



Competition for students at King's College London

Creative writing on the Parthenon Galleries in the
British Museum, inspired by audio description

2025

Funded by a RISM fund,
Department of Classics, King's College London

Booklet designed by Dr Ellen Adams, King's College London

© Individual authors (2025, King's College London), CC BY NC ND.

This license enables people to copy and distribute the material in any medium or format in unaltered form only, for non-commercial purposes only, and only so long as attribution is given to the creator.

<https://mansil.uk/kcl-competition>

Organised by:

Ellen Adams, Reader in Classical Archaeology and Liberal Arts,
King's College London

Panel of judges:

Joseph Rizzo Naudi, partially-sighted writer

Victoria Moul, poet and critic

Benjamin Wood, Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing, King's College London

Ellen Adams

Introduction (as presented for the 2024 competition)

A standard line in essay feedback is to complement the information gathered, but then to comment that it is ‘rather more descriptive than analytical’. Academia rewards analysis, the marshalling of facts into the order of an argument. While agreeing that this skill is key, I sometimes wonder whether rich description is undervalued; it is, after all, appreciated in most media and prized as an entertainment and educational tool when delivered well. There is even a field of study dedicated to the vivid, verbal translation of the visual and sensory – *ekphrasis*. A practice-led form of this kind of translation occurs in audio description (AD), provided for blind and partially blind people in live performance (theatre and dance), film, and museums.

My research project investigates how museum access programmes for people with sensory impairments facilitate different ways of seeing and sensing artworks and objects, including AD and touch tours for blind people, and British Sign Language tours for Deaf people (see www.mansil.uk for more details). AD is a creative form of spoken language, seen as intermodal translation. It can be set against creative poetry and prose, as in the [Many Lives of a Snake Goddess](#) project (with Nicoletta Momigliano and Christine Morris), to consider how these different genres shaped our responses to these figurines. Pressing the pause button to facilitate ‘slow looking’ at the objects allows so many depths and layers to emerge.

It was a wonderful opportunity to run a competition for King’s College London students to produce an AD or piece of creative writing based on the Parthenon Galleries at the British Museum. Some [guidance](#) was given on AD, writing about art, and the Parthenon sculptures, but students were encouraged to produce personal responses to their experiences of the sculptures.

Some of the participants agreed to contribute to this booklet. I find this collection a fascinating mix of description and imagination, history and contemporary relevance. Participants have blended soaring inventiveness with close detail to great effect, whether in poetry or prose. The description not only reflects the materiality of the sculptures but also stimulates the mind. Many thanks to all involved in this project, particularly those contributing to this booklet.

Sophia Knight (First prize)

East Pediment K: Fragments

light fills her eyes. [] dark
 gets in.

 stirring, goddess slides
 up, linen [] watering skin

but something stops her. something like []
 which will strike her, make her dust.

]

]

]

the fabric swells, iron
 to the knees,

[] chipped at the footfalls.

the earth turned white,
unmarried, coated with sweet oil.

 maybe hestia.

maybe

]

]

] no one

Isobel Strevens (second prize)

South Metope XXX

He feels defeat approaching. He desperately tries to scramble out from under the Centaur's looming flank, his mantle slipping from his shoulders in the struggle. The beast surges forward and he stumbles backwards, the synergistic harmony of dancers warped into brutal confrontation. Its front hooves pin him in place, the left pressing hard into his thigh, the right between his legs, flinchingly close to his exposed manhood. The flinty edge of its hoof cuts grooves into his skin, slicing at his battle-tender flesh. His left leg aches, folded uncomfortably beneath him, grit scraping his shins. The Centaur grabs him by the hair, wrenching at the roots and whipping his head forwards, sending shooting pains down his neck and a nauseating swelling sensation to erupt under his tongue. His naked body is laid bare, open, vulnerable.

He feels defeat approaching. The Centaur rears onto its hind legs, mercifully unpinning his right thigh. Its tail, streaked with blood and gore, sweeps a cloud of dust into the air, sending particles of grit into his eyes. He averts his gaze sideways and surveys the scene unfolding around him through tear-blurred vision. The ground is littered with bodies bruised, battered, broken, Lapiths and Centaurs, bitter enemies, heaped on top of one another, the intimate naked entanglement of lovers corrupted into the strange embrace of battle. He sees the terrified Hippodamia trapped in Eurytion's frenzied embrace, her wedding attire torn and stained with blood and her hair dishevelled as Eurytion tosses her about, fending off her husband Pirithoüs's vengeful attacks.

