

# Pericles

by Bob Henderson

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WITH A NAME LIKE THAT it's a wonder I didn't take more notice of him.

I had met him years before. And the name did catch my attention for a moment. Making me smile as I glanced at the shy eleven-year-old.

A name is only a name of course and a boy's lips would taste as sweet were he a Wayne or Cecil.

In this case, having encountered my first Pericles mingling silently with his dusty band of comrades, I promptly forgot him.

How perspective changes with the years. He who was peripheral becomes central. A vibrant source of inspiration. A provocateur of wild erotic transport.

Thus did Pericles, prince of my present poem, remain for years in the background. A barely discernible, perfectly placed continuo modulating in the shadows of my baroque affairs.

I can recall two notable exceptions to my indifference. The first is as vivid as last night's orgasm.

I was at his house, not far from mine. Gathered with his family to watch a football match on the box. My plan had been to go to the match with a friend. We didn't get tickets and agreed to meet at his cousin's house. The first in the family network to have acquired a colour TV set.

The youngest of the cousins was Pericles. I had seen him with his father at the football. This small dark appendage smiling and backing out of sight.

I sat down in the midst of a tense and voluble company. In slow straining English Pericles described the goals so far.

He was down on the carpet. Responding to my enquiries with the politeness of a kid safely under parental control. Recognising the guest, the foreigner. The 'glamorous' friend of his older cousin.

Who failed to show.

Everybody in that crowded room was involved.

Mother, periodically distracted from splendid Maenadic imprecations against the referee. In order to function as a hostess.

Pericles, tortured by the tantalus determining the fate of the match. Irritated to desperation by his mother's outbursts.

Father, the civil servant. Conservative, taciturn, strict. Chewing palely on an unlit cigarette. His blood pressure visibly rising. Bald head glowing with suppressed rage. Muttering rapid obscenities under his breath.

At full time the score was 2-2. With many decisions in dispute. Extra time would follow.

Mother bustled off to make coffee. I settled myself to converse with Dad.

The poor man. Forced to face the foreigner.

Pericles grinning obliquely. Hanging around to translate, if need be.

Father's remarks filtered slowly through the mordant grin of one dragged briefly away from vice and damnation.

Pericles lying in the middle of the floor to watch the outcome of the derby. Separate. Acting the expert. Agonizing in his private world of worship. Identification total.

Changing his position a hundred times as the fortunes of the teams changed. Leaping about. Crouching, knees hugged to his chest.

Head buried in hands to evade horror.

Face ground into the carpet.

Cheering, yelling, groaning. Coaching. Celebrating. Condemning. Laughing at the enemies' mistakes. Mourning our own. Crying real tears wrung from his wrestling spirit.

This eleven-year-old friend of a football fan.

I'd seen plenty before. But never such anguish. Poor kid. It's rotten to be at that age. At that stage.

By the time the final whistle blew and we had won, I had forgotten the boy. His tears were dry now. He was happy. As we all were. He alone did not find a way to release his feelings.

THE SECOND OCCASION on which my attention was drawn to Pericles was about a year later. The day of another match. This time Pericles and his cousin had tickets. I was not going with them. But visited the house the same day.

We set off together. The kids swathed in long striped scarves.

Pericles dropped back in boredom. Or wonder. As I began to flirt with his cousin.

Suddenly the air was filled with a dull rumbling which became a roar. Across the thoroughfare appeared a mob of youths whose costumes showed immediately that they were fans of The Enemy. About five hundred of them. Armed with sticks, rocks and god-knows what.

Then with a lightning shift they were on our side of the street surrounding us. Howling abuse.

Before I knew how, I found myself alone. Some metres away my young friend stood hemmed in. A white face in the centre of a hostile mass. Someone pulling tight on his scarf. Another demanding his ticket. Loud obscenities.

The air fused with fear.

Without thinking I pushed my way through.

I stood head and shoulders over all of them. And somehow could not feel endangered.

Forgetting about knives and chains. As I blundered in.

Confronted the kid who was throttling Cuz. The former a smudge of dirty hair and missing teeth. Looking at me in momentary doubt.

Numbers forgotten as he sized me up.

"What do you think you're doing?" I demanded. A sprinkling of gutter Greek gave him another surprise. Still staring balefully. Motionless. Some watched him for direction. A leader perhaps. Others were already wandering away toward the stadium.

Cuz saw his chance and tore himself free. Broke away and ran like a spring deer down the first side street.

Ratface held up the scarf: a trophy. Spat on our colours.

Stuffed it into his back pocket.

In minutes they were all gone.

Dazed and mildly satisfied, I looked around for Pericles.

After a minute he emerged. Sliding silently as an evening shadow from behind a light pole. Fifty metres back up the hill. Lucky he had stayed behind. Or retreated.

He joined me now. Nonchalant.

Face flushed with excitement.

"You O.K.?" I asked.

"Yeah, sure."

"You want to go back to the house?"

"Nah."

I feared a second ambush.

"What you say to them?" he ventured with a grin.

This husky whisper of a voice. Which I hadn't really heard before.

"Nothing much."

"You hit him?"

"Didn't have to."

"He have the knife"

"I know," I lied. "I'll walk to the stadium with you."

"You see the match?"

"I don't have a ticket."

We ambled along together having our first conversation.

"You don't need ticket," he pressed. "You take mine and I go through with you. Is easy."

His face open in invitation.

"Wouldn't want to get you in trouble," I balked. Touched however. He accepted it. "Stay out of the battles, Muscle.

Don't get hurt."

"O.K.," he said. Already dismissing me to the ranks of grown-ups.

"Will you find Cuz inside?"

"Sure."

