling joyfully. Between dives he just floated on air, his form shining against the gleaming water and the air shimmering in the summer heat.

An odd thing happened as the dreamer's flight crossed the threshold of the dead boy's gaze. The dreamer's heart, overwhelmed with delight and the heat of the sun, fluttered, quickened, and then stopped. The young dreamer gasped, his face arching up to the sky, and in a dramatic flourish his body began to dive towards the sea. The onlookers laughed joyfully, thinking it was only another one of his grandstanding dives, until his body dove into the sea without even a splash. The old man had noticed what was happening before the crowd. He had dived to catch the young dreamer, but he was too late to catch him, and would've been too late to save him, as the young dreamer had died at the apex of his flight.

The old man landed on the beach, looked at the body floating in the water, scowled, and cursed his inventions for the second time that year.

People rushed down to the beach as the fisherman pulled his body out with his nets. The island's doctors determined that the young dreamer had not died through a fault in the old man's invention, but only through a physical ailment. The old man promised to never give other people his wings, because he had now seen the consequences. The people of the island decided that the old man had delivered on his promises. It was not his fault that the young dreamer's heart had stopped, so they decided to rename the island Icaria. Some of the hunters wanted to use the boy's body as bird bait but were overruled by the rest of the island, who disliked the noise from the birds. They decided to let the old man entomb his son.

In the next few months, the old man enlisted all of the carpenters and laborers on the island to help build the tomb. They purchased saws from the old man, which cost them many silver drachmas - the old man had increased the price of the saws when he discovered their popularity. The body of the young dreamer was forgotten in the hubbub, and he lay in a field, his golden-brown tanned body gradually darkening in the sun. He still gazed ecstatically up at the sky. Eventually his skin tanned to a dirt brown and became indistinguishable from the earth. He was only discovered again in the fall when the lone plowman accidentally plowed through him.

They buried the old man's son in a wooden coffin, which was covered over with marble and placed in a large tomb. To remind himself to never again test his inventions on young men, the old man hung the wooden wing of the original frame, warped by water and sun, in the tomb. There was some trouble transferring the boy's body to the tomb. Whenever the boy's skin appeared to the sky, birds swooped down upon his corpse, so the old man invented an especially tough type of burlap

that birds could not pierce and covered his son with it. As the old man and a procession from the island carried his son to the tomb, they heard the cackle of a partridge, which Ovid famously recorded. But what has not been recorded is how partridges hunted and haunted the old man to the end of his days, cawing joyfully and flying low around him disrupting his work. The old man laid his son to rest. He tearfully promised that he would visit the grave every few years when the blades of the local saws needed

replacing. And so, the son lay in his tomb, his lifeless eyes staring at nothing but a burlap sack. In the ages to come the feathers which still clung to the wooden frame of the wing would continue to drip seawater in the tomb, slowly and peacefully eroding the marble cover, wetting and cutting through the rotten, sawed wood of the coffin, dissolving the fibers of the talon-scarred burlap sack, until they finally dripped seawater onto the boy's head.