He feels defeat approaching. His attention snaps back to the Centaur above him as it raises its hand to the heavens to prepare a lethal strike, the formidable muscles of its shoulders becoming individually distinguishable in his effort. Its nostrils flare as it brays a belligerent war-cry, its mouth contorting into a sneer as it surveys the helpless Lapith below. He scrabbles pitifully on the floor as his fallen mantle slips and slides beneath him, slick with sweat, frantically trying to escape the Centaur's poised fist. He wrenches his left arm backwards to balance himself, his palm grinding into the bloody ground.

He feels something. A protrusion from the earth. His searching fingers scrabble as he contorts his body away from the leering Centaur, earth and grit amassing painfully under his nails, and he wrenches the mass free: a clump of rock. He remembers a story his

mother had told him in his childhood. *Once upon a time, Zeus was angry with the people of the Iron Age, furious with the trick that the wicked Lycaon had attempted to play on him. He wanted to wipe out the bad people and replace them with good ones. Zeus flooded the whole world in his anger - he remembers laughing as his mother told him about the dolphins swimming between the tree branches – but one lucky couple, Deucalion and Pyrrha, survived. When Zeus calmed down and called back the flood, Deucalion and Pyrrha prayed to Themis, goddess of Justice, for help: “Throw the bones of your mother over your shoulder”, she told them - he remembers the booming voice his mother had used for the goddess’s proclamation. To begin with, the couple were confused by the goddess’s riddle, as they were separated from their own mothers’ bones by the flood, but soon they realised that their ‘mother’ was Mother Earth, and her bones were the rocks that surrounded them. So the couple threw some nearby rocks over their shoulder, and lo and behold, a new race of people was created.* The goddess’s words lodge themselves firmly in his consciousness, and he sends forth a silent prayer to Themis that Mother Earth’s bones might save him, too.

And whether the goddess has answered his prayer or whether the rock has renewed his resolve, he does not know, but he feels his very blood fizz with newfound energy. He sends another wordless prayer of thanks up to the goddess of Justice and prepares for his *aristeia*. He subtly twists his torso to the left, seeking to shield his weapon from the Centaur’s view, and grips the rock tightly with his left hand while sending his right fist into its flank, the full force of his weight behind it. His knuckles emit a nauseating crunch upon impact, but in his battle frenzy, the pain barely registers. The Centaur recoils, de-centring its balance as its tanned skin smarts and a furious red welt begins to emerge.

The Centaur feels defeat approaching. Weapon in hand, he prepares to strike.

Tomasz Gorny (third prize)

The horse of Selene speaks

Step into the Duveen Gallery, Room 18 of the British Museum. The air feels cool here, and the light is diffused and gentle, falling softly on my marble form. The walls are pale and unadorned, a blank stage where we – the Parthenon sculptures – wait for your gaze to bring us back to life.

I am Selene's horse, carved from Pentelic marble centuries ago. Before you now, I am but a fragment: a head severed from its body, yet still carrying the echoes of the goddess who guided me across the night sky.

Look at me. My nostrils flare, wide and deep, as though drawing in the cool night air. The veins along my face bulge with effort, my jaw clenched in exhaustion. My ears tilt back, straining to catch the faintest sound of Selene's chariot wheels. Though I am still, my muscles ripple with tension, frozen mid-stride as I descend into the horizon.

Run your eyes over the marble – see how the sculptor's chisel captured my power and fatigue. The smoothness of my mane contrasts with the rough edges where time has worn me down. My mouth is open, and my teeth bared as though gasping for breath at the end of my nightly journey.

Imagine my place in the East Pediment of the Parthenon, high above Athens. There, I was not alone. The goddess Selene, her flowing robes shimmering under moonlight, guided me through the heavens. Together with Helios, we framed the birth of Athena at the pediment's centre—his chariot rising with dawn, mine descending into night.

But here, in this quiet gallery, I am far from home. The artificial light casts shadows over me, but it is not the same as the glow of Attica's moon. Around me, visitors pass in hushed awe. They lean in close, their faces illuminated by smartphone screens, but do they truly see me?

Do they see the story carved into my marble veins? The faith of those who once worshipped beneath the Acropolis, who saw me not as a relic but as part of a sacred whole?

Here, I am silent. A fragment placed carefully behind barriers, surrounded by placards and labels. But if you close your eyes and listen, you might hear the faint thunder of hooves in the night sky. You might feel the cool marble under your fingertips, its surface smooth yet trembling with the weight of history.

I am Selene's horse. A creature of myth, a memory of a distant home. Look at me and bring me back to life.