THESE WERE MY MEMORIES of young Pericles.

For three or four years he remained a vague figure on the fringe of my consciousness.

Late one lonely autumn as the last leaves fell. And I began to recover from the end of an affair of three years' duration. Melancholy.

My phone rang. And it was Pericles.

Calling me to face a new reality.

I was surprised and delighted.

Introducing himself and chatting away in this confident voice. Husky as an old ginsoak. Sounding older. I hadn't lately looked in his direction.

We talked about the football. What else.

The way he talked showed he was no longer the boy who had lain on the floor and wept. A more mature fan, this.

Why had he called me? Who gave him my number—the questions tickled me pleasantly as we rattled on. There was purpose in his manner.

He took a while to work around to it. Masking shyness with forthright friendliness. Which tended to presuppose a pretty solid relationship between us. And I wanted to know why.

I was hardly listening to what he said. Enjoying rather the tone and tenor of him.

It came out suddenly.

Would I like to coach his football team? The one he played with.

On a grassy paddock near his home. His gang, the others. I paused for several thoughtful breaths. Pericles carried on, accelerating before I could lightly refuse. Flattering.

Persuading.

Me brought to a halt by this piquant proposal. Out of the blue. Promising to plunge me into a boyworld untasted.

The whole idea flavoured by his mysterious new self. Heard, as yet unseen.

I had voiced no negatives and Pericles took heart. Could he call in on me? Was I busy now?

Fifteen minutes later he slipped into my hallway, my immediate consciousness, my heart—as easily as if he had lived with me for years.

I gave him a Coke. He was ready to negotiate.

I needed time to absorb him. Almost a stranger.

I recognized him all right. But essentially he was a new boy.

Though I was no news to him.

How well he must have observed me over the years.

Now I observed him. Taller, slimmer but still chunky. His fifteen years gracing him like a crown. Coal black hair beginning to wave. His forehead kissed by wayward curls. Eyes slightly Asiatic. Not when he looked at you directly. Caught in a sidelong glance. A whiff of Smyrna.

A pale blue sweatshirt speaking eloquently of long arms and a neat waist. Hipless. Black cords hugging legs charged with energy.

Hazel-nut eyes. Seductively lashed. Unguarded and quick to shine with laughter.

Before I even thought about his football team, I looked. Listened to his coffee-ground voice.

Breathed deeply and recognized a treasure. A fresh feast all unlooked for.

Within the hour I had agreed to coach the team. Days and hours were arranged. Very businesslike.

Pericles left well contented.

Listen. I would have agreed to anything.

It was not until I was lying in bed later that my mind addressed itself seriously to the task I had undertaken.

THE TEAM WAS KNOWN unofficially as Byron's Bastards, after the district they lived in. And the English boy-lover they had barely heard of.

Pericles would introduce me to the boys. Waiting agog for the new foreign coach to show. He wanted to arrive with me. After giving me a few hints. About the personnel.

I rolled the bike to a stop on this unmown grassy space deeply green in the cool autumn evening.

At once the boys leapt to their feet and stood very nearly in a line.

Unsmiling, they were keyed up, ready to prove themselves.

I was abundantly welcome.

Formally, crisply Pericles lead me down the line of outstretched hands. Like some Royal reviewing boy scouts.

This promising bunch of lads. Barely a team with two to spare. Thirteen to fifteen years of age. Not a fatty among them. A band of beauties, in fact.

Pericles chief among them. Revealing himself in the rose-light of sunset as the beauty of beauties. Hunk of my hutch. To whom I was now fully committed.

Oh my coal black satin skinned warrior. I saw you were impatient. So I wasted no time. Stripping to shorts and leading you all off into a long hard run. You especially striving to keep up. Your stubborn chin lifted. Hair flung behind you. Like a thoroughbred in the straight.

I made the boys work hard that night. Fearing the doubters and the difficult.

It had its effect. They were shaken up. And challenged. Pericles watched me like the others. His eyes shining. Finally I released them with a few encouraging words and they straggled off to the shower room housed in a dilapidated stone hut.

Pericles hung back to walk with me, stripping off his sweatshirt.

"Do you think I was too tough?" I wondered.

"NO," he insisted. "It's just what we need. But we could be a good team, I think, if we got into shape."

"I think you could," I agreed. "The talent's there."

Pericles glowed. With sweat. And with that intense satisfaction I came to know in him. At special moments. When he was pleased and excited.

I stood guard at the broken-hinged door while the boys jostled under the showers. Coming back to life in their nakedness. Horsing around. Exchanging shouts of ribaldry and derision.

Pericles in the thick of it. Slick and trim as an otter. Restraining one or two of the others. With a look. Keeping his dignity. As he exposed his young glory. Clearly a captain.

Looking toward me from time to time. As if to say, don't worry, I can keep them under control.

Flashing those straight teeth with the slight gap at the centre. Which seemed to make his grin perfect.

His long wet lashes fluttering out the message, /don't care if you see me in the nude. In case you were wondering.

He was right of course to be unashamed. There was no fault in that dusky young body that I could see. With its sturdy back muscles and full hard buttocks. Pectorals deeply defined.

Pericles is a boy who really lives in his body.

He loves to be moving. Sometimes on the football field, or on the bed, he seems a very avatar of motion. A young Hermes.

The other kids drifted off, each shaking my hand again. Offering some word of connection. Pericles waiting until last. Leisurely towelling himself.

I began to fear some censure.

But all he said was, "You should take a shower too." "Didn't bring a towel."

"You can use mine."

So I stripped in my turn and took a welcome shower while Pericles leaned against the wall. The towel hanging loosely between his hands.

