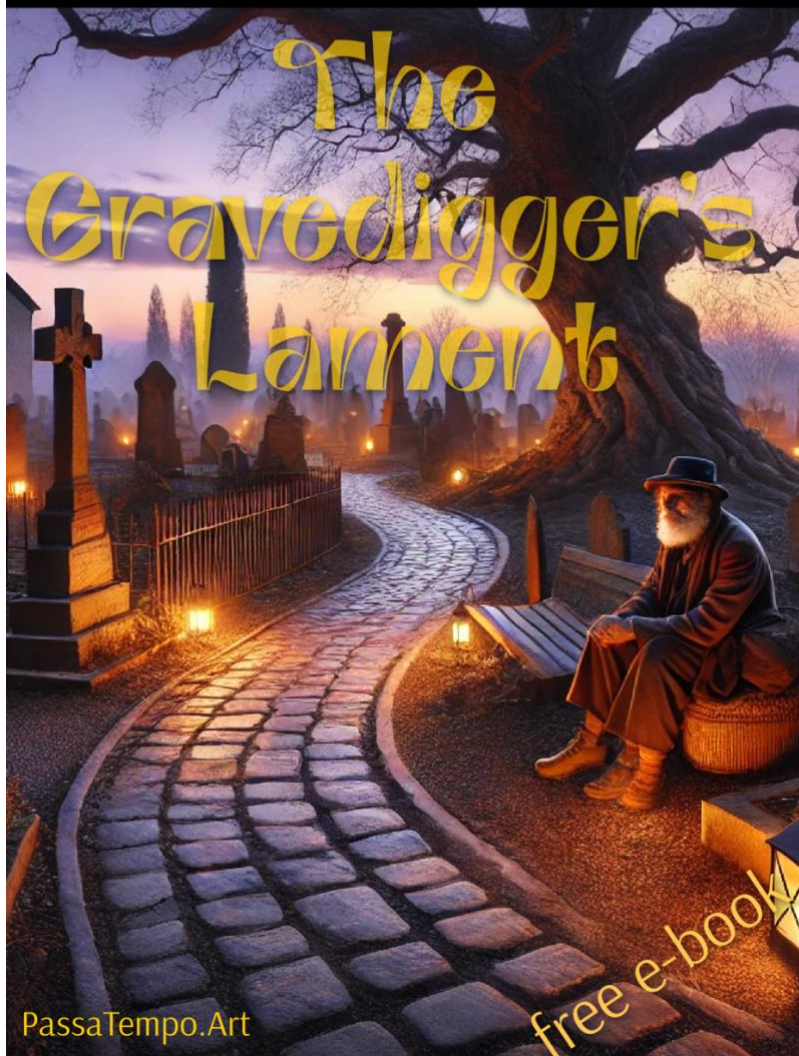


Emmanuel Rhoides

1895 (....and today)

# The Gravedigger's Lament



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# The Gravedigger's Lament



by Emmanuel Rhoides (1895)

**Translation from Greek to British English: Thomas Pagonis**

*“The Gravedigger’s Lament”* is one of the few known short stories by Emmanuel Roidis, published in 1895. It is a narrative rich in social and political commentary, irony, and sarcasm, depicting the harsh realities of poverty, political corruption, and social injustice in 19th-century Greece.

# Bringing Emmanouel Rhoides to the English-Speaking World

The works of Emmanouel Rhoides are now in the public domain, opening the door for a new generation of readers.

©[PassaTempo.Art](#)© is dedicated to translating his writings into English and making them freely accessible—accompanied by insightful commentary—to introduce his literary genius to a wider audience.



## A drop of history....

After nearly 400 years under Ottoman rule, Greece emerged as an independent nation, carrying forward its language, faith, and cultural identity despite centuries of foreign domination. Yet, the early years of the new state were anything but stable—poverty, political turbulence, and sweeping social transformations shaped the nation's uncertain path forward.

In its early years, Greece's capital shifted multiple times as the fledgling nation sought stability. **Ioannis Kapodistrias**, the country's first Governor, initially chose **Aegina (1828–1829)** as the provisional capital for its security and strategic position. In **1829**, he moved the capital to **Nafplio**, a thriving administrative center at the time. Then, in **1834**, King Otto selected **Athens**, drawn to its deep historical roots and its potential for expansion into a modern city.

Though **Syros**, the birthplace of Rhoides, never held the title of capital, it emerged as one of Greece's most influential cultural and economic centers. Its bustling port city, **Ermoupoli**, flourished as a hub of trade, intellectual exchange, and artistic innovation, enriched by an influx of refugees from Chios, Smyrna, and Psara. The island's cosmopolitan spirit fostered progressive ideas, literary ambition, and critical discourse—elements that would profoundly shape the young Emmanuel Rhoides.

<>

# Emmanuel Rhoides:

## The Satirist Who Defied Convention



Born in 1836 on the island of Syros, Emmanuel Rhoides (1836–1904) grew up in one of Greece's most dynamic cultural and economic hub. In the aftermath of the Greek War of Independence, Syros emerged as a thriving center of trade, intellectual exchange, and artistic innovation. Its capital, Ermoupoli, became a melting pot of Greek refugees from Chios, Smyrna, and Psara, fostering a cosmopolitan spirit that would profoundly shape Rhoides' worldview.

Raised in this environment, Rhoides developed a sharp intellect and an unrelenting wit—qualities that would define his literary career. Unlike the more romanticized Greek literature of his time, his works were marked by skepticism, biting irony, and fearless critique of authority. Moving to Athens, he established himself as a formidable satirist, using humor and sarcasm to expose political corruption, religious hypocrisy, and social inequality.

His most famous work, *Pope Joan* (1866), a scathing critique of religious institutions, led to his excommunication—a testament to both his boldness and the controversy his work inspired. Yet, despite opposition, he remained influential in Greek literary circles, later serving as the director of the National Library of Greece. His writing—seamlessly blending historical insight with sharp satire—remains strikingly relevant today, influencing modern political satire and social commentary.