Rochelle Lee (Special mention)

if i could show you the parthenon sculptures

perhaps I would start with the idea that it was not originally a site of worship, but a haven where even gods could recover for a momentary breath. Like the one you hold, right under the clearest pearl of the iris: sensing faintly a weakness even from such pale, resilient renderings. There may be no other way to make intimate with the past. She towers like a name beholden. Preceding air, the hush of ivory that stills an Athenian devotee to her feet: destruction had never before seemed so delicate. So hushed in precision. Where we are allowed we take turns running our hands against the battered remnants of a blazon. Unknotting the difference between an arm destemmed of its heart, and a torso still tangled in its companion's veins. Shadows may have subsided from the marble's varnish, but still, we know how far they have traveled. As if the width of our fingers can strum an ocean's touch. Careful not to graze too close to the open points of braille, the blood struggles to fully settle the weight of its silt. Like a language that can only be relearned. Everything no longer seems at rest. Is it still Oreithyia cradling her twin sons if I only see undulating folds of tissue, outpouring into a rippling skull? Somewhere, one of his torsos, buried in repose. Did Iris mean to land on Earth parted so triumphantly, mid-leap, where wind barely brushed her bronzed wings? I see where her head has been broken from the frieze; you see how she patiently embraces Hera's shoulder, lingering on the shimmered lift of her veil. Helios, Selene, draining each other in mirror image: stretched gaunt over her horse's cheekbone, the exhaustion of trailing night's diaphanous strands into daybreak. What did the lithe-bodied god think, as he pulled himself through the surface of a river in Athens? Was there triumph in not drowning, in high relief? What feels more seductive, the first whisper of touch or the hush of having something to break? Poseidon's spring of salted-tears is enough to carry us through lifetimes: is Aphrodite melting into the protection of a maternal lap, or does Dione cling to her like an anchor? Under that cloak of water, what did Hestia stoke within herself? Will Hebe, bearing cups of nectar, ever turn to face us? Where does Demeter store her grief for Persephone: in the chin, on her delicately serrated hand, or the brief flicker gripping her torch, like a spark of recognition? Maybe, you speculate, the answer is to outdrink mortality in the hourglass of Dionysus's palm. Look at the cavalcade of horsemen over there, on the south frieze: why is it some face forward, others back where they came, a handful into the well of their own souls? What is it that we can find in these vignettes apart from a moment of crisis? Uncertain if you're ready, I reach for your hand still trying to parse the shape of understanding, a curious, human thing: already I can see it crumbling, the way all pulses eventually ebb. It is possible to build fragile into a legacy that lives on, hereafter. Everything is unfinished anyway: often the sculptors hid the rough drapery on the back, away from the unassuming viewer's eye. We can fill in the fragments like handfuls of golden sacrifices. What distance these pieces must have roamed: wrenched apart in a cry of swan song.

Even standing this close, I still do not know. Even if I could show you what I see, I could not

A Centaur and A Lapith's Tussle: Fight for The Loved Ones

This nearly square grey slab, 122 by 132 centimetres,¹ has two damaged upper corners – one more broken than the other. Two interlocked wrestlers are carved: a Centaur and a Lapith. The metope radiates a quiet, mysterious energy, drawing us back to the Parthenon to witness a battle that is bare, raw, and elemental.

This battle happened at the marriage feast of Peirithoos.² On the left side of the slab, the Centaur is half-beast, half-human, and stands frozen in the heat of combat. Its powerful body leans forward, its posture tense and aggressive. Thick, curly hair cascades over its shoulders, each strand deeply carved, giving the impression of real-time movements.

Under its furrowed brow, a pair of almond-shaped eyes are carved in deep relief, amplifying the expression of cunning and hostility. Its long, exaggerated nose bridge goes toward its bearded mouth, which hangs slightly open as if issuing a silent threat to its opponent.

The Centaur's form, its muscular human torso seamlessly transitions to its powerful equine lower half. Its muscled hind legs stand firmly. And the front legs lift slightly, reflecting a moment of upcoming attack. Its body demonstrates an impression of tension.

On the right side of the slab stands the Lapith, the Centaur's opponent, a fully human figure. He is young; he stands firmly. His brow is furrowed, but not as deeply as the Centaur's, he looks calm rather than raging. His finely-proportioned nose extends naturally from his forehead, a pair of almond-shaped eyes, carved with a determined look.

The Lapith has strong jawline and square chin. His legs are well-proportioned and packed with muscle. He balances himself on one leg, his posture steady, his body seems ready to counter the Centaur's assault.

Both are nude, their muscular upper torsos illustrating the ideal masculine body shape. The Centaur's thick hind legs are slightly bent, and its forelegs twist tightly around the Lapith's right leg, indicating its intention to unbalance him. The Lapith fights back with his body slightly turned, pressing his right knee firmly against the Centaur's chest, and lifting his foot slightly forward to brace against the attack. At the same time, his right hand grips the Centaur's wild hair. The Centaur strikes with its powerful hand, gripping the Lapith's throat deadly.

¹ https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1816-0610-15

² Ibid.