Dallying. In these first moments of intimacy.

"You're in good shape," he offered. A bit flattering, I thought. But nice to hear. When you bare yourself before a boy for the first time. I said nothing.

Pericles hung his towel on a hook. Folded his arms and frankly inspected my body. Muscle by muscle, limb by limb. It would have been embarrassing, cheeky in another kid. The way he did it was fun. I could almost feel his hands on me. Checking each temple and vein.

I wouldn't have got a hard-on: Though my eyes never left him. If I hadn't seen his gaze come to rest on my sex. All but challenging me to get it up.

At the same time his own rod was rising.

I longed to reach out and touch. Hold, fondle, encourage. After that—whatever might happen. Let it.

But Pericles turned aside. Before he was fully erect. His pretext the towel I would be wanting soon. He probably hadn't noticed how hard I was getting.



His head bowed. Wet curls before his eyes. The complicit towel now clutched at his navel. Falling in modest folds before his privates.

I too turned aside, taking his cue. Twisted the cold water on to maximum.

Burning under the icy douche for the slim naked loveliness of him.

I must have made steam.

Dying to take hold of him and press him close.

I don't know how I managed to restrain myself but I did. We avoided eye contact.

Fortunately I was rational enough to understand his reaction.

Pericles might know anything.

About me: he'd seen me with his cousin often enough. And others. Heard godknows what gossip about my tastes. About sex: the absorbing topic of his age and peers.

He might be ready for experiment.

But he turned away, ashamed.

Not of his erection certainly. If I hadn't been there. The other kids instead. It might have been a source of jubilation. Comparison. Racing each other toward happy ejaculations.

I had stirred his healthy young body.

But, this had been a big night for Pericles. Planned and anticipated keenly. I had fallen in with his plans and pleased him. Stirred his enthusiasm.

No matter what his flesh might say. With its own fulsome frankness. Suddenly. In this damp draughty shed. In response to my nakedness, or whatever.

His mind promptly directed otherwise.

Still the captain and host.

Gossip from the past was theory. First training with the new coach was present reality. Pericles would not flaunt himself.

Our rapport already fine enough to protect.

I prolonged that painful cold shower as long as I could. Pericles stayed covered until his shame had passed.

Thus we were able to pretend. That neither of us had seen. How we might move each other.

Ignoring the sharp pain in my balls. Casually I took his towel and dried myself.

As we dressed the pain spread into my pain and stomach. I wondered if he suffered the same, in silence.

If he did he gave no sign.

WE FACED OUR FIRST MATCH with considerable nervous tension. As virginal we bussed to an alien dusty altar, one Saturday morning.

It was a different company entirely on the way home. We had won, 3-0. The team amazingly had performed like clockwork. Their antics on the bus the universal mayhem of boys victorious. Confidence fixed and optimism rising.

Pericles sat beside me at the front. Refusing to be drawn into the horseplay. Happily tolerant.

Listen.

Showered, combed, triumphant he fairly radiated excitement. Sending wonderful waves of warmth coursing through my veins.

OVERNIGHT, AUTUMN abruptly turned into winter, as it tends to do in Athens. With rain storms and bitter winds. The team continued to win, the boys building certainty and fame as they went.

With winter also came shrinkage of time. The clock changed, the days drew in. School and the treadmill of night classes and private lessons which traps the feet of Greek teenagers.

We could not extend our training time. When the rains and finally snow arrived we should be hard put to continue at all.

Still, they all continued to turn up. No matter how bad the weather got. And it was pretty bad that winter. Runny noses and sore throats were common. I had my share. We refused to give in. Preferring to cure them in our own way.

At 7.00 pm we would crowd into the draughty change room, our voices booming, feet stamping in the weak electric light. For a session of callisthenics. Boring enough but it gave the kids a chance to warm up. Throw themselves about a bit. At the age when every jump, bend, flick and twist of the body gave them pleasure.

No two boys did an exercise exactly the same, strictly as I prescribed and demonstrated. This diversity was a delight. Though I was the only one aware. They were there for solidarity and expressed it fiercely when called upon.

Soon we were all glowing with healthy exertion. The sense of carrying on under adverse

conditions. And an awareness of doing something slightly mad.

No doubt it was. In that stone shed, symbol of lowly goats. Deep in icy February.

Then I would lead them off on a long testing run around the boundaries of Byron.

Chilly night having fallen. Not a soul stirring out of doors.

Under dripping trees; across wet shining bitumen reflecting blue street lamps; up and down the short steep hills. Determined not to slacken. Even when the gradient was sharp enough to suggest crawling on hands and knees.

Truth is we enjoyed it. In the wet and windy cold we sallied forth and the streets of Byron were ours. Week after wintry week we pounded their lengths and claimed them. We didn't need an audience.

One bright image will always remain in my memory.

I am standing on the top of some hill. Pausing briefly, panting, to check on my charges. Pericles is not far behind.

I look back down the narrow curving street with its sparse lamps.

A light rain is falling. Everything is quiet.

Almost. On the mush of melting snow there is a light rhythmic splashing.

I see my boys jogging up the hill towards me. They are not talking but seem to be calling to me: Here we come. We're still with you. Where to next?

One behind the other they run. But it is nothing like a single file.

Boys seldom run in a straight line. Even when that is what they are supposed to be doing.

A bunch of leggy boys in shimmering shorts moving more or less in the same direction. But making from moment to moment sudden irregular breaks in the line.

A pretty punctuation.

Capricious sidesteps.

A leg kicking out toward nothing.

A head with its cap of curls rolling round two full rotations.

A chin lifting, nose pointing toward the coach.

Flick of a thin white arm.

