

SET IN STONE

(E Hondroudakis)

For my grandchildren

Two cold feet stood there with no body and nobody, unable to go anywhere.....nowhere. The memory of a life, but without the body, how could these feet have thought?.....for feet cannot think and yet they had memory. A voice, and yet there are only the feet. They have no mouth so they cannot speak. And still the voice speaks to them. Greater things abound and still the feet deny the voice for they have no ears. They stand on a plinth, which supports them, and yet they are not free to walk even for the fact that they have no body, but simply for the weight that keeps them bound to the earth, in the one place. The world passes them by. They know this and yet have no eyes. And the wonder of life fills them. The old woman, up the road that lives so simply, cooks quail in the late afternoon. Herbs and spices help the fragrance of the cooking lift into the air and oh... how sweet the smell is.... For it is all life.

"But stop, we have no nose" the right addressed the left.

"We are not smelling. We are only feet, just cold, immobile marble." L

"And why be feet that can't travel?" R "Better still, how is it that I can hear you and you can hear me... my thoughts?"

"Are you part of me?" L

"We've always been together as far as I can remember." R

"I thought that too." L

"Do you know what we're saying? We have memory.... why? We've been nowhere....done nothing and yet we experience, why?" R

"Yes, for as long as I can remember." L

"And how long is that?" R

"I can't say. We must have been made that way." L

"Why doesn't the block say anything? Have you ever heard it?" R

"No... well, I can't recall." L

There was a pause, then simultaneously they agreed.

"No, it never said a word." L&R

"But it is part of us." L

"We're stuck to it." R "True?"

"True!" L

The heel of the right foot began to feel warm.

"Feel that?" R

"What?" L

Gradually, like a velvet tide, the left foot felt something coming over it.

"I'm getting warm." L

"I told you." R

Sun began to flood the site under the old olive tree where the feet stood. As it moved across the sky in the late afternoon it immersed everything under the tree in a velvety blanket of gold.

"How do we know its quail?" R

"What else smells like that?" L

"Well this is one to consider! Why do I feel hungry?...Do you?" R

"We're two feet and we know about hunger?" L

"You're right, but its more like the joy of food." R

"Go back...you said two feet." L butted in

"So?" R quite matter-of -fact

"So...we do mathematics?" L

A warm breeze sprang up. With it came the unmistakable scent of lavender. It mixed softly with the bitter aroma of the black, ripe olives that had fallen around them on the tufts of grass and white stones that were framed by small blue flowers that grew in clumps. Summer was a good time. Even the nights were pleasant. Occasionally the sky would fill, as if it there were no room for the stars, with the most enormous moon. And things that jumped and scuttled would seem to go about preordained tasks.

Life was good and the feet knew this, yet all through the night they exchanged thoughts. Thoughts on what the old lady's house would look like, what did lavender smell like? That is, if it was actually lavender at all.

All the questions that came in an endless stream, and for every one, they had an answer. And they knew. Knew that they were right

Except..., and this left them with a blank, as blank as the sky when it was grey and featureless..., what were they doing here?

How did they come to this place?

"Ocean!" yelled the left foot. Another random thought hit

"Yes, yes, yes" said the right in a tone that befitted someone who knew everything. "Of course I know ocean."

"So, where is it?" asked the left.

The right paused. A flood of thoughts sped through it.

"You get my point...don't you? Said the left. "There isn't any here!"

By the time the morning came the feet were still going at it, relentless in the stadium of question and answer.

"We see another day and yet I'm not tired." L

"All that discourse with not a thought for rest, let alone needing it and I'm not tired...more like fulfilled," they said in unison.

Then came a sudden quiet. What was this? Something had picked them up and hurled them, but they were not moving.

It was more than a strange feeling, like the one that happens when you know someone is standing behind you even though you can't see them. Or when you know what someone will do before they actually do it.

What was this?

Left foot and right foot knew. They were one and yet not joined, except by the block.

To look at them, it was obvious they started as a large white block of marble sitting among the grasses and small blue flowers.

The block was equal on all sides as it rose from there to the top, sort of like a table where it was flat. Out of this, like two individual frozen white clouds, the feet stood..., or were they sitting?

They were fine looking feet, a creation to marvel at. But they went no further than just past the ankle with one only slightly higher than the other.

What left thought, right thought and what right knew, left knew.

"Do you think there's more to us?" L

"I have to agree!" R "The old woman who passes here...!"

Like a shaft of the brightest sun, it hit both of them.

"Her feet are joined!" L&R

"There must have been more to us!" R

"So, we're not just feet." L "But what if this is how we were finished...incomplete, a job not done."

"Nah! Can't be," they said in unison.

As if to snatch them from within a trance, the sound of stones and thumping grew louder and louder, then it stopped.

"That's a horse," they thought.

The horse began eating grass less than the height of the block from them.

"It's... it's a man!" Their thoughts seemed to pool, then flow together.