The battle between the Centaur and the Lapith is frozen in marble. As I stare at it, I seem to see another struggle—a fight for survival, for hope, for life itself. That is not a mythic Parthenon story, but a real one occurring in hospital rooms under bright lights. Here, the Centaur's brutal attacks resonates with the illness of leukaemia; each movement embodied the cruel waves of chemotherapy's side effects, which mercilessly assault the patient's body and spirit.

The Centaur's forelegs curling tightly around the Lapith's leg reminds me of the side effect of nausea – how it twisted the patients' stomachs. It is not just an upset stomach; it is an extensive wave of sickness that destroys the patient's desire to eat, drink, and even think. And, the Centaur's paw, squeezing the Lapith's throat, brings back the memories of how the patients experienced fevers that suddenly burn, leaving them soaked in sweat, followed by freezing chills that no blanket could warm. Their bodies tremble, as if they were stuck in a battle where they could only be beaten.

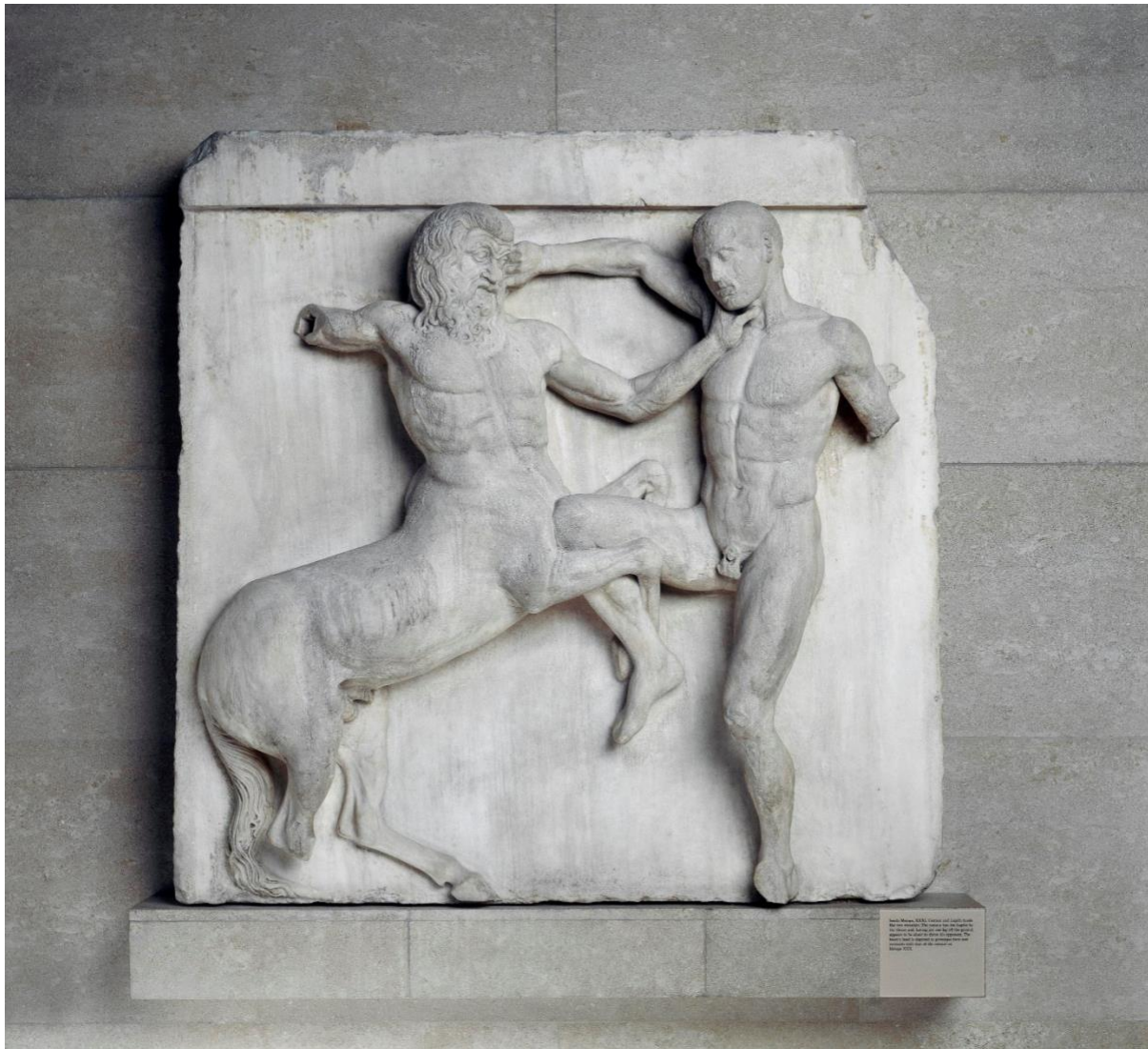
When they thought those were the worst parts of chemotherapy, they were wrong, not even close. As a result of the nausea and fevers, their electrolytes were thrown into chaos, potassium dropping dangerously far out of range. Intravenous potassium supplements became a grim necessity. Each drop through the tube felt like a sharp stab to the heart, lasting three hours each time, three times a day.