Shrug of a single shoulder.

Flash of fingers trailing along Wet palings.

A sudden leap off two restless feet.

The wonderful erratic orchestration of boyhood. An endless celebration.

"LISTEN, DAVID," Pericles announced on the phone early one evening.

"Hi, Muscle," I greeted. "What's up?"

"Nothing. How are you? Look. It's just that Thursday night's no good anymore."

I was momentarily baffled.

"Oh? What's happened to Thursday night?"

"I've got this tutoring class. They've changed the time.

And it's miles away."

"You mean... you can't make training?" I murmured.

Feeling betrayed.

"No! You crazy man. Of course I won't miss training.

That's fixed. But I can't come to your place before. For our usual strategy talk."

My heart dropped into my socks.

"Well... O.K. If that's how it is. Don't worry. I understand."

There was a pause. I heard his throaty chuckle.

"Are you asleep or something?" he demanded. In a beguiling throaty whisper. "We gotta find another time.

How about Saturday morning? I'm free until 12.30 I could come down at nine."

Relieved, I agreed to his proposal.

Though the thought of doing anything significant at 9.00 am Saturday was somewhat shattering.

On the other hand, three hours with Pericles in my own home—clutches?—was irresistible.

Saturday morning became his.

Three days later I sat gulping black tea. In weak morning rainlight.

Promptly at nine Pericles arrived. Wearing a sleep smudged smile. Endearing in damp jeans and an aubergine sweat shirt. Coal black curls webbed with Scottish mist. Eyes sparkling with intention. Words spilling forth in greeting.

As surprising myself I took hold of his shoulders and kissed his dark head.

I boiled water, hunched over the gas in a fuzz of early rising and physical response.

Tea having lately captured Pericles' imagination. We jiggle our tea bags.

"Heavy night, Muscle?"

"Not exactly," he considers. As if ashamed of his meagre portion of free hours.

"Where'd you go?"

"To the skating." A roller rink much in vogue that winter. "Go on your own?" I was jealous.

"Nah. Coupla the guys. You know."

"Must be a great place."

"It's O.K. There's nowhere else."

"How's George?" I teased.

George was the proprietor of the rink. Pericles had let it be known that George was a paedophile and a pest.

"The same. Always trying to get you into his office for a Coke or something."

"Why don't you take him up on it? Free Coke...."

"Joking.... Look, George's O.K. He's just a bit... embarrassing. You know. Too obvious. And he thinks he's such a big shot. Just because he's got the skating place. I don't think he owns it anyway."

By ten o'clock the rain stops and incredulous we feel the reflected rays of sunshine on our cheekbones. It lasts for the rest of his visit.

Opening our eyes wider. Blinking and thinking. Drawing closer together over the kitchen table as we go over areas of common interest.

Pericles relaxes in his chair with that silver glint of gratification. And I gravitate toward him in the heat of the heavy metal playing on the cassette.

Our heads nodding together in quiet complicity. Until I am again kissing his coal black hair, nuzzling his neck.

His eyes wide, half smiling, limpid. Our fingers tangle.

I am charmed by the stillness of his hand resting in mine.

Pericles needs a leader.

A solemn recognition.

My slightly trembling fingers run up the bottom of his sweat shirt. Revealing a tempting strip of brown flesh. The white tops of his slip just showing. He is waiting.

I slide my wondering palms up over his hard tummy on to his pectorals. Tracing their sharp outline with my fingers. His nipples catching my covering palms.

"Your chest is perfect, Muscle... classic. You are like a kouros. Know what that is?"

"Yes, of course."

"You have the chest of a kouros."

"Thank you." He is flattered. Interested.

I rub his chest a while with slow circular strokes. His nipples harden.

I have noticed the swelling in his crotch.

But take my hands away. Having explored and indulged enough.

I want to talk to him. His eyes seek something similar. It is appalling to consider what rough bargains he may have made with himself.

In order to keep the coach.

I don't want him to acquiesce in this cold barbaric manner. Even if prepared to. I want to know him. For him to understand the degree to which I already appreciate him. The distinct ways.

I stand up awkwardly. Pour out more hot water. We jiggle again.

Pericles' crotch continues to swell. His thighs easing apart.

"Football's important to you, isn't it, Pericles?" In my most sincere voice. A crinkly smile to encourage.

He surprises me with a guffaw which turns into an apologetic cough.

"Not that important, David. I mean, it's only a game, isn't it?"

Is he sending me up?

Apparently not. His Asiatic eyes remain opaque. Idly scanning a team poster taped to my kitchen wall.

As my hand slides along the faded denim inside his thigh. Fingers inching towards his boyish bulge.

"Yes... but it's your game isn't it?"

"How do you mean?" Pericles wanted to specify.

He slid forward a trifle on his chair. Shortening my search. A hard lump now nestled in my hand. Difficult at first to distinguish balls from crown.

Neither of us was looking towards that arena. My caresses quickly made it clear. Which end was up.

"I suppose I mean," I mused, distracted by his hardness. Confused by his words.

A boy I had seen as a football fanatic. Now a horny young jock. "It's your favourite. Your best. Your... choice."

"For the present," he shrugged. Managing in the same movement to shift his cock into a more comfortable position. Inside his jeans. Straining the zip. And now more completely in my grasp. "If other things was different," he concluded, "I suppose I don't play football at all."

"What? You amaze me, Pericles!" My surprise registered with a playful pinch at the base of his stem.

"Why?" he laughed. Almost sophisticated. In his way. Making him feel gauche.

With my free hand I squeezed his knee.

"Oh, Muscle. And I remember you in agony over Our Boys in a cup final."

Pericles looked blank. Then he 'remembered.

