



Maw

By

Matt Cantor

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes... Matt Cantor has created a conceptually beautiful little story with, “Maw,” and I cannot emphasize enough how clever this story is.*

Our narrator is definitely a long-winded talker, singularly connected to (and here is the fun part) an ancient Greek geologist, Theuciddus – one of the first geologists and obsessed about the hunger of the earth.

I don't know if Theuciddus is real or if the translation actually exists (as our narrator tells us at the beginning, and as I actively did while reading, cursory searches on Google will pretty much give up nothing but idiotic Bo Burnham references or autocorrect to "succubus" fictions) or even if the Greek actually used within the story is correct (Google translate couldn't help me there either).

I also don't care about any of that. I'll gladly accept that this Greek writer didn't exist – I've had to read plenty of Classical Greek and by and large I'd probably rather skip some of the more tedious parts of learning rhetoric.

Cantor has given us a character acting as a fulcrum for the beautiful metaphor he embeds from start to finish. Theuciddus doesn't need to be real, the speaker doesn't have to really have any useful experience at translation (a character flaw he readily admits to), The Hunger of the Dirt doesn't actually need to exist in reality because the hunger of the earth certainly does.

"Maw," from title to last line, works as a lovely metaphor for the world swallowing us. I found this to be a beautiful, witty, and oftentimes humorous concept that I think Cantor hits home quite well. We're born of the dirt and we go back to the dirt, and if Theuciddus had known of the concept of gravity I'm sure he would have an even stronger argument by which to explain the hunger, the pull, of the world upon all of us. He was just one of the first ones to see it in the right way.

I will gladly tell you to read this story.

Five Stars.

QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language...)

"I used to care a great deal about where I will one day be buried, after my death. I thought at length about the place, which place it should be, and how it should be marked, where my bones will come to rest-- but I know now that my bones will come to rest nowhere. My bones will never rest..."

MAW

"Everything is sinking. All of it, everything, all of the time, always."

Not many people have heard of the Greek philosopher Theuciddus. You might not even find anything if you Google him-- barely any of his writings have survived-- only two of his writings in fact. Or actually, one of his writings; the other thing is a map.

The only reason I know about Theuciddus is because I took Geology in college, and my professor mentioned him. "Theuciddus was one of the first geologists," he said-- and that was

probably the only reason he knew about Theuciddus, either. There are a lot of things that geologists only know about because they're geologists, and there are a lot of things too that only geologists know about, things like Theuciddus and the tastes of different rocks.

Theuciddus was born probably, *probably*, sometime around 600 BCE. We don't know anything about his parents or his siblings, if he had siblings. We don't think he had any children, ever, but we don't know that for sure either. We think he was born near Athens, just off the banks of the river Kifissos. It's hard to say. We only have his one writing and a map, and no one else ever wrote about him.

"Everything is sinking. All of it, everything, all of the time, always."-- that's how it starts, *The Hunger of the Dirt* by Theuciddus of Maybe-Athens-- the title, of course, is a translation, and so are the opening lines. I translated it myself, actually, after two semesters of Ancient Greek, and as far as I know, it's the first and only translation of Theuciddus into English; the only other translation into any language at all is German, and I can't say if they did right by him or not. I can't really say if I did right by him either, two semesters is just two semesters, and I was just doing the translation as a final project for the class-- I got an okay grade on it, I guess, but the professor was giving out okay grades to everyone, she was just one of those professors. I turned it in as my final Geology project, too, and I got a "C" on it for that, but he was an opposite sort of professor to my Greek professor-- he was more the sort of professor who spent the whole semester taking away as many points as possible from everything turned in by everyone, as though he was keeping the points for himself to redeem for some secret prize at the end of the year.

"It can be seen easily that a heavy man walking through the mud will sink with every step," writes Theuciddus, *"and if he pauses, he will sink and sink, right where he stands, and*

after some time he will have to give great effort to pull himself out again, and carry on. Everyone has seen this."

Did you know that the Ancient Greeks had dinosaur bones? They often found them while mining quarries for stones, or while digging out foundations for their larger buildings. I think about that a lot, too, what that must have been like, because they had dinosaur bones like we have dinosaur bones, but they didn't know what we know about them. They must have been terrifying. They must have been stupifying. *The Hunger of the Dirt* touches upon this too, but in an odd sort of way; *"These creatures, whatever they were, surely they walked up on the surface of the Earth in the past. They gazed at the sky. They drank from the rivers of Athens, Kifissos, Ilissos, Eridanos. With such teeth and eyes and ribcages for great lungs, they could not have lived their lives below the dirt, deep, deep, away from the sun and the air and the water. So how is it that they have gotten down there?"*-- and that's what I really love about Theuciddus, you see?-- in the face of unexplainable dinosaurs, he doesn't care so much about what terrible monsters they must have been, does he?-- no, no, all he wants to know is how they got down into the dirt. *"They are the heavy man standing in the mud,"* he writes. What a thing to write.