Patients were brave and tough, bodily pains did not strike them, but then, there was the hair, falling away in handfuls, collapsing their last reserves of strength. They would run their fingers over their heads crazily, as if searching for a proof of what had once been theirs. Tears could no longer be controlled; they cried out loud like children, asking a question that had no answer—why were they the ones with leukaemia, why?

The story behind the battle between the Centaurs and the Lapiths is: at the wedding of King Peirithoos of the Lapiths and Hippodamia, the Centaurs – who had been invited as guests – got drunk and lost control. Their wild instincts took over, and they tried to abduct the Lapith women. Outraged, the Lapiths fought back to protect their people and defend their honour, leading to a fierce battle between the two groups.³

I see the Lapiths' courage in their battle with the Centaurs resonated the bravery of leukaemia patients. The Lapiths fought to protect their women, just as leukaemia patients fight for their families and loved ones. At the heart of both struggles is the shared will to protect those they care about. The frozen stance of the Lapiths and Centaurs, carved in stone, leaves space for our imagination-mirroring the uncertain outcome of a leukaemia patient's fight with chemotherapy. In that unknown, there remains hope.

³ <https://www.worldhistory.org/video/173/battle-of-the-lapiths-and-centaurs-parthenon-metop/>



Marble metope (South XXXI) from the Parthenon: a Centaur and a Lapith tussle like two wrestlers.

Source : <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/114750001>

© **The Trustees of the British Museum**. Shared under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International \(CC BY-NC-SA 4.0\)](#) licence.

Anderson Wong (Special Mention)

West Pediment N

yesterday i saw her:
 shivered and
 riven and
 ridden to a
 wisp,
whisked away to the corners of the world...
 and yet
she stands
—poised—
empyrean and alight and
sewn tight with aged-white marble string
as elegant and still
—unwavering—
as the day
she was formed.

Gabriel Abd El Latif

A stone in the path to the Parthenon

Behold, now shall I sing of the glory in which I could have shared but of which destiny has – in her wisdom – spared me that I may pass down the renown of that most gleaming of temples which crowns our august and most majestic city. I am but a lowly, misshapen and discarded stone of marble lodged firmly in the arid, fertile soil – mired among many others who now bend in devotion to this new service which had been ordained unto them; not to count themselves among those others who stand to form this great monument which I shall – in due time – laud, but to serve as the ground upon which many across the world may walk that they may wither at the beauty, rejoice in the splendour and shiver in awe of the temple to our mother.

Lo' – a new day approaches! Dawn saunters in to call up all those on Earth to attention, her rays of merigold and rose thrust forth, brightening the hill and once again breathing life into it that we might shake off the dust of slumber and share in the same brightness of the approaching day. The ashen clouds slowly and begrudgingly gather themselves to leave as the world above is plunged into light. The sweet birdsong permeates the air and the wind gathers, as the multitude of shrubs and wildflowers who too have their being in the ground sway to the same rhythm.

When the day gets into its later hours, we sit, suffering the wails, sighs and whimpers of those too weary to carry the weight of their wet, tender and tired bodies up over us that they may indulge in a glimpse of the beauty that was sat patiently waiting for them beyond the *Propylaea*.

Fathers heave one trembling foot over the other, periodically stopping to glide a finger across their forehead and dash a jet of salty sweat against the fiery-hot ground, gazing – hoping to catch a sight of the temple beyond; the grandest sight which their markedly mediocre efforts have not yet earned for them. Mothers try desperately to keep the same pace as their young, warning them to not fall prey to those stones which – unlike myself – jut out, hoping to cause their victims to tumble over.

It would be remiss of the sacred duty which Destiny has bestowed upon me to dwell for too long on what I expect you find to be the rather mundane goings-on of the day-to-day, so forgive me if I have kept you eager to learn of what it is I truly have been charged with divulging to you.

It is in my experience that when one accomplishes the stone path and enters through those gates, one finds all grievances dissipate into the thick air at the sight of the complex in front of them. They are struck by those most formidable and inviting of maidens stood

dominantly yet tenderly on – as it has always seemed to me – the edge of the world. Shoulder-to-shoulder are they stationed – their bodies draped in *peploi* which you'd be forgiven for presuming were real blankets of cloth hanging freely over their shoulders, cinched casually at the waist.

They stand, just in their prime: backs straight, shoulders pulled back upright, an intricate thick rope of braided hair courses down their backs, resting between their shoulder blades; their youth forever captured in cold marble. Curvaceous legs stand fatigued yet enduringly under the weight of the stone slab resting atop their heads as they look serenely into the distance with an expression vacant and eyes inquiring.