"But David! This is years ago!"

"That's true. It was. But not long ago you suddenly rang me up and asked me to coach your team."

His expression changed. A comradely grin.

"I guess I surprised you with this, eh?"

"Pleasantly."

"You are not annoyed? You are not sorry to have the team?"

"Not at all." Nor to have you, I yearned.

He slapped me lightly on the shoulder.

"Poor David. What a bunch of lazies. You must be bored a lot."

"You know I'm not. And anyway,"—I decided to challenge him—"you're not lazy. You could be a professional if you wanted. In a few years."

Pericles would have fallen off his chair laughing. But evidently was not ready to rip his comfortably cozened cock from my fingers.

"You're joking!"

"I wasn't. Haven't you ever thought about it?"

"Maybe when I was about seven or eight." I pictured this dusky darling at seven. "No. Listen, David. Me a pro?"

Never."

"Don't be so modest."

"What means?"

I explained.

"It's not this. O.K. I'm just an average player for my age—"

"Come on now."

"I'm nothing special. I know this. True is I am better at the Basket. So I am captain of our team. What is this? You know. We are the goats at the bottom of the mountain. We just manage to keep it together. I know how to shout at the others. This is nothing. Is an old habit."



I was impressed. But had doubts.

"But you yourself, Muscle. Forget the others. With the right team. The right coach." My fingers fiddled with the metal tag on his zip.

"This the real reason, David. I sooner die than live this life. Play ball for the drachmas. Change teams for the big offer. Run around with a big advertising on my shirt for drinks or something. Talk to TV about nothing. With the big smile on my face. Put my life in all the magazines. Make like I am a star. A monkey in the circus is."

Quite an analysis. I was staggered.

"Is that how you see football now, Pericles... and Our Boys?"

A flash of sentiment softened him.

"Well... O.K. Not always like this. But—I don't have any posters on my walls anymore," he smirked, faltering at the end. Lest he offend the coach.

I laughed. Pericles was never big on tact. I tended to value this.

"I know. Posters are a bit crazy at my age. But I like them. All part of my pleasure in being here in Greece."

"Fair enough," Pericles nodded.

"Why do you play?" I wondered. "Why muster the team? Call in the coach?"

"Well...", he drawled, lightly mocking my earnestness. As I oh-so-slowly pulled down his zip and slid my fingers inside his jeans. His cock stretching a snug white cotton slip. "I play because I like it and... because is not something I have to do. And because... I can run things a bit and... I can do on my own, I mean without teachers or parents or this. Just me and the kids. And you now, of course. I want to say... is the good thing of life that belongs to me!"

"I understand, Muscle."

Stroking his rod. Urging his knob to push up, peep over the waistband. He seemed to like it. But I had to go on talking.

"I suppose you hate school," I sympathized.

"Yeah... no. Not really. School is just school. Is where you are at my age. I think was pretty awful on your own. But everyone else is there too. Even a coupla teachers are O.K. We have some fun. Is only there is so much of it. So many things you must. You know."

"Yeah, I know.... What about lessons?"

"Some are good."

His swollen knob popped stickily out of its nest. I rubbed it with my thumb tip.

"Which ones do you like?" I pursued. "Gymnastics best, naturally."

"What? Nah. Gym is a bore. When we have. The teacher is a fat slob. Wants to keep us quiet only."

"Don't you enjoy working out in the gym, though?" "What means?"

I explained.

"Ha! We have not. In Greece only the private schools. If we have ever," he dreamed, "and a real teacher... I will enjoy this."

I wondered briefly about applying for the job.

"What lessons are O.K.?"

"History," he answered promptly. "This is always good. And... English. Now especially 'cause I have to talk to you. Understand each other."

"Why history?"

"I dunno. I always like it. Even in the little school. I am really bad at composition. This is why I have the extra lessons on Thursday.... I still hate."

"Doesn't history mean a lot of reading?"

"Yeah. More than the other lessons, I suppose. In pages. But doesn't count. Because is like stories. And new people you kind of meet. I can... go away to... other times," he grinned.

"Every history lesson."

"Easy."

"And then football. So many worlds for you to escape to, Pericles."

"Only two this is."

"You want me to make it three?" I offered clumsily. Easing his cock free.

He paused a moment or two. Still. In thought or surprise. "I better go, David," he said gently. A hand on my arm. "Look at your watch."

In the nicest possible way he slipped himself out of my hand. Zipped up.

Took his time in leaving. Hung around a bit in fact. Examining my possessions.

When I kissed his head in parting I held him closer. Added a puff on his ear.

Wondered if he would make it home before coming.

I CHECKED WITH CUZ in the meantime. A casual telephone conversation for old times. About Pericles he said a few things. With a mixture of contempt and affection. All of these remarks were pungent.

"Oh, Pericles is bright enough. No genius you know. Never one of your top students. But he's always been above average. Just lazy. Never puts in an effort. Who know what he can do?" Cuz inflated with recent examination success. Parental approval. "He likes to be out in the street. Muck around with his mates. But... they think he's smart. If he ever gets down to it, he'll do all right: get into university."

University? Pericles?

"PERICLES," I ENQUIRED. A little bemused. "Do you think you'll ever... go to university?"

Weeks had passed.

I held his naked penis in my hand while he calmly fondled mine. We'd got used to mutual stimulation.

Usually I jerked him off. Sometimes I sucked him.

And once with persuasion he had licked my cock for five blissful minutes.

"Yeah I reckon so," he answered casually.

"You seem very sure about it," I cautioned. Knowing the limited number of places. Fierce competition to fill them.

"Well, I could be wrong," he admitted. "This is a long time off."