**Rhoides' Literary Legacy: A Satirist Ahead of His Time**  
Though controversial in his era, Rhoides' impact on Greek and European literature is undeniable. His sharp wit and fearless critique of institutional power, corruption, and social injustice positioned him as a literary figure ahead of his time, aligning him with great satirists like Voltaire, Swift, and Heine. While he was often dismissed or censored during his lifetime, his works gained recognition in later years for their literary brilliance and uncompromising moral stance.

One of the most distinctive aspects of Rhoides' work is his use of Katharevousa, the formal, archaizing Greek that was promoted in the 19th century as a bridge between ancient and modern Greek. Unlike Demotiki, the more colloquial form of Greek spoken by the people, Katharevousa was much closer to Ancient Greek in structure and vocabulary. While some writers used it rigidly, Rhoides masterfully manipulated the language, infusing it with satirical sharpness, irony, and a modern sensibility that made his critiques even more piercing. His ability to wield this scholarly yet playful form of Greek allowed him to satirize not only social and political issues but also the very linguistic debates of his time.

His influence can be traced in the works of later Greek writers, particularly in Nikos Kazantzakis and Kostas Varnalis, who also used satire to expose political and social failings. Today, in an era where corrupt politicians, media manipulation, and economic injustice remain prevalent, Rhoides' voice feels more urgent than ever. His critique of a political system that deceives its citizens, of religious institutions that stifle progress, and of a society that neglects its most vulnerable, could easily be applied to the modern world.

#### A Timeless Voice Against Corruption and Hypocrisy

More than a century after his death, Rhoides' work still resonates. His biting satire and unflinching social critique serve as a reminder that the struggles of the past—political dishonesty, economic exploitation, and the marginalization of the weak—are not relics of history but ongoing realities. His legacy challenges us not only to admire his literary craft but to recognize the enduring relevance of his warnings.

In a time when disillusionment with politics and power structures is widespread, Rhoides remains a guiding voice, urging readers to question authority, challenge dogma, and confront injustice with intellect, wit, and unyielding courage. His work stands as a testament to the fact that fearless critique never goes out of style.

# Plot & Central Themes of Emmanuel Rhoides' *The Gravedigger's Lament*

Inside a dimly lit cemetery, under the flickering glow of a lantern, Argyris Zomas—once a prosperous fisherman and farmer from Syros—recounts his tragic life story to an anonymous listener. Betrayed by political deception and financial ruin, he is now reduced to a gravedigger in Athens, a broken man navigating the depths of despair.

Zomas falls prey to the empty promises of a parliamentary candidate, who assures him of a secure government job, a scholarship for his son, and financial stability in exchange for political support. However, once in power, the politician abandons him, exposing the deep-seated corruption of the system.

Deceived into investing his life savings in worthless railway shares, Zomas quickly descends into poverty. With no money left, he is forced into grueling labor, first as a porter and then as a gravedigger.

Meanwhile, his family suffers unbearably—his wife wastes away under the weight of endless pregnancies, and one by one, his children perish: four from disease, one in a brutal carriage accident, and finally, his daughter falls victim to an unspeakable crime, driving her to madness and death.

Zomas's suffering is not merely the result of personal misfortune—it reflects a society that turns a blind eye to the struggles of the poor. His story underscores the cold detachment of both politicians and the public, exposing a world where the weak are crushed while the powerful thrive.

In just a few pages of intense and captivating storytelling, Rhoides crafts *The Gravedigger's Lament* with a masterful blend of irony, vivid imagery, and raw orality, amplifying the emotional weight of Zomas's tragedy.

However, Rhoides employs a style uniquely his own. He juxtaposes tragedy with biting sarcasm, exposing the absurdity of a system that chews up and spits out the innocent.

Rhoides' descriptions are grotesque and vivid. He portrays Athens in brutal, almost surreal detail: streets flooded with mud and blood, suffocating slums, and the eerie, overgrown graveyard where Zomas now works.

The style is Conversational & Theatrical. Zomas's direct, emotionally charged storytelling makes the reader feel as if they are sitting beside him, listening to his confession.

Thus, *The Gravedigger's Lament* is more than a personal tragedy—it is a scathing indictment of 19th-century Greek society, exposing its corruption, inequalities, and indifference to human suffering. Through masterful storytelling and biting satire, Rhoides gives voice to the oppressed, crafting a critique that remains as relevant today as it was then.

Yet, Zomas's tragic story is not confined to 19th-century Greece. It echoes the struggles of all those who have been discarded by a system built to serve the powerful. His downfall is not merely the result of bad luck or personal mistakes, but rather a symptom of a society where promises are empty, justice is a privilege of the elite, and the poor are left to fend for themselves. This harsh reality is a recurring theme in literature—seen, for example, in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*—a testament to how little the fate of society's outcasts has changed over time

But now, sit back, listen, and let the anonymous narrator guide you into the depths of Argyris Zomas's lament...





# The Gravedigger's Lament by Emmanuel Roidis (1895)



How it happened, many years ago, that I became interested in a grave in the cemetery near Vathia is of no concern to the reader. I only mention it to dispel any suspicion that this is some sentimental nonsense. It is not. There is no Marika, Eleni, or Persephone resting beneath it, but rather a good man named Antonis. I would visit him occasionally, not only because he left me with good memories but also because I enjoyed the walk. Besides the Vathia plain, I do not believe there is another place in Athens that gives such an impression of spaciousness. The Stadium, the Rangavas district, Vatrachonisi, and the foothills of Lycabettus are, of course, highly picturesque. The only flaw in their beauty is the excessive accumulation and variety of objects vying for admiration. Too many hills, rocks, ravines, gorges, columns, rooftops, Byzantine domes, and countless other things rarely allow the eye to discern where the sky meets the earth—or at the very least, to rest upon a relatively smooth surface. The variety of colours is as chaotic as the terrain itself: the dusty grey-white, the golden hue of ancient marble, the ochre of sun-scorched loads, the sparkling mercury of the sea, and scattered patches of green, sparsely sprinkled like a miser's touch. To these must be added the sky's hues at sunset—gold, purple, sapphire, and amethyst in extravagant combinations. All of it is beautiful, of course, yet somewhat reminiscent of the gaudy brilliance of Mayfarth's shop display, before ten years of decay and dissolution dull its colours.