It is only then – when the pilgrim has escaped the gaze of these maidens – do they reap the rewards of their labour. Only then are they counted worthy to peer upon the glory of our city and that of the whole world, to which my fellow labourers and I have faithfully delivered them.

Forty-six columns of Pentelic marble, as pure as the goddess for whom do they so dutifully tower upright, encase the *naos* – each of these columns bear twenty grooves carved with exquisite precision along its length, each stand at exactly the same height, bearing the weight of a roof bedecked with eight thousand tiles – not one thicker, thinner, larger or smaller than the next – artistry which Time has long since taken for his own; consistent artistry without fail – defiant, proud, unparalleled, unrivalled.

Filing past the columns, one enters a city which, though long abandoned, still lives in the minds and imaginations of those who now walk its streets. If one wants to enter into the lives of those who, eons before, have walked these spaces, one must fight against the Time-fashioned chasm – so vast and unconquerable to almost all, that they meander oblivious of the importance of the holy place in which they stand.

If this battle is won, the visitor will find the murmurs of ancient pilgrims – who, in piety, voyaged to honour the virgin-goddess – still rattling in the air. They can smell that thick, suffocating aroma of burnt fat dripping from offerings, exuding a stream of smoke dancing high into the sky. They can see countless waves of supplicants, who struggle and swarm about the temple gates, restless as bees, buzzing with urgency and excitement – the two priests kneel, digging their bare knees into the ground as they throw up their arms and stare into the sky above in supplication to the colossal warrioress of bronze which stood, guarding all of Attica. They can savour the same subtle saltiness of the sea upon the tips of their tongues as the fresh wind wafts its aroma across into the city and its neighbouring streets.

Then – and only then – will they understand the significance of their visit and be able to grasp the sanctity of the place which we have valiantly guarded and of which I – and those who can still find it within themselves – will sing for ages to come.

Ben Cassell

Tour

As always, we begin with the finale,

Her gift folding back into itself, shifting in dedicated hands.

I draw the attention of these wandering grey reflected eyes to a marble peplos (is it not?) with excited hands already stretching up to Olympus with understanding.

I have walked this pomp so many times.

Kings were of a serpentine nature when I was their age, when Classics, I was told, were things for the 'posh'.

I process them around this inversion, inviting them to see the sights, hear the sounds, of a festival they will never attend.

This bleached Ionic canvas over which an ocean of ink has stormed, is virgin soil to them, a vital spring of inspiration.

'These figures are kanephoroi' Curiosity metamorphosing into earnest interest, 'And these are apobatai'

This canvas can race, walk, smell, and breathe for these initiates. 'These men, standing, leaning, sitting, may be the eponymoi'

A required choral interlude on Democracy, as we dance onto the next panel.

We retreat further back, witnessing a birth that shook the world, its own witnesses now without the means to do so.

The lacunae of the pediments promote rhapsodic recitation, summoning to their mind's material, with which to carve the image anew.

The flare of nostrils, the cascading drapery, 'the sea tossed by dark waves'

Moving to where few walk, the devotional pursuit of techne is evidenced.

The figures are complete, the back as well as the front,

Portions of a dedication no mortal eye would see.

We slowly race to the scene of Her victory, figures at equal distances still engaged in their sport. Athena planted an olive tree as Her claim to Attica.

The Persians burnt it 'in which year...?' Smoke from this sacrilege mixing with the smell of gunpowder in their minds.

The violence of the metopes steals their attention, making for light relief after these divine episodes.

The strained sinews of barbarism being curtailed, and physis finally slain by an arche in full sail.

Giggling mixes with proud recollections of other themes, 'Amazonomachy, Trojan War and...' 'Gigantomachy' I pronounce aloud.

Time does not allow us the 'gentle luxury to weep', passing the finale again, following me to a glass exit and out to other pasts, I continue the tour.

Olivia Hamblett

Walking from wing to wing

In an echoing vast space, the tapping of feet along the black slabbed floor cackles in The face of the tumorous mesh of ancient Greek marble,

The same materials used entirely differently: the ceiling lights bounce directly onto You.

You're lit from above, creating a sense of hushed presence, a decayed calcified Awesome majesty

They called You 'The Elgin Sculptures' for a while, centuries on You were reunited With your real name - not Your real home - yet.

Beheaded torsos sit stationary.

It's dusk and the descending March of Progress are faceless and stare towards us

The only head in this case is that of a horse, it's eyes bulging, tongue leaping out And over the boulder.

Ritual - sacred now secular have followed You.

You, the most refined Parthenon body bits.

Protector of the city, You have seen hundreds of sacrifices, cattle and personal at Your great altar. Chewed up and spat out and now You are London's Ready Made Meal Deal of culture.