Three years or more.

"Don't leave it too late," I teased. "Or do you expect to get in easily?"

"Of course not," he grinned. Batting my erection back and forth with his palm. I squeezed his in response. "I know this. You got to read like crazy to have a chance. O.K.—I will do. I don't mind a fight."

Stupid of me. Competition was right up his alley.

"I never failed anything yet," he offered frankly in support. He meant school exams. But the statement had resonance. I gazed at him, thinking.

So, Pericles. When the time comes. Probably your final year in high school. You will show them what you can do. In their terms. In the meantime you will jog comfortably through the years. Enjoying things when you can. Finding freedom in football.

"I suppose you'll do history, then?"

"At the university? Nah. No future in this."

Tiring possibly of my catechism he dug down to find and hold my balls. He called this 'checking the gun for bullets'. Satisfied that I was loaded he got back to work on my cock.

"Why do you say so?" I persisted. Holding on perilously to the theme.

As the fires mounted.

"Nobody ever has tell me about a work to use history." "You could be a history teacher."

It was feeble and he chuckled at the notion.

"Anyway," I chose a higher path, "do you have to use it? Can't you just do it for the sake of interest? And fun. Since you like it?"

"This is nice probably. But you can't work it. You enjoy for three-four years. Then you find you use up maybe half your hours for nothing. I mean that nobody wants to hear about."

The job market. Next scramble after university entrance. How their lives were mapped out. And they knew it. None more than Pericles. Remote as the rat race was from his present self, the prospect saddened me.

Pericles took my mood for censure.

"Look, David. I have understood. It should not be like this. It should be to learn for the joy. So should with school. But it is not. I have heard my cousins. They are more bored than I am." Pericles the realist.

"Why go to a university at all, then?"

"What else. I am going to let those other stupid beat me?"

"No, Pericles. I can see you are not."

"So." He might have closed the subject.

"And isn't football the same as history? No future."

"Sure," he agreed happily. "But it doesn't matter. 'Cause it doesn't spoil anything. Make no problem for me... and I like it"

I adjusted the rhythm of my hand to his. Bringing us closer together. Rising towards a mutual climax.

"Will you go on reading history? For fun."

"Maybe. Yes. I will do. This make a nice hobby, eh? I cannot play ball forever...."

A SOLACE HE WAS. Filling the void. Long left by a lover lost. I became more grateful for the continuingfact of Pericles. With his unspoken certainty. Quiet acquiescence.

Way ahead of me. Sometimes suggesting impatience. But perfectly attuned to my needs.

Such a calm prevails when we meet. As if only in our conjugation he comes to rest. So it feels. We come to rest together.

Then we come alive together.

BYRON'S BASTARDS CONTINUED to win week after thrilling week. We acquired a name. A team to beat. Possible favourites. New champions?

Albeit of the goats at the bottom of the mountain. Lowest rung of the juniors. I suppose I took the team much more seriously than Pericles did. It was I who elevated them mentally to the level of athletic splendour. Perhaps Pericles detected this phantasy. But the general effect of the boys was positive.

Perhaps it is an advantage for a coach to be a little mad. All this was a new experience for the kids.

Captain Pericles was sure of success from week two. Or possibly earlier.

Pericles' beauty flourished with the season. Snowflakes framing a salty prettiness: His masculine vigour made an arresting contrast.

Planning tactics became ever more intense.

Meanwhile, we learned to kiss each other. Two hungry tongues a-roving.

For a month it was mine that had done all the roving: lapping fondly about his neck and ears.

Scintillating territory.

Greedy lip plunges into the dark forest of his hair were part of our greetings and farewells.

But the first time I tried to kiss him on the mouth he turned his head aside.

I felt rebuked and guilty.

Later I thought about it: he was probably wary about giving his lips after I had been sucking his cock. Sensible. The very last thing we wanted was an unexplained infection. Parental shock.

And yet he hadn't turned away abruptly, I recalled. Considerate in refusal.

We had been so intimate in other things. Surely he wanted to taste also this singular delight?

Next time he came to me I prolonged our greetings.

Winning a mothwing flutter at my throat. Of innocent lips.

I held him close and murmured our familiar gambits. Took his elbows and drew him closer. His outdoors boy-smell filling my nostrils. He leant on me. Put his hands on my back and hugged me. My face in his hair, his chin on my shoulder.

Our cheeks brushed together.

I spoke his name softly, fondly.

Tea and tactics could wait.

There was a soft, foolish smile on our faces. In the air about us.

I stroked his cheek, cupped his chin. Gazed deep into his hazel eyes.

His lashes barely stirring.

Before he knew it I had touched his lips with mine. I was already inches away. Smiling.

Caught up in a gauzy web he almost managed to grin at my cunning.

Minimally I raised my brows and he just nodded. Nipping his upper lip I softly sucked. And then the other wetly. As Pericles tasted my moustache.

Back and forth we slid, savouring. Sealing.

I waited, watchful. Wondering whether to probe.

Only to first receive his venturesome tongue. Seeking mine. Tip touching tip. Skirmishing.

Retreating. Luring me on.

I led him to the canopy. Pushed him gently down onto the cushions.

Where we lay loosely laced for the rest of Saturday morning.

AFTER THIS DAY it was tacitly agreed that kissing was part of our play. Though sometimes Pericles tired. Urgent for other sensations.

Often as not, when I was bringing him to a climax he would softly call out,

"Kiss me, David."

To ENJOY THE primeval comfort of cuddling.

During these our winterbound explorations I began to photograph Pericles. Faced with the camera he was like no other boy I have ever met. A willing and pliable model. No coyness, no delays. Look, no mucking about. He really seemed to enjoy the game as much as I did. He had natural confidence but showed no conceit.