The appearance of Vathia is entirely different—nothing there dazzles or overwhelms the senses. Judging by its name and its low-lying nature, one

might expect it to resemble a funnel, yet it is only here that an Athenian's gaze can enjoy an unobstructed horizon. The plain stretches smoothly towards the pale grass of the Olive Grove; a long avenue of trees cuts through it, and small houses scattered at great distances further enhance the imposing sense of space. And if the day happens to be autumnal, the sky leaden, a damp wind stirring the reeds, ducks playing in rain-formed pools, and carts of must and hay trundling along the muddy boulevard, it takes little imagination to believe that, with a single bound, one has leapt from Agios Konstantinos Street to a field in Wallachia. Those inclined to consider my love for flat expanses, clouds, puddles, mist, and dampness excessive are free to liken me to those ungrateful Israelites who, weary of daily manna and quail, longed for the leeks and garlic of Egypt.

As rural as the location is, so too is the cemetery. At its entrance, two jovial priests sit at a small table, drinking retsina with villagers and cart drivers, supplied by two nearby taverns whose owners, with commendable wit, have named them "*Rest*" and "*Vanity*".

Just beyond the gate, the visitor is met with a black noticeboard bearing the inscription:

*"Dogs are forbidden to enter, as well as to pick flowers."*

The usefulness of this sign seems somewhat doubtful—unless, of course, Vathia's dogs can read, or have a peculiar habit of picking flowers. A few steps further, one enters an enclosed field, little different from the unfenced ones nearby. Except for a few near the church, there are no columns, pyramids, busts, or other grand symbols of eternal rest. Even the vegetation lacks a distinctly funereal air—more pines and acacias than cypresses and willows, while daisies, thistles, and anemones grow at ground level. The impression is so pastoral that, in one corner where excavations had taken place, I mistook two or three whitened skulls among the grass for melons. No heavy slabs press upon the chests of the dead. Most graves resemble small gardens, planted with red geraniums, red bougainvillaea, and red hollyhocks.

The names and virtues of those resting beneath are inscribed on the crosses above, or, if their eulogies are particularly lengthy, on paper placed in wooden cases behind glass or wire mesh, reminiscent of auction notices. These cases also contain artificial flowers, ribbons, scarves, braids of hair, and often a photograph of the departed—or of the grieving widow. These mementoes are made all the more poignant by the youth of those who left them. Nowhere else, indeed, does the desire for eternal rest seem to develop so prematurely. We could not understand why, until one

day we had the fortune to meet Mr. Chatzimichalis, who was visiting his patients nearby.

The high number of early deaths is attributable to the fact that the filth of this district is exceptional, even by Athenian standards, and its fumes more suffocating. One need only walk its streets for a quarter of an hour, leaping over puddles and dung heaps, then enter the cemetery and read the names on the crosses:

Maria Markou, aged eighteen—Charikleia Markou, aged sixteen—Anastasia Pogga, aged sixteen—Marigo Flampoura, aged nineteen—Eftychia Lykou, aged fifteen, and so on. The harem of Charon in Vathia is exceptionally well-stocked! This likely explains the sharper grief of the mourners and the elegiac fervour of the epitaphs. Most are in verse, and so long that only a few stanzas can be quoted here for appreciation:



*"Here rests my beloved wife,  
She left us in sorrow and tears.  
Eleni, oh, where have you gone?  
Come forth, let us speak  
Let us tell two words from our grief-stricken hearts."*

And a little further down:



*"O traveller, who stands in awe before this tomb,  
And reads her name upon the cross of death,  
Go, tell the world, O noble wanderer,  
That here she rests beneath the silent stone."*

Notably, however, there is no black stone atop this grave—nor a white one. Like most other such references, it is purely poetic imagery. To the left of the aforementioned, one can read, behind a glass case, a printed epitaph for another much-mourned Eleni, consisting of ten stanzas, including the following:



*"Our dearest Eleni,*

*From her mother's womb she departed,  
And went to Hades, her light extinguished.  
With her fair beauty she descends to the underworld,  
And her noble character surpasses all maidens."*

Yet, what moved me the most was this:



*"Whoever sheds a tear upon this dark soil,  
Shall water a lemon branch adorned with blossoms,  
And a gentle angelic soul, hidden within the earth."*

Frequent travels and other concerns led me to neglect, and nearly forget, Antonis for many years. When I finally thought of him again, it was only natural that I found his resting place somewhat changed. The cypress trees had grown taller, the number of the dead had quadrupled, and the crosses stood so densely packed that little space remained for the daisies and thistles. To this, I must add with a heavy conscience that, during my long absence, my friend's grave had fallen into complete neglect. The wooden railings had collapsed, the flowerpots lay overturned, and not a trace of an inscription remained on the black cross, which rust had turned red.

I sought out the old gravedigger to have the disorder put right, but, as I learned from a mourning woman tending a nearby grave, he himself had been laid to rest years ago in the very ground where he once buried others. However, there was now a successor, whose head at that moment emerged from the basement of the ossuary. After the head, his torso appeared, followed by his long legs, which, with just a few strides, carried their owner towards me.

