

SAILING TO MYTILENE

Diane Furtney

*To a young woman at a bus stop in San Francisco
and for anyone young and lonely*

It's not as if I don't remember
that concentration, the fever

of waiting, alert for a sign
that the world (with all its confines

of structures and premises, any of which,
it seems, could be changed or switched),

that the world actually
might have moments of less difficulty,

less unease. There's a tautness
in you, a fine almost-overwroughtness,

listening to everything...
Your eyelashes are another small, stringed

instrument. You are a bright conclusion,
what the world in any of its persuasions

calls beautiful. And the waves
of traffic past this broken-paved,

crowded, bus-stop corner
are racketing with a purpose to more

than—what, a thousand destinations
per hour?—Mytilene, only one

among them. We stand apart.
I won't see you again, we aren't

likely to speak. And maybe
because your hopes are so solitary,

so much at risk for self-despair,
I have a wish for you. I'm sure

no one's pronounced it, ever,
on your behalf, and it's one I'd offer

as unpresumptively as possible, just for
your inner ear. It's a wish for

luck, of course, but only of a certain
kind, not the poses and protestations

you're all too likely to find
the sea of the real world delivering, end-over-end

into your life. Those wastes: the pouts
and sullenness of "love" that then turns out

to lack empathy and deep world-interest
while keeping a fierce agenda about its past;

also the drunk or clenched or over-layered,
the sexual wanderers

and the sexual frantics. Or the blur,
awful, after small but elongated failures

of sincerity, when feelings have been
explained too little or too much. Or the line,

fraying, with which you'd anchored
—feeling incandescent, delivered—

in someone who then becomes
half-hearted, unconvinced. Or some

other—Well, but what do you really
want, I wonder?, vagrantly

young, whom I imagine I know about.
You look inward, then out

and down the street, you both notice me
and don't, a fact my vanity

registers as good and bad.
And as one who'd be glad

of a brace against vanity's maraudings,
what I wish for you is something

altogether else: the lover who is not
your heart's desire, not

your type, you think, who instead
is almost uninterestingly good

for you—something like, say, piscine
vegetables. Someone, I mean,

with whom the imagination,
always a slave at the oars, awash again

with self-dislike and rancors,
can find enough scope for

the daily, large and tiny
efforts at restraint and loyalty.

I know if you're extra-fortunate,
that lover's traits will duplicate

those of my own love—who's clumsy at
times, aggravating, not

invariably endearing, a strange thing,
and whose gestures are like something

that skims and elegantly bends
above the long depths of her mind.

Once, in closeness,
she asked aloud—she is that generous—

"How much would I give to be
here?," and has described my body

as "those serious and glamorous depths."
Braver than I, deft,

she's another knowledgeable reptile,
able to interfere with certain of my perils,

with one or two of my undoings.
So my wish is not for vanity's dreaming

imagery, a best-that-turns-into-the-worst,
but the awkward, reversed,

and harder dream, the one so desperately
at odds with your fantasies;

may it arrive, as it usually does,
like a simple packet boat you somehow recognize.

Possibly lost, desirable: that I won't know
what becomes of you, that you won't know

that we have met—well,
there's a decorousness to that, I suppose, a still

surface I would not disturb,
just ripple lightly on this momentary curb

with a story, something permanent you make me
think of, from Thucydides.

The Athenians, fifth century BC,
exultant after a long-embattled victory

over one of their most stubborn
and unruly colonies in the Aegean,

sent off a full-gear'd warship—late
in the day this was, after detailed debate—

back to the defeated island
to carry out their sentence and command:

that every citizen of its capital,
Mytilene, be put to death. But full

of misgivings through the night,
next morning they reopened their debate,

argued until afternoon, re-voted, and dispatched
a second ship to try to catch

the first before it put to shore,
to rescind their execution order.

Under this sky like the blue of waves,
for you as well, may you have

swift winds: the trireme
of self-hatred, sleek and trimmed

and low in the gorgeous water,
may it be overtaken by the faster

ship of mercy. Or, leaping from the anchor
like the Greeks, race from the harbor

to the assembly in the square
—where swords already glint, lifted in the air—

in time to save the old, decayed,
impoverished, noble city. And may

you find, still breathing
under the conquered walls, something worth saving.

Note: See Book III, Sections 3.35–49, “The Peloponnesian War,” in *The Landmark Thucydides*, Robert B. Strassler, ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1996).