Needed my praise to fulfil his vision of himself.

I soon knew that he believed whatever I said to him. I learned to be careful what I said. Given this opportunity to discuss a boy's beauty with him.

He had walked, perhaps ambled, into my clutches—but certainly not slipped.

Seemed determined to stay.

Alone, I wrote poems about him. Pericles knew this. I told him. Showing him the pages I had covered in his praise. I wanted him to understand that he inspired me. Pericles took in this new information, interested. He didn't feel honoured, but glad. Once, in the unsympathetic ambience of football training at its sweaty peak, he told me that he was glad he was my inspiration.

Simply. Having thought about it and absorbed. In his own way.

"Makes up for composition. Doesn't it?"

"How do you mean?" I puffed.

Jogging along together on the damp grass.

"Well... you write it... But... if I was not... you don't write it, eh?"

Dead right, Pericles.

A FEW WEEKS after Easter, Byron's Bastards faced their first Grand Final.

It was quite an occasion.

Undefeated, they were flying high.

The field was circled with a dense band of supporters. I spent some strained minutes greeting parents and receiving their good wishes.

While the tension grew.

I called the team to me. Their nerves had reached the last notch.

In peak condition they possessed an excess of energy.

Could not stand still a minute.

I offered a few words of counsel. But I knew that apart from Pericles they were barely listening.

Dazed by the electric atmosphere. The pain of anticipation.

Pericles gave me a rueful smile.

Just look at them, I thought.

The merciful whistle snapped the strong as the referee called them out.

I watched them fly off like stones from a catapult.

A lump in my throat. And a prayer in my heart.

Then the match had begun.

I WON'T DESCRIBE IT. Just imagine ninety minutes of total effort; concentration; teamwork.

We won the bloody thing. But only just. And with a fair dose of luck on our side.

Boys playing games. All over the world. Not such a solemn thing....

Let me share the images which leap to mind when I recall that day. Not much connection with football perhaps. Certainly not what my mind was agonizing over at the time.

My public self. Coach on the sideline conscientious.

Pictures which must have impressed themselves on my subconscious.



Flashes of exquisite beauty.

First there is the overture: teams trotting out onto the field. Released from the tension of waiting. Rejoicing to be into it at last.

Of course they want to win. Every last one of them. But the desire is absent in the manner of their entry. Applause follows them out like a chorus.

No sense of competition as yet. No antagonism now or later. The bottom of the mountain is to this extent blessed. Contest free of fame and gain.

I see the boys at rest. Not all together as at half-time. (Byron's Bastards sprawled about my feet. Making crazy patterns in the grass. Distractedly happy. All but Pericles unable to register my words, concentrate on my suggestions. Signalling promises with their faces and bodies. Pericles quietly elated. Wearing an odd grin. He knows that I am too excited, involved.) One and then another. Individuals. Unselfconscious.

In moments of respite from the struggle. The ball away in other corners.

Relaxing each in his own way.

One with a hand on his hip, head hanging as if he would like to forget the match and study the grass. One long leg thrust forward, bent. Free hand idly swinging, brushing his shorts. Could be dreaming....

A boy standing casually on the far wing. Looking like an interested spectator. Calm. Except for the constant flicking of fingers at his sides; twitching of his chin....

Others make no secret of tension: temporarily out of the play, they compensate by running on the spot. Pale knees pounding like a donkey engine.

Bending and stretching in extreme versions of familiar exercises.

Holding tight onto their ankles, legs stiffening, faces in their shins. Hair hanging onto their boots. Brand new catapults ready to fire.

My goalie. Left alone from time to time. Peering out from under a peaked cap. At the distant scramble. Or round about his domain. As if seeking wisdom in wood and grass.

While not called to action, he lifts an arm and leans on the goal post. A moment or two. Before straightening up. Clapping his gloved hands together, crouching. Baring his teeth. Then relaxing again. To lean this time on the other post.

Striving for superhuman cool.

But to my perverse eye, just a kid who would like nothing better than to lean on a goal post all day....

These moments of rest are brief; the kids all have their share of action. But footy is like that: it leaves you alone at times....

One pudgy little readhead down on the grass after a scrambling clash with two other players. Lies winded for a minute. Rolling over rises neatly. At the same time reaching behind him to tug at his shorts: caught too tightly between his buns. A good hard tug. Shake of the shorts.

Hands clasped behind his neck. Once more alert and in position.

Buttocks clenching, relaxing; clenching, relaxing....

Pericles poised to strike. Just outside the penalty area. Leaning slightly forward, arms hanging free. Can't see his face. But feel his intense concentration. Almost hear his hissed instructions.

I am suddenly struck by the look of his neck. From the back too vulnerable. His hair twisted and matted with sweat. Plastered to one side revealing the bare nape.

A flicker of pity and fear touches me. Making me want to run out and cover his neck with my hands, lips....

This kid on the other team years younger than the rest. About half as tall. Brown hair cut in a fringe. Tooth missing up front. Brow furrowed. Determined.

Conscious of disadvantage he rolls his head from side to side as he runs. Thrusting forward one shoulder after the other.

In fact he is one of their better runners and plays as well as any. After each good pass one of his team mates pats him on the back. He never acknowledges 'his praise. The frown remains.  
...

A tall slim boy standing outside, toes nudging the line. Cowlick flying up in the wind as he waits for the whistle. His whole body straining forward. If the rules forbid him to actually ride the ball in, he will be swift to follow.

Holding the ball tight above his head. You can see his arms stretching. Bending his spine back further than it ought to go. Twisting a little. Then snapping forward, body and soul hurling that ball as far and fast as possible.