I hastened to explain that I wished him to enclose and tend my friend's grave for fair compensation. Yet, as I spoke, and even after I had finished, the gravedigger continued to examine me from head to toe with such persistent scrutiny that I could not understand it. Surely, there was nothing particularly strange or remarkable about me. My perplexity deepened when, suddenly, he asked me with great familiarity:

— *"Don't you remember me?"*

I then looked at him more closely, but I did not find him handsome. Tall as an obelisk, gaunt as a mummy, sunburnt like a Bedouin, with legs like reeds and a neck like a camel's, he reminded me of those ghastly Arab ascetics whose sudden appearance in the alleyways of Cairo had often made me shudder. Yet, the more I observed him, the more my memories took a different turn, transporting me not to the land of the Pharaohs but to a sunlit island of the Aegean. Instead of a yellow river, I saw blue waters; instead of minarets, palm trees, and camels, I envisioned vineyards, pomegranate trees, goats, chickens, and pigs. And rather than resembling a dervish from Cairo, the decrepit gravedigger before me seemed far more like the ghost of a man I had once known, years ago, in Syros—when he was still full of life, with flesh beneath his skin, teeth in his mouth, an upturned moustache, a knife in his belt, and often a carnation tucked behind his ear.

This image was tied to joyful excursions to Delagratia, warm sea baths, and lively breakfasts in a garden by the shore—fried fish, fresh figs, soft cheese, all served by a charming hostess. The sea baths, the garden, the hostess, and, above all, the finest boat in Syros had once belonged to this very man, whose name, however, I could not immediately recall. At last, I managed to retrieve it:

— “*Argyris Zomas!*” I exclaimed, rubbing my eyes.

— “*The very same,*” replied the unfortunate man, wiping his own eyes.

— “*And how did you end up here?*”

Instead of answering, he clenched his fists and murmured through his teeth:

— “*Curse politics.*”

Like all the unfortunate, he was eager to recount his sorrowful tale. But night had already fallen, the weather was turning foul, and I lived far away. I was preparing to bid him farewell, postponing the hearing of his grievances against politics to a future visit, when the long-threatening rain above our heads finally began to pour down in torrents. He then offered me shelter in the small outbuilding beside the chapel and asked me to share a little retsina<sup>1</sup> with him—to ward off the damp.

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<sup>1</sup> **Retsina** is a traditional Greek white or rosé wine that has been infused with pine resin. Legend has it that his resin was originally used in ancient times to seal wine jars and prevent oxidation, but it also imparted a distinct flavor that became a signature characteristic of the wine.

The “little” retsina was a full oka<sup>2</sup>, which the one-eyed servant of the nearby grocery, *Vanity*, soon placed upon a wobbly table, along with two glasses and a handful of black olives. Besides the unsteady table, there were also two rickety stools. The darkness was nearly tangible until my host lit a small, octagonal lantern, shaped like a censer, quite possibly stolen from an unguarded grave.

I must confess, my position was rather odd, and any acquaintance of mine would have had every right to laugh, seeing me, at such an hour, in the depths of a deserted cemetery, drinking with a gravedigger under the dim glow of a funeral lamp. But I had no inclination to laugh, for I was overwhelmed by an indescribable melancholy. This man reminded me of the most carefree days of my youth, and never before had I so deeply understood the truth of Dante’s famous verse:

*“Nessum maggior dolore  
Che ricordarsi del tempo felice Nella  
miseria.”*

*(“There is no greater sorrow than to recall happy times in misery.”)*

It is true that another renowned poet has argued precisely the opposite, declaring happy memories to be an inalienable source of consolation. But at that moment, everything conspired to make me believe that he knew not what he was saying. I was cold, I was restless, the rain continued to drum against the wooden roof, and outside, the deep darkness was intermittently broken by flashes of lightning, illuminating pools of mud, rows of crosses, and the tops of cypress trees. Yet, more mournful than the weather and the place were the words that my companion now began to recount.

— “*Do you remember,*” he asked me, “*how beautiful my wife used to be?*”

— “*Why do you say ‘used to be’? Has she passed away?*”

— “*She’s still alive, only she’s lost her looks. Back then, the men of Syros would come from afar—you among them—not so much for my fish, but for the beauty of her eyes. I never felt jealous because I knew she was*

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<sup>2</sup> The **oka** was a traditional unit of weight used in the Ottoman Empire and later in Greece, Turkey, and the Balkans before the adoption of the metric system. Weight equivalent: 1 oka ≈ 1.28 kg (or ~2.82 lbs).

virtuous, and that you were all just wasting your time. Her only flaw—and I share the blame for it—was that she had too many children. One every year, eight in a row, and twins the last time. And the more children she bore, the more her looks faded, her body weakened, and fewer people came to admire her and pay good money for our eggs, lettuces, figs, and cheese.

Another problem was that the fish started to dwindle. By then, there were as many fishermen in Syros as there were lawyers. I was also worried about my eldest daughter, who was growing up and would soon need a dowry. While I was preoccupied with these thoughts, an election was called, and an Athenian colonel, who had spent years as a government engineer in Syros, came to ask for our votes.

He set off on a tour of the villages, and one morning he appeared in my orchard with two of his friends. You remember how strong I used to be back then. My knife-handling skills and my fists were famous across the hills, and one day, just for a bet, I lifted a pregnant donkey clean off the ground.

I also had many relatives in the villages, including old Salloustrós, the great tanner, whose wife led him around by the nose. All of this could be useful. With plenty of flattery and sweet words, the candidate urged me to become his political agent and representative at the ballot box. He promised that, in return, he would do whatever I wanted—get me a good job, either here or in Athens, get my brother-in-law out of prison for smuggling, secure a scholarship for my son, and many other things I can't even remember now. It was enough to make me dream of rabbits wearing priestly stoles. So I threw myself headfirst into the 'electoral struggle', as he called it, along with my entire family.

My orchard became an election headquarters, and from morning till night, I ran about campaigning, handing out photographs, leaflets, promises—and where needed, punches. My wife played her part too, distributing slices of watermelon, sweet words, and sweeter glances. One evening, she came to me, terribly ashamed, to confess that, in order to win over a political opponent, she had let him kiss her and, falsely, promised him something more. My political fervour was so great that I forgave her, on the condition that she never did it again—though I secretly resolved to break the scoundrel's bones once the elections were over.