We took a class trip to Athens at the end of our second semester of Ancient Greek. We saw the ruins and the columns, we listened to the modern people speaking and we tried to compare it to how the language used to be. We went on tours and ate food, we walked on the beach, we bathed in the sunshine. One of those trips. I didn't go to the beach, though, I spent that day off on my own. I was an adult, no one from the school was going to stop me. I went walking past the outskirts of the city of Athens, I went looking for the place where Theuciddus was born. I knew I wasn't going to find it. He knew I wasn't going to find it.

“Why should a house be any different from a man? Why should even the steadiest dirt be any different from the mud? If such great creatures can sink below, what cannot?”

He wanted to prove it, too. He writes about an experiment he did, he describes it in great detail. My Geology professor made a mark on my translation, the only positive thing he wrote about the project, and he said “The first Geology experiment? Pretty cool!”-- and it was, maybe. I don’t know. What Theuciddus did was he went out into a field, and he lay down, staring up at the sky, and he paid a boy in gold coins to come out every day to the field and put bread into his mouth and pour water, and to clean away his urine and excrement, and he just lay there, day after day, week after week, month after month, for an entire year, he just lay there. He didn’t sit up, he didn’t stand up, he didn’t roll over onto one side or the other. He was dedicated beyond all reason. And finally, finally, after an entire year had passed, finally, he rose up from the ground, and turned, and he looked down at where he had been laying, his arms and legs shook, shivered from disuse, he teetered, struggling to remember his balance, but he was smiling, he must have been, because there it was, right in front of him. His very own truth.

“The dirt was hungry for me,” writes Theuciddus. *“The grass below me had withered in the shape of my arms and my legs, my body and my head, but that was not the only shape of me I had left. All around where I had been laying, the Earth was sunk in, not a hair, not an inch, but more than that-- nearly the length of my thumb, the Earth was sunk in. If I had stayed there another year, it would have been the length of my hand. If I had stayed there ten years, the tip of my nose would have been below the bottoms of the grass. The dirt was hungry for me. If I had stayed there twenty years, I would have been eaten entirely. Everything is sinking. We are all men in the mud, and if we stop moving, we will be swallowed away.”*

Why should his house have been any different?

Why should anyone's house be any different?

I wonder what Theuciddus would have thought of the rising seas. Venice vanishing-- all the coastlines vanishing. Whole islands of people dipping a centimeter at a time below the waves. "Perhaps the Earth has lost its patience," he would have written-- or perhaps I just want to think he would have written that. "Perhaps it has starved for too long."

The funny thing about dirt is that it actually follows a lot of the same physical laws as water. Dirt is subject to buoyancy, for instance, that's how the sinking works; if you take a hunk of lead and you drop it on some dirt, and you wait and you watch as the hundreds and hundreds of years go by, it'll sink and it'll sink until it gets low enough that the density of the dirt around it is the same as the density of the lead, and then it'll stop. It'll just sit there. Forever. Until someone digs it up. Bones, too, bones will sink and sink until they match their own density-- it's a slow thing, sure, and for the most part when we find bones, they're still probably pretty close to the age of the dirt around them. But they're moving until we dig them up. They're always *moving*, down there, churning with the chyme of the Earth.

There are bones down there that are denser than uranium. There are bones from creatures we cannot begin to imagine, sinking, sinking, all the way down to the core of the Earth, sunk so low already that we will never find them, we will never know them, but they're there. They were *here*, once.

There are bones that are hollow, like raptor-bones or early birds, and they are not sinking, but they are rising towards us, bit by bit, rising through the dirt and stone poured atop them by landslides or volcanic eruptions-- there are bones being regurgitated. Soon, we will meet them.

Theuciddus was one of the first geologists, but he was also a paleontologist, technically. That's what his map is all about, a map of discoveries of ancient creatures-- places throughout

Athens and the area around it where skeletons had been dug up during construction-projects or mining, or farming, even. He has all the rivers and streams labeled, and the roads of the city, and the footpaths out to each dig-site-- and every dig-site has drawings beside it of the various things found there, notes about the soil, and so on. Theuciddus makes notes of how deep below the Earth the creatures were discovered. He makes guesses about how long it took them to sink so low. He writes a little bit, too, the odd sentence here and there, about the people who made the discoveries. This writing seems bored, half-minded. Theuciddus couldn't care less about these people. "*The man here grows barley,*" he writes about the fields where what was probably an ancient ancestor of the horse was discovered-- at least going by the drawing.

There's this one spot, though. It's different. Everywhere else, all the other spots, he writes about how the bones were found-- "*Spotted while digging a basement*"-- "*Caught in a plow*"-- "*In a block from the quarry*"-- very specific, or at least specific enough, right? Gives some context.