A man dismounted took a bladder from the things he had on the horse's back and put it to his lips. He drank. Water ran down his chin and darkened the cloth that wrapped this body. Wet and cool, and it shone in the sun as it created a trail from his lip, under his chin and down his neck.

The feet were spellbound.

Squelch. He put it on the edge of the block, covering the two smallest toes on the left foot.

The man then moved one foot in an arc in front of him flattening the long grass. Then he dropped to his knees and rolled over to lie on his back. The feet watched not even wanting to think.

The time wore on, maybe hours, and the horse stood just chomping on the sweet young grass, every now and then making a most unusual sound and quivering its knees when flies danced through its black, thick hair.

The man stirred, then slowly sat up. He ran his fingers in a sort of brushy, comby fashion, through his curly light brown hair and picked out grass seeds and something else the feet couldn't quite recognise.

He stood up and stretched, then in an unhurried manner went to the block. From a large pouch on his waist he took out two figs. They were the brightest green at the stems and on the other end, like the colour of the flowers that grew closer to the path, but richer.

As the man bit into them, the feet watched. Figs, they thought, we remember figs.

He took the bladder and drank once more.

Droplets of water ran down the two toes where the bladder was resting.

Now the feet were stunned.

Sound, not like any other sound, and yet not just sound, was released from the man's mouth.

He spoke! He spoke to the horse. And the feet knew this sound. It was words. Words like they had exchanged all the previous day and through the night that was big with discovery.

"Come my friend, we'll find you some cool water too!" said the man to the horse.

Gathering up the bladder, he put himself again on the horse's back and moved off along the path.

"Well that was an experience." L

"I loved it" said R and did a double take. "What's that over there?"

"I see it, I see it!" L.

Over where the man had laid, they could see white, like rocks, but certainly different from all the other rocks which lay here and there. The shape made the feet's thoughts race.

It was....the shape....they knew the shape. It was a man, all white like them. What was it doing there? Why hadn't they noticed it before? Was this man asleep?

"He hasn't got any," L says.

"He can't walk," replied R.

"He has no feet! L.

"We can't walk either" R.

Singing carried on the air breaking their concentration. It was the woman, the one who prepared the quails and she came closer, carrying a small basket over her arm. In the other hand were a stick, as tall as she was, and a fold of cloth.

Once under the olive tree where the block stood, she put down the stick and basket and proceeded to spread the cloth.

All the while the feet took everything in.

Taking up the stick, she lifted it over her head and began beating the grey-green foliage of tree.

Olives everywhere. They were falling like green pellets of rain onto the cloth.

Singing and gathering, the old woman placed the fallen olives in the basket. She picked one from a low branch and closed her eyes as she smelled it. A smile came over her and she opened her eyes then plopped it in with the rest. Her head turned in the direction of the white man.

The woman spoke "Ah, you were glorious my poor friend,... but we all must face our demise." With that she placed her hand on the instep of the left foot. Her skin was soft and the warmth in her passed to the foot. Gently, she moved her hand down the foot and across resting on the other foot.

"If only you could stand as you once did," she said. She was old, but her eyes said life, a young gaze from earlier times.

Reaching down, she took up all her things and passed back the way she came.

Things that day were already overwhelming. Then the realisation of all wonders came over the feet. The white man was them. They were part of him.

The depth of matters was powerful and the conclusion unavoidable.

"Oh to be one," L and R thought "To be complete, to stand. As if to arrive home and claim your roots, to know your identity. This would be a blessing."

All that day and the next night they stared at the white man. The light from the moon made him glow but he lay amongst the grass and wild herbs without moving.

"Do you think he has thoughts?" R.

"We do. Maybe,... but who can tell?" L.

Light flashed in the air. Wind began to swish this way and whirl that and the moon started to hide.

Clouds would not allow it to shine like it should. The wind rose up as if voices, screaming and shrieking, and the flashing light cracked the air, rumbling as if giant hooves dancing on the purple-black clouds.

The olive tree joined the chorus, creaking like gigantic ropes on a trireme, adding its voice to the cacophony.

The low bushes and grass made continuous gyrations in sync with the wind, lying down then picking themselves up.

Miniature explosions, here and there, lifted the earthy smell of the land into the air as raindrops smashed into the dust on the path, eventually subsiding as the frequency of the rain increased. No more dust, just water over mud and with it the clean, transparent scent that only rain can bring.

The wind lifted the rain sideways. It splattered against the block and over the feet.

This was a spectacle, a drama of the highest magnitude, like no amphitheatre would know, for this was God's play.

More and more water ran, like silver cloth, along the ground, filling ditches, crashing over rocks and the few old stumps to one side of the place where the olive tree stood.

The rain did not take breath, but grew from strength to strength and still the water came.

It charged into and around the block taking with it everything that had lain on the ground. Twigs, leaves, pebbles, the old olives and soil. Soil from around the block. Water soon began eating its way under the block and with each moment it ate deeper. Then it moved. Only a slight jolt, nothing really, then it listed to one side and slightly forward.