On the second campaign tour, the weather turned foul, and the colonel ended up staying at my house as a guest. After I had treated him well, he

*asked me about my personal affairs. I told him that my orchard barely provided an income and that the profits from fishing were eaten up by the interest on the debt for my two boats. He advised me to sell my vineyards and boats and buy some shares in the Peloponnesian Railway, which a certain Mr Goustas's agent was selling on the Athens Stock Exchange. These shares, he said, would give me a ten percent return, I'd secure my job, and I could marry off my daughter to a sergeant he himself had in mind. That's the nonsense this well-wisher filled my head with—curse the cloud that rained him down upon my humble home.*

*Anyway, the elections took place, and our man won—but just barely, with only nine votes more than the next candidate..."*

*— "The runner-up," I said.*

*— "Exactly. I can say without boasting that if it weren't for me and my people, the other man would have won instead.*

*The day I went to bid farewell to our victorious candidate, I found a crowd there—forest rangers, schoolmistresses, tanners, metalworkers, deacons, candle-lighters, street cleaners, and even the city dog-catcher. The newly elected MP was holding a ledger, noting down names and the favours they requested. When my turn came, he told me that there was nothing suitable for me in Syros and that I should go to Athens, where he could place me in a better position.*

*I would have preferred to stay in Syros, where everyone knew me, but I was dazzled by the thought of a grander position and the sergeant's stripes for my future son-in-law.*

*The next day, I began selling off my property—my land, my chickens, my goats, and my pigs. It took a whole month to find buyers because, by then, everyone wanted official documents, and no one even looked at fields anymore.*

*In the end, I managed to raise 8,000 drachmas, collected the thirty railway shares the MP had advised me to buy by the end of the month, and the next morning, I loaded my wife and seven children onto the ship—our twins had died young. Then I went back out one last time to settle an unfinished matter in Syros. I crept behind a fence near Ammos café, where, every evening, that scoundrel who had kissed my wife went to play backgammon. When I saw him approach, I leapt out like a ghost, grabbed him by the throat so he couldn't cry out, and gave him such a beating that he'll remember it for the rest of his life.*



*The next morning, we arrived in Athens. I found my family a small hotel and rushed off to see the MP. After all the love and devotion I had shown in Syros, I expected him to embrace me. But in Athens, he had become serious.*

*He told me, 'The position of a government MP is difficult due to the many demands placed upon him,' but assured me that he would try to find me a small job and that I should return in eight days. That was all—no invitation to sit, no cigarette, no 'How is your wife?' No word about my son's scholarship or my daughter's engagement to the sergeant. I wanted to stay a little longer, hoping he might remember, but he was too busy. I left with a heavy heart and returned in eight days. They told me he was in Parliament, then at the Military Club, and then somewhere else.*

*For three whole weeks, I went to his house morning and night. Only twice did I manage to speak to him, and each time, he said nothing more than 'I'm working on it, have patience.'*

*How was I supposed to be patient when I had seven mouths to feed? We were crammed into a filthy dump, damp, full of bedbugs, eating food dripping with fat, and spending ten drachmas a day. To be fair, there were nine of us, all with good appetites.*

*Another fifteen days passed, and nothing happened. My money was running out, and I owed the hotel. The worst part was opening the newspapers and seeing that all the other political agents from Syros had been appointed—one as a policeman, another as a customs officer, another as a public weighmaster. Even the scoundrel I had beaten up had landed a job as a supplier for the quarantine station. Only my turn never seemed to come.*

*One morning, the hotelkeeper explained it to me. 'Those who stayed in Syros, he still needs for their influence. But here in Athens, what harm or good can you do him? You're just a nobody in a strange city. I'm afraid he's stringing you along.'*

*When I heard this, my blood boiled, and I rushed to the MP's house, determined to confront him like a man and tell him I could wait no longer—I was out of money and patience.*

*As I walked there, I prepared my speech, climbed the stairs two at a time, and burst in—only to find the house empty, the windows open, and just a*

*barefoot soldier scrubbing the floors. It was from him that I learned: 'The colonel has been sent by Parliament to Thessaly to study hydraulic works and will be away for at least a month, if not more.'*

*A whole month! Meanwhile, I had been reduced to counting not just the days but the very hours of my family's hunger..."*

*For three whole weeks, I went to the stock exchange morning and evening to see what was happening. My heart pounded like a bell, and before I even lifted my eyes to the board, I would cross myself and vow to light a candle to all the saints if only they would grant me the sight of a better price. But it was no use. From ninety drachmas, the next day they dropped to eighty-two, then seventy, fifty, forty, twenty—until, in the end, no one wanted them at any price.*

*I won't even try to describe the nights I endured. I couldn't sleep—not only that, I couldn't even sit still in the same place for five minutes. But where was there space to walk in the hole where we were crammed on top of each other? To avoid disturbing my family's sleep—after I had already reduced their bread—I would wait until they had dozed off and then go out to let off steam in the deserted fields around our shack.*

*It was January, yet I felt neither cold, nor rain, nor fatigue, even though I spent the nights roaming the hills. Worry ate away at me—what would become of us? And my fury burned when I thought of how, for twenty years, I had woken before dawn, braving the cold and storms, to scrape together, through fishing and labour, the few thousand drachmas that those scoundrels had swindled from me in just a single month.*

*One night, my wife lay in wait for me behind the door, and when I returned at dawn, she started hurling accusations at me—accusing me of gambling, of wasting money. I had no choice but to confess everything. But later, I regretted it—because, in the end, her scoldings were better than her tears.*

*One by one, we sold off the few possessions we had left—our rugs, our pots, our best clothes, even our gold-embroidered wedding quilt. I told you before that I knew no one. After searching in vain for work, one day, I took a rope—not to hang myself—and went to stand in front of Kapnikarea Church among the Maniots. The finest lad in Syros had become a porter! With the little I earned, I managed to keep us from starving—but not from hunger.*

— “Have you ever been hungry?”