But there's this one spot, though.

That's why I'll never stop thinking about Theuciddus, probably, that one spot. I've been there, during the trip to Athens, I made sure of it-- that was one of the two things I absolutely had to do, go looking vainly for Theuciddus's house, and go looking for this spot because of how he explained it on the map.

It's roughly an eighth of a mile East of the river Eridanos, roughly a mile and a half before it meets the river Ilissos, that's how it's marked on the map. But there are no such rivers. There are no rivers in Athens.

There used to be.

The rivers are men in the mud. They're down there, under concrete. They're buried. They're sinking-- sinking and sinking-- every year, the tax dollars repave the roads, a centimeter at a time, the rivers are sinking away, but they're *there*, they're still flowing, like blood, like bile--

- Theuciddus writes near the end of *The Hunger of the Dirt* about how "*I used to care a great deal about where I will one day be buried, after my death. I thought at length about the place, which place it should be, and how it should be marked, where my bones will come to rest-- but I know now that my bones will come to rest nowhere. My bones will never rest. Where I am buried is not where I will stay. I will sink. I will be carried by the deep tides of the Earth. I will be stirred and mixed, I will drift, and perhaps one day I will be spat up again into the light, or perhaps I will be caught in one of the rivers of Athens, the Kifissos, the Ilissos, the Eridanos, and I will be carried away to the sea.*"-- and maybe he was right, maybe that's exactly what happened, maybe he chose to be buried nowhere special at all and he sank away, and maybe he was caught in the water of a river under concrete and carried through the deep dark out to the sea, and maybe the sea will rise up like the hungry dirt and it will swallow Venice and Hawaii and Japan and the Philippines and London and Boston, where I was born, and maybe fifteen years from now the drowned-and-drowned skull and ribs and spine of Theuciddus will wash in through the forgotten, hurricane-smashed window of the exact room in Beth Israel Hospital where I first started to breathe-- and maybe my skull and my ribs and my spine will be there, too. Fifteen years is a long time from now. Anything can happen. Fifteen years, and the tip of your nose will be deep below the bottoms of the grass.

So will the spot I can't stop thinking about.

It's already down there, really. The spot, just like everything else. It used to be roughly an eighth of a mile to the East of a mile and a half upstream from where the river Eridanos used to

meet the river Ilissos. It's a bit of dirt behind a grocery store. An empty lot down an alley. The sun shines brightly there in the afternoon. There are some weeds growing, but not much-- it's mostly just the naked soil, at least for now. It looks like they've started and stopped building something there a few times, that dirt has been tamped down pretty well. There are long straight lines traced out for a foundation, or maybe a basement. Maybe they were going to mine stone here, or do some farming. But this is it, this is the spot that's different. What Theuciddus wrote about this spot right where I was standing is completely different from what he wrote about all the other spots on his map.

ὄστέᾱ εὐρίσκεισθε δεῦρο

He gives no context, he doesn't tell us what this spot was, he just calls it "here". He writes in the present-tense, not the past, not "were found" but "are found". He refers in the general, not the specific "Bones", not "The bones", and nevermind what type of bones they were. There's no drawing for this spot.

"ὄστέᾱ εὐρίσκεισθε δεῦρο"-- just like that, right next to the marker-- and even the marker is different from all the other markers on the map-- all the other markers are "X"s, pirate-treasure-map-style, but this one is a circle, a circle drawn around this someday-empty-lot down an alley behind a grocery-store, where the sun shines brightly in the afternoon.

I picked up a stick, and I scratched out the letters in the dirt at my feet.

ὄστέᾱ εὐρίσκεισθε δεῦρο

"Bones are found here"

Maybe the circle is a drawing of the world. The Greeks knew it was round, after all-- even though they never quite figured out what the dinosaurs were.

Maybe it's a mouth.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *“Maw” is something of a funny animal, drafted as a tongue-in-cheek response to an argument I had a year or so ago with a non-fiction professor about the difference between truth and facts. The best description for this piece is “Fake Non-Fiction”, borrowing from the styles of thinkpieces and term-papers before decohering into the looser prose of personal essays, and then further into the free writing of raw fiction. It never fails; every workshop I’ve ever done with this piece, someone has raised their hand to complain that they Googled “Theuciddus” and couldn’t find anything. They ask if he was real. I ask them if the uranium bones were any sort of tip-off. That being said, there are fewer lies in this piece than you might think; climate change and overurbanization nip always at our heels; existence is sinking.*

AUTHOR BIO: Matt Cantor is a surrealist from Boston, Massachusetts. He has been lucky to work in the past with extraordinary filmmakers, musicians and artists, and he’d be nowhere at all, of course, without his partner and his dog. It all comes from them, and he hopes someday it comes back to them. His work traffics in the strange, or even the absurd, as well as the bittersweet, all of which also describe his cooking.