The clouds sent more rain, making all before it seem paltry.

This was one thing the feet had no memory of, or didn't want. The block moved again, further forward, the light cracked the air, a vapour of charring wood, and crashing, all in one moment, a large branch splintered from the olive tree smacking hard against the block.

Like a sinking warship, the block rolled and plunged into the torrent, then to be carried over the ooze... sliding.

The watery mud splashed up on the feet as they unwillingly led the block on its uncharted course.

Whack! The block came to an abrupt stop, jammed up against something in the dark.

More light cracked the air. Like a flashing sword, it drove itself into the block between the feet...then nothing? Suffocating blackness no sound, no anything, just suspended as if to float in a starless cosmos.

Light began to flicker. It splashed here and there. It skipped, lightly on the block, growing in strength.

"Are you there?" asked Left.

A voice answered, "Who's that?"

"Why would I not be," said Right.

"Well, who's that," the voice asked again.

"Do you feel heavier?" L

"My thought precisely" R. "There's something jammed against us."

It was the morning light and as the sun rose higher the full power of the storm was revealed, for the block and its passengers had come to rest against the legs of the white man.

"I'm no longer just a right foot." R

"And I'm not just a left" L

"No, you're mine." came the voice "we're one again,... I'm one."

The earth was dry, the mud and water had gone.

How long had they been lying there?

Time had definitely passed, much time. That singing, that familiar tone, and they began to move. The horizon wavered, it seemed to shake and quiver. Then a jolt and some dust rose up. It was the old woman. Standing there, smiling, holding a long rope. She walked over to the block. Shielding her eyes from the sun, she spoke. "There you go my sweet friend, how you should be."

She knelt and read something on the front of the block.

"Warrior and protector, artisan and philosopher...ambassador of the truth, Evangelos."

"A name, I have a name!" thought the statue.

Then she untied the other end of the rope from two horses resting in shade of the olive tree.

"Now that I have you standing like you were meant originally, I will finish my work."

With that she brought forth a large bulging sack and loosened the twine that tied its mouth. From it she took a brush and five or six gourds with stoppers. Removing the stoppers one by one, she came next to the block, dipped the brush and gently applied its contents. She started at the feet and worked up. It was pigment.

"Thanks to the lightening, which God sent, I can restore you. You have your feet back and your feet have you."

She was coating the statue in the way that all marble statues once were. Skin tones on the body, crystal blue eyes, golden hair and life-pink on the lips.

"How young you were with so much life ahead and so much to accomplish"

The woman then placed a goblet of red wine on the plinth along with a small loaf of bread, white soft cheese, a bowl of olives and three figs.

By this time it was late afternoon and with her labours finished she gathered all that she had brought and led the horses back in the direction of her house. How magnificent the statue looked. Here was a man, no longer bleached, no longer white marble, but still motionless. The sun lowered itself behind the row of trees running along the crest of the hill and the light faded from the day.

So much had transpired. So many miraculous things had come to pass.

"How...why... how did I die... did I ever really die? Who is the lady who seems to know me? And the thought, the memories... why." The statue paused as if to draw breath.

"One voice, there is only one voice, it is my voice....no longer divided." Thought the statue, as if to check just once more, what had happened.

These thoughts weaved in his head like bees bobbing from one bloom to the next when the spring brings new life.

"It is good to be one again, that is true, but how wonderful it would be to return home, to hold my family, to have the company of friends and to embrace all that is sacred."

All through the night the statue thought, and thought deeply, on all manner of things on the life he once had. Over and over, until exhaustion quietened all his thoughts.

As the new day dawned, in the grass where the statue once laid, a hand moved. Slowly an arm stretched up and eyelids quivered, then opened. It was a man who had rested there the night. He drew himself up on one elbow and rubbed his eyes with the other hand, blinking at the piercing morning light. He slowly cast his gaze on the field around him, suddenly stopping on the olive tree. He rubbed his eyes again and held his hand over his brow focussing on the plinth under the tree.

"What is this under the tree?" he thought.

And like a spring releasing, he quickly rose to his feet.

Then he noticed things on the ground around him. There was a small bowl with olive seeds around it, a few morsels of white cheese in it, a small crust of bread and a wine goblet. He cast his eyes from side to side while in turbulent thought, then slowly ran his index finger inside his mouth, took it out and looked at it. There were seeds on his finger....seeds of the fig. His head lowered steadily. He leaned forward, a little apprehensive about what he might see, and there, he saw scars that went right around each ankle. A smile began to find a home on his face. He looked back up at the plinth...the block under the olive tree. There was no longer a statue on it.

He looked up. The sky was clear and endless. Slowly raising his arms as if the wings of a bird, he tossed back his head and began to turn. He turned faster and faster and laughed, loudly, breaking into a dance that came from deep inside.

He was free. No more questions, just a knowing, that he was free to complete a life that had been cut short.

With that he launched himself in the direction of his destiny and good fortune.

His greatest adventure was only just beginning.