— “Many times, when I hadn’t learned my lesson, and my teacher made me go without food.”

— “Don’t joke about misery. Hunger means two mouldy loaves from the stale market to feed nine people. Half of what’s needed to fill them up, when with their bread, they eat nothing else except wild greens and sage that the children gather in the hills. Those who go to bed hungry take longer to fall asleep, and when they do, their sleep is restless. Many times, I heard them muttering in their sleep, as if they were dreaming of bigger pieces of bread.”

— “The dream of bread—you’ve taken that from Dante’s *Inferno*.”

— “I don’t know about Dante. I only know that there is no worse hell than seeing those you love suffer and being powerless to help them.”

One morning, at last, I saw in the newspaper that the colonel had returned from Thessaly, and I went straight to his house. It was ten o’clock, and I found him still in bed, relaxed and rosy-cheeked, with an embroidered cap resting on his bald head. He was sipping his coffee and playing with a cat. He seemed to struggle to recognise me—and he wasn’t entirely wrong. Hardship and sleeplessness had wasted me away like candle wax. I was half the man I had been, no longer fit even to be a porter. Misery had humbled me.

Gently and carefully, so as not to anger him, I began to tell him everything I had to say. But he paid far more attention to his cat’s antics than to my words. Then my rage boiled over. I grabbed the cat by the neck, hurled it to the other side of the room, and raised my voice. I shouted that his stocks, his lies, his job offers, scholarships, and marriage promises had left us destitute in a foreign city—that he had ruined us, destroyed me, and left us starving. And that if he didn’t do something for me, I would drive my dagger into his gut and then throw myself into the sea with a stone around my neck.

As he tried to calm me, the door opened, and in walked a middle-aged, smug-looking man with a stylishly parted hairstyle, a perfumed handkerchief, and thick lips like a Moor’s. The colonel called him over, and they whispered together before turning to me. “Go tonight at five to see the municipal councillor—he has a job for you.”

You can imagine that I didn’t miss the appointment. The municipal councillor asked if I knew anything about gardening. When I told him that this was my trade, he put me in a carriage and took me to the café Vanity across the street. There, he called over a priest and a man in a fustanella, introduced me to them, and informed me that everything was arranged—I

would earn sixty drachmas a month, perhaps with some extra perks, and should start my new duties as a gardener the next morning.

By then, night had fallen, and from where we stood, I could only see a few trees peeking over a wall. I imagined it was an orchard. It was only the next day, when I reported for duty, that I realised gardener did not mean orchard keeper, as I had assumed—it meant gravedigger.

I didn't like the work at all. You know how we Syrians prefer not to have dealings with the dead. We go the long way round rather than pass a cemetery at night. We bring in all our funeral workers—shroud makers, gravediggers—from Mykonos or Santorini, because even the most desperate Syros man would rather shovel manure than touch corpses and burial shrouds. I feared my wife would be disgusted with me. But she cared for nothing now except getting bread for our children and urged me to accept.

At first, I suffered terribly. As I dug into the black cemetery soil, full of bones and rotting wood, I couldn't help but remember the red earth of my mountain, fragrant with thyme, my pomegranate trees, my chicken coop, my pigs—all of it, all mine once. From a man of property, I had become a gravedigger. What a disgraceful change!

The first body I had to lower into the grave was that young man down there—the stonemason whose photo you were staring at—a twenty-year-old only son. His mother wept like a wounded doe. My own eyes swelled with tears, and the torchbearers and priests laughed at me. At night, I feared being alone—I dreamt of those I had buried, and the bread I ate seemed to smell of incense.

But in time, I grew used to the dead and pitied the living less.

— “So,” I said to him, “are you content now?”

— “Content?” Cried Zomas, his eyes flashing once again. Listen and learn the rest. To be closer to my wretched job and to pay less rent, we moved from our mountain hut in Ragavas, where at least the air was clean, to an alley in Vathis near the old bridge. You mock the people of Zia and Syros for sleeping alongside their pigs. But tell me, have you ever seen worse pigsties than the poor districts of Athens? Have you ever seen another place like Vathis? In summer, the dust rises in clouds; in winter, pools of stagnant water turn to knee-deep mud at the slightest rainfall, and in every street, there's an open or fenced-off pit serving as the entire neighbourhood's latrine! But where else can people go? The health

*officials, architects, policemen, mayors, and governors all consider necessities to be luxuries.*

*Opposite me, there's a butcher who slaughters animals—small and large, goats, sheep, and calves—right in the middle of the road. Two rivers are always flowing: one red with blood, the other green with manure and bile. The neighbours complain, but what can the police do when the butcher's wall is decorated with hanging daggers, yataghans, knives, swords, and pistols? A perfect arsenal, and in the middle, a portrait of the Prime Minister, crowned with laurels, as if to declare that his friend has official permission to bring us pestilence. And if anyone dares to complain, he can butcher them too, just like the sheep and the calves, so that others learn to stay silent. Further along, there's a warehouse full of half-scraped animal hides, forcing anyone without a cold to clamp their nose shut.*

*Another plague is the grocer, and an even worse swine is the greengrocer. And it's not just one or two of them—there are twenty, fifty, a hundred, all with protection. So much so that one summer, when the water supply was low or contaminated, a typhoid epidemic swept through, and children began dying like flies. I buried four of my own, one after the other, in that corner near Gennadios' grave—the same place where you admired the white carnation bush.*

— *There, I said to him, I counted four little crosses standing side by side.*  
— *Have a little patience. We had not yet finished mourning our four children when, returning home from work one afternoon, I saw from afar a large crowd gathered in front of our house—men, women, and officials in red uniforms. I began to tremble, then started running. As I approached, the first thing I saw was my wife, collapsed on the ground between two neighbours who were rubbing her with vinegar to revive her. Beside her lay another motionless, bloodied heap. That heap was my son, Giannis—the one who used to tell me that the MP would secure him a scholarship. His mother had sent him to the market, and he had been crushed by a carriage racing through the narrow, crowded street like a hunted hare.*