Battles have ravaged around You. You stood waiting to celebrate but now You are Here.

Pale and patient

Venetian explosions awoke and broke You, thousands of years after Your birth.

A sultan handed You to an ambassador for show. You're not home now, but You're Permanent. Away from Your sacred rock, divided from Athens to a street halfway Between Tottenham Court Road and Euston

A democratic promise of the ideal of Greek life, You inspire others from this room, Now.

Sulkily ravaged by time and dislocation from the high city

The sacred heart of the centrepiece, converted and converted until left as a ruin

We know You have lived many lives before, hidden by Athena's promise.

Piles of limbs and positions: sitting, kneeling, squatting, cascading

Under Your description placards hold insufficient words such as 'probably' – You are Lost then found for our interpretation over time. Left to a state of complete Uncertainty

Tobi Olatidoye

South metope XXXI

A fossil-coloured marble slab. Flawlessly buffered and flawlessly square. Its rounded edges bear their weight upon an elevated stand. Despite its astonishing craftsmanship, the upper right-hand side of this lonely square tells of its brawl with the test of time, receiving the uppercut of deterioration to its corner, disrupting what might have been a clean-cut line amongst an action-filled scene.

On closer inspection, the background is scattered with discoloured splinters while tiny, jagged edges highlight its subtle imperfections and formidable mortality. In the centre of this scene, as if carved from the hand of creation and life itself, appears two figures frantically fighting, forever frozen in time as a spectacle to behold the naked eye.

On the right-hand side the stoic-faced young man, the Lapith, uses his right hand to grip the hair of his wild opponent, the Centaur, depicted on this panel as human from the torso up and half-horse down from his posterior. The Lapith's left hand is drawn back yet we lose vital information from the lower arm as it undergoes a slash to the forearm leaving it absent; only the bold shadow that emerges behind the brachium reminds us of what a mighty fist the Lapith had, to overcome such an untamed adversary. The right leg of the Lapith is raised high and bent, digging into the hips of the Centaur, while his left leg stabilises the weight exerted by his stance from his uplifted right leg. If depicted in another circumstance, the agility, position and precision of the Lapith could perhaps be mistaken for a ballet dancer midway through a pirouette, though as we pierce our eyes on the figure of the Centaur we are hauled back into the flames of this clash of arms.

The bearded Centaur is displayed on the left. His staggering rear is a warning, enticing terror, provoking aggression. His hind legs are fixed firmly on the ground, while his swishing tail is tucked behind faltering hooves, that have so long attempted to resist the crushing force of both him and the Lapith, that his right hoof has gone and burdens the consequences.

Despite the exposure of his underbelly, the Lapith wraps his forelegs around the right leg of the centaur, fending off what may have been a cruel blow to the breast. The right forearm of the Centaur has departed - a hollow hole resides in its disappearance. We can only wonder if this curved arm was pulled into a fist or some other winding motion. The left arm maintains impeccable condition, smooth yet small threads of veins bulge through firm muscle, reaffirming his vigour. This arm is outstretched to a vicious chokehold - he is barbarity and belligerence incarnate.

Your hands glide coarsely over the surface of the square metre panel. We focus our attention to the outline of the Centaur on the left, the hair from his tail swirls downwards in fine grooves. You move your hand diagonally to the right, across his barrel, the rough and grainy surface scratches at your fingertips giving a sense of realism to the grittiness of the panel's scene. Your hands travel upwards, the toned contours of the abs and ribcage somewhat bring life to this statue, but the unsettling cold and rigid form expose its imitation of life.

Your hands slowly graze over the missing foot of the right figure, the Lapith. The gravel-like texture abrading - gently clinging to your fingers, causing vibrations along your skin. As your hand drifts along the calf and knee of the Lapith shallow gouges of marble repel the touch of feeling. Ascending to the face of the Lapith, the eyes are soulless, smooth and lack warmth like hardened wax. The chiselling of the nose and lips inflict little texture that can only be compared to the surface of sandpaper.

Oh, what a wonder! The great metope stands resolute in its erosion, it's inevitable erasure from existence. In its prime it would have been placed proudly on the doric frieze of the Parthenon, painted skilfully in radiant colours. Now, the faint grey lie bare for all the world to see, and what we envision from its glory days is not what remains.

London Singletary

Η Μελαγχολία του Ερμή (The Melancholy of Hermes)

There abounds before me,
this boisterous bundle.
Such mighty clamorous wind!
Yet all that draws to my ear is my felt
hat with its faint soothing shush
in its brush against my skin.

My half-brother leans on my shoulder,
bade me to gaze upon his works.
This procession to honor the one who
from father's thought was birth.

I did so,
I saw the shuffling, the dancing,
heard the flapping bird wings of near-distant
talk. It bled together, like shifting stream
water.