*Giannis died two hours later. Everyone mourned him, cursing the carriages and the police. The coroner told us he had done the calculations and, in proportion to the population, more people were killed by carriage drivers in Athens than by tigers in India. But why wouldn't the carriage driver do as he pleased? He had protection, just like the butcher and the greengrocer, who had the right to make us ill with their rotting goods and their stench. As I laid my fifth child to rest beside its siblings, I bitterly reflected that in Vathis Cemetery, I would not even have the small consolation of digging*

*the grave of a minister, an MP, a governor, a municipal councillor, or any other protector of murderers, because all of them were buried in the grand cemetery.*

*The following year passed more quietly. The only thing I noticed was my wife sighing as she cut larger pieces of bread for our remaining children. The poor woman was thinking that the extra portion had once belonged to the deceased. Our daughter had grown up and reached the beauty of her mother in the days when she used to drive you mad in Syros. Only, you might have liked the daughter less, for she was reserved and modest, like a saint's image. We had placed her in a women's hat factory, where she earned twenty drachmas a month, and our only remaining son, Petros, who had become a typesetter, made a little more. With these earnings and my gravedigger's wage, we managed to survive. I also made sure to fill my pockets with rusks at every funeral.*

*Then the army draft came, and they took Petros to prepare for war in Thessaly. While we wept, he was full of enthusiasm, dreaming only of glory, ranks, killing pashas, and harems filled with diamonds.*

*I had not seen the colonel for some time and had tried to forget him when one morning he sent word for me to come to his house for an important matter. The scoundrel once again wore the sugary smile and spoke the sweet words of Syros. He complained that I had forgotten him while he had never stopped caring for me. He assured me he was still looking for a better position for me and had finally found the groom he had promised. What this really meant was that the old mayor of Syros had died, and he wanted me to write to my father-in-law and other relatives to support his chosen candidate in the upcoming election.*

*I no longer believed a word of his promises, and after the harm he had done me, I had more desire to strangle him than to serve him. But he had the power to take away my job, so I promised to prepare the letters immediately. That afternoon, he sent a non-commissioned officer to collect them. That was the groom—strong, well-dressed, and pleasing to both me and my wife, especially when he told us he had inherited a bakery in Rodakio from his late mother.*

*But for some reason, our daughter did not like him at all. When we asked her why, she replied that his face did not seem trustworthy and that he had one green eye and one purple. That made me angry. I told her firmly that a girl whose parents could not even feed her properly had no right to be*

*picky over the colour of a man's eyes. She lowered her own and began to weep, telling us she would do as we wished.*

*Our greatest concern, however, was Petros. At first, he wrote regularly, but now a whole month had passed without any news. We wrote to him, but he did not reply. We searched for information everywhere, but no one seemed to know or want to tell us anything. My daughter plucked petals from daisies for answers, and my wife turned to fortune-telling, asking the cards where he was and what he was doing.*

*Finally, one day, a sergeant returning from the army camp came to bring my wife the amulet she had tied around Petros's neck when he left for the front and to tell her that she no longer had a son. He himself had closed Petros's eyes after he had suffered for three weeks in hospital. The messenger had also suffered from fever and was still yellow as sulphur, but he turned red with anger as he told us of the hardships he and his comrades had endured in Thessaly. And the greatest suffering of all was knowing that they would not fight any enemy other than the cold, hunger, and dysentery.*

*Of the seven children I had brought to Athens, only one daughter remained, and even she was not happy. She tried, for our sake, to be kind to her fiancé but could not hide her sadness. One morning, he took me aside to ask what dowry I was planning to give him. That cursed MP, to keep him attached to us until the Syros municipal elections were over, had led him to believe we still had something left.*

*I told him plainly that, following the colonel's wise advice, we had been left with nothing but the clothes on our backs, and that all I could offer him was my daughter and my blessing. He made no comment and continued visiting us as before. However, I noticed that from that day on, his behaviour towards the girl changed. He began treating her like a sultan—paying no heed to his words, grabbing her by the waist, and chasing her around to kiss her.*

*We did not like this behaviour at all. But we thought of our own poverty—and of his bakery.*

*One night, when he went too far and tried to force her onto his lap, she managed to escape his grip and ran to lock herself in the other room. He stormed off in anger without even bidding us goodnight. However, he returned the next day and the following ones, and his behaviour became more civilised. I took this as a sign that he loved her and had regretted his brutish ways. But for her, her aversion had turned into sheer terror.*

*She kept insisting that his two eyes were not the same colour, and she would turn pale just hearing his footsteps.*

*A few days later, we were expecting her home one evening from the factory so we could have supper together. But time passed, and she did not appear. At first, we assumed they had kept her late at the hat factory due to urgent work, as had happened before. Then, we started to worry—could she have run away to escape the sergeant? But that wasn't in her nature; she loved us and was willing to do as we wished.*

*Half an hour later, I went to the factory to look for her. They told me she had left at the usual time, at seven. I returned home, hoping to find her there. She was nowhere to be seen, nor was the sergeant. I went to the barracks to look for him—no one knew where he was. I went to the MP's house—he had not seen him for two days and even remarked that the sergeant had no reason to abduct the girl, as I was willing to give her to him willingly.*

*Then, I woke up two neighbours, and we lit lanterns to search in case she had fallen into one of the pits or dry wells in Vathis, which swallowed people every dark night. We checked them all—nothing. I rushed to the police station to ask about those whom the coachmen had run over that morning. That day, they had not hit anyone—only a cow had been struck by the railway. The police chief took pity on me and assured me he would investigate thoroughly and quickly find out what had happened to my daughter.*

*Four more days passed, and nothing had been discovered. I returned to the MP's house, only to hear, once again, that he knew nothing and had not seen Meintanos. But this time, he seemed troubled—he avoided my gaze and was eager to get rid of me.*

*The next day, my daughter was found.*

*Do you know what had happened?*

*— How could I?*

*— Meintanos, along with two other scoundrels, followed her as she left the factory and walked towards the Vathis Bridge. There, they grabbed her, covered her mouth, threw her into a carriage, took her to a filthy brothel run by some Madame Vasiliki, violated her, tortured her all night, and left*



*her there, unconscious and half-dead. Meintanos was hidden for three days in the MP's basement before he was helped to escape.*

*— These things, I told him, happen every day. You can read about them for five minutes in any newspaper.*

*— With one difference, he snapped, this happened to my daughter, and to me, it is not the same.*

*They had taken her near the Vathis police station. I ran to lift her into my arms and bring her to her mother.*

*All night, we wept, kneeling beside her bed, kissing her hands and feet. But she would not respond, nor even turn to look at us.*

*We feared she was angry with us.*

*Then two doctors arrived and told us she had gone mad.*

*With them came the police officer. After the doctors left, he told me that Meintanos was a scoundrel with a history of rape and murder accusations. But he was protected by the MP of Syros, who had saved him twice before, and it would be foolish to go up against a colonel and a government MP—especially now that the government was faltering and needed him. No matter what I did, no matter how much I shouted, I would achieve nothing. But if I stayed silent, something might be done for me—perhaps my daughter could be admitted to the asylum free of charge.*

*I said nothing, for I had already made my decision.*

*I wrote to my father-in-law, asking him, poor as he was, to take care of his daughter and granddaughter. I kissed my two unfortunate women, made the sign of the cross, strapped my dagger to my belt, and at ten o'clock, I took the road to the MP's house, determined to kill him and let fate decide the rest.*

*I found his door open and his parlour full of people. Among them was one of the doctors who had visited me that morning, as well as a priest with his deacon, carrying the sacraments and a stole. No one noticed when I entered.*

*I hid behind the curtain of the window and from there I heard that after breakfast, the colonel had suffered a stroke, had been left half-paralysed,*

*and was in danger. They were now debating whether to bring the priest immediately or wait to see if he improved or worsened.*

*After a while, another doctor emerged from the bedroom and said they should let the patient rest.*

*Little by little, the visitors left until only the doctor, the priest, and two household friends remained. At midnight, they too retired upstairs to rest, leaving instructions with the soldier on duty to remain in the parlour and call them if anything happened.*

*But the soldier only cared about spending the night comfortably.*

*He placed a candle on a chair near the divan, lay down with his boots on, picked up a newspaper, and within five minutes, he was snoring.*

*Now it was my turn—though not to sleep.*

*I emerged from my hiding place, drew my dagger, entered the adjoining room, and locked the door behind me.*

*It was the same room where, three years earlier, he had received me while playing with his cat—except that instead of an embroidered cap, he now had an ice pack on his head, and instead of slippers, mustard plasters on his feet.*

*Despite his wretched state, his mind was still intact. He recognised me instantly. And when I raised my dagger above him, crying, “Murderer of my children!” the fear in his face turned him green.*

*He was mute and paralysed—he could neither plead nor kneel. But what his knees and tongue could not do, his eyes did instead.*

*His gaze begged for mercy.*

*His eyes kissed my hands, licked my feet.*

*I did not have the heart to strike the sick, pitiful wretch.*

*But it would have been unjust for my children to go unavenged.*

*I sheathed my dagger and spat in the colonel’s face.*

*And instead of anger at the insult, he looked at me as if to say thank you for sparing his life.*

*— And how did the story end?*

*— The colonel survived and left for the baths. My daughter suffered for a few more months, and then I laid her to rest alongside the other five.*

*Do I not have the right to say, curse politics?*

*— But it is your own fault too, I told him, for getting involved in it. You and all the others who gather votes and believe in what you are told.*

*My argument did not silence him—it made him rise, thunderous and fearsome. His eyes blazed, and he gripped my hands so tightly that it hurt.*

*— Don't say that, he told me, for it does you no honour. The excuse of "It's your fault for believing me" is fit for the swindlers of the stock exchange. The more easily we trust, and the quicker we forget, the greater the guilt of those who deceive us. The simpler, kinder, and more innocent the people, the more they should be pitied and protected, not seen as fools to be skinned to the bone, condemned to filth, disease, and disgrace—treated like those heartless carters who overload their horses and beat them senseless just because they don't bite or kick.*

*If you have a heart in your chest and not a stone, don't blame the people—shout with me: "Curse the deceivers of the people!"*

*I could not grant the poor gravedigger this request, for my voice is weak, and I dislike shouting.*

*If I understood him correctly, what he longed for—comparing our politicians to cruel carters—was that just as societies exist elsewhere for the protection of defenceless creatures—horses, cats, pigeons, and other winged or four-legged beings—so too should there be, in Greece, an association for the protection of voters.*

*THE END*

## PICKS

☞ “Just beyond the gate, the visitor is met with a black noticeboard bearing the inscription: *“Dogs are forbidden to enter, as well as to pick flowers.”*

☞ “No heavy slabs press upon the chests of the dead. Most graves resemble small gardens, planted with red geraniums, red bougainvillea, and red hollyhocks.”.

“There is no greater sorrow than to recall happy times in misery.” (*Dante reference*)

“Whoever sheds a tear upon this dark soil, shall water a lemon branch adorned with blossoms, and a gentle angelic soul, hidden within the earth.”

“Have you ever been hungry?”

“In proportion to the population, more people were killed by carriage drivers in

*“I sheathed my dagger and spat in the colonel’s face. And instead of anger at the insult, he looked at me as if to say thank you for sparing his life.”*

### Comparable Works:

- *Les Misérables* (Victor Hugo) – for its exploration of poverty and injustice.
- *Of Mice and Men* (John Steinbeck) – for its tragic inevitability and focus on society's outcasts.
- *Dostoevsky's short stories* – for its mix of grotesque realism and existential despair.