Yet I could not see their faces,
nor my half-brother's face, nor my aunts' and uncles',
nor the one that held Athena's place.
All their features lost in stone's sighing
crumble. But what of man?
How could I have known
That the Martian thud of trodden, well-struck
Earth, by horse hooves should ever deplete their
worth?
That in their enslavement to ambition
My grandfather would bade them turn and trot
towards
the demure faint crackling of their hearth?

I barely heard them,
That suréd walk returned a rippled echo
soon muted by cloth.
I could no longer see them. I hesitate to join them.

As I sit here,
What becomes of you or I?
I know not. I deliver my last message:
For as long as you live, shine!
Do not grieve, life lasts but a short while

ere through.
Chronos has his due.

The Parthenon East Pediment – The Birth of Athena

From the East subtle rays of morning sunlight trickle across the cold marble, replacing the hollow light of the lonesome moon. The mellow beams warm the pale surface of the dead rock which has been chiselled and carved to take the form of gods. With the wind rushing from the sea these lifeless imitations begin to breathe, as if in a whisper they were told to live and *did*. Garments and hair billow with the breeze and eyes sparkle in a ricochet of anticipation towards a centre, wherein a miracle unfolds: straight forth and sliced from Zeus' head the beautiful and wise Pallas Athene is born, coming into the world with a new day's light, dressed in full and dazzling armour. A woman born ready for the hardened and cruel world of men.

As Thalassa reached the top of that steep hill this spectacle unravelled before her tired eyes. She had had a sleepless and agitated night. The sea that usually soothed her mind had been of no aid to her. Instead, restless, she had spent the night stiff in bed - immovable. Beside a large and breathing pile of skin and bones, the scent of strong wine lingered on his breath and clung to his skin. Never had she felt so outside of her body. This man, her new husband, had pushed the very essence of herself away - she had become a spectator of her own life. Before the faint mists of the dawn began to ascend into the sky she had slipped away, dressed, and left the compound as silently as she could.

The air was chilled and sweet, and the wind had only just begun brushing along the coast. Before Thalassa even knew where to go, she found herself blindly speeding towards the temple. The stars remained in the sky, drifting further and further away with each step into that unknown oblivion. It was still too dark to see her surroundings clearly, but she could make out the movements of her limbs. They possessed a skeletal and ghostly quality in the pre-dawn light, as though they weren't truly a part of this world and could vanish along with the moon beneath the waves.

The journey passed in a blur and her heart had pounded against her chest ceaselessly. At moments she had thought it would push through her feeble skin and fall to her feet. In some sense, she almost hoped it had. What was her heart to her anyway, when she could not truly own her body? Watching the figures glow above her, they seemed to hold more life within them than she felt in her flesh now. What was to say they did not live too? From Earth's clay Prometheus had fashioned Man to take the image of gods. And so too did Man craft *their* gods: to explain the inexplicable, to carve out right from wrong and to quell the mortal fear of death. But these were the creations to affirm a male world.

She looked up to Athene who stood beautiful, wise and strong at the locus of the scene. A virgin woman-warrior who could make the souls of men quake! Desperately Thalassa searched the Goddess's bright eyes, hoping to find an ally to fight for her, to find an unspoken meaning to reconcile the realities of her world. But it was to no avail. The Goddess continued to stare aimlessly out of those vacant eyes. To the left Aphrodite lay spread out upon her mother's lap, lavishing in her attractiveness. The folds of her chiton flowed perfectly along her body like a stream, accentuating her languid and elegant physique, daring the gaze of men to fall desirously over her breasts. But neither she, so engulfed in her own image, could offer the young girl peace. These revered women were so distant from the grasp of the mortal world, how could they possibly provide her any solace?

The sun was now in its full blazing glory, and she watched as the colours danced across the smoothed marble. They were so perfect and still. She wished to climb into that frame and be frozen in the morning light as well. Beyond these celestial bodies her city lay in the last reaches of sleep. The sea glistened as the final shades of night slid beyond the horizon and she thought of time and its endlessness. She envisioned the ocean's waves crashing over her home and dragging it into its depths. Nothing could truly last forever. Not even these sculpted vessels of divinity. She watched as time cascaded over the stones, tearing away paint and limb. One day those almighty beings will be but remnants of a memory and a time, their faces and identities lost in ages. One day that darling Athene, who she sought for protection, would be gone.

In that central void she began to shape her hopes, dreams and needs. Not out of pristine white marble, but instead, with the colours and light of that ocean and sky she longed to be a part of and move beyond. Her desires fluctuated with the wind and sank with the roots of old trees. She walked away from the temple and its grand design to sit facing the vast expanse of water which swayed below her. The sun had begun to heat her skin, and finally her body had reasserted itself into the world again, away from that spectral realm of shadows.