Long before my eye picks up the receiving boot, it lingers on the thrower. Hanging limp from the waist, momentarily spent....

One of my forwards, a good-looking fourteen-year-old with shiny chestnut hair and eyes of a faun. Into every movement with speed and tenacity. Never stands still for long.

Frequently thrusts his hands inside his shorts as if expecting pockets.

Once every three minutes sweeps his hair off his face with a breathtaking toss of the head. I'd swear he wears his hair that way just so he can throw it back: he does it so well....

A cluster of five jump for a ball hoping either to head it back to safety or in for a goal. Some of them must be mine. They jump not precisely together in rapid succession, a split second between each leap. The crouch, hardly bending the knees. Tensing the calves. The stretching of the trunk as feet leave the ground, toes pointing anywhere. Neck extended until the head is ready to defect.

Technically it is a contest but you can sense they are in it together. When some kid connects it is fortune more than skill. The smile on his face for his luck not victory....

I stand at the sideline fretting. Shouting. A stream of clichés pours from my mouth automatically. Not that I don't mean it. Not that it isn't necessary.

A bunch of kids thunders past me very close. Some of them brush against me. All but trample me with their nylon studs.

I can smell them hot and sweaty in the dying afternoon. Their boots tangled like cattle in stampede.

They must be tired by now. But breathe easily openmouthed, their swelling lungs telling nothing.

A bit scruffy: shirts hanging out of muddy shorts. Hair mussed and blown. Many a bootlace trailing. Socks sagging to half mast; sunk.

They are engaged in a futile action: chasing a ball which will be out long before they catch it. I'm sure they know this. It doesn't matter. United they gallop on. Every eye gleaming....

In kicking the kids excel. Not so much in skill as in grace. Here above all is where I see them growing before my eyes. Scooping in a pass. Biting the lip in concentration. Dribbling with dainty pretence at leisure.

Swinging back that boot which looks like a ball of steel at the end of a rope. Hurling the body into it. The back making a perfect bow. Legs dappled in cloudy sunshine. Smooth, straight, concealing muscle and sinew. You see them lengthen in the kick. Rejoice in that growth....

Sharpest image of this happy day: Pericles. In a glorious coup. Seeing a chance. Accelerating. Rest to strike in a flick of the lid. None of us understanding until it has happened. Lightning. We need action re-play. Can't have it. The thing is past.

He doesn't score, but it is beautiful.

The last time I checked him he looked extra loose. Next time he is a good twenty-five metres up front, body bent into the lethal arc, arms flung back, fingers splayed. Hair flopping forward. A cannon-ball blasting pigskin.

The ball he kicks goes straight out. But the move was brilliant....

They were out there on their own. Parents, coaches, fans excluded. Testing themselves against the day. A grand final. If you admitted. Still a bunch of boys at play. Their own conspiracy proof against the rest of us.

None of them was under-nourished. But looked frail enough at a distance.

The backs of their smooth beige thighs under floppy shorts were strangely poignant.

They had things the pros have long lost: joy, innocence, boundless optimism. For all their dreams, like their straining limbs were directed towards the future.

Where everything was possible.

Pericles had tried to explain to me.

About football. About being young.

Finally I learned from him.

BYRON'S BASTARDS, SWEATING, glazed with triumph, self-conscious in their new role as champions, ambled off the field one by one. I loved them all.

The ovation followed.

Piece de resistance: Pericles running first to me. Keeping the officials waiting. Grabbed hold of me and kissed me on the mouth. In front of the whole world.

None of them seeing. The thrust of his hot loving tongue as it sought mine.

After the formalities we suffered a sense of anti-climax. Me and the kids.

Two nights later we would gather again for a celebration. Pizza. Video games.

For the present it was over.

We were loath to leave the field of victory. Dragging limbs seeking temporal retard.

The weather scattered us eventually with a sudden downpour.

The kids ran off to cars, family, home.

Pericles stayed with me. His sweat and dirt washing away before me.

We stared at each other, helplessly soaking. Our eyes full of joyful satisfaction.

"Want to come for a ride, Muscle?"

"Yeah," he husked.

"Before I go crazy and write a poem or something." We jumped on the bike and sped away together. Cruising around long after the rain had stopped. "Wanna go to the sea? Ride along the shore?"

"Yes," he murmured into my shirt. My shoulder shivering with the kiss of his warm breath.

"Let's go!" I shouted.

We roared along the coast road for miles. Smelling the salt. Breathing the airy promise of summer coming. When we had covered too much distance we discovered at last that we were hungry. Pulled in to a souvlaki bar. Devoured hot pittas with icy cans of Coke. Night slowed us down.

Leaning across the wet bike we wondered what next.

"Time to go home, Muscle?"

A long negative silence.

"Why don't we go to Sounion? Please David, I feel very bad if we don't go somewhere now. It is strange. I have this sort of sad empty feeling."

I understood. Feeling a fair bit of that empty sadness myself.

"Sounion?" I smiled, half knowing.

"To the house. It's not much father."

The family house on the cape.

"Will anybody be there?"

"Only my aunt and uncle. They won't mind. They live upstairs. We can have downstairs. Come on, David, what do you say? I can't go home now."

"You'll call your parents?"

"Sure."

We raced off along the dark wet empty road to Sounion. In the event we did not meet uncle and aunt. Pericles was the messenger. A few sleepy phrases drifted down the staircase and

we were ensconced.

Pericles led me to a bedroom overlooking the gulf.

"You can have this if you like."

"We'll share it," I decided. Pushing him inside.

"Wouldn't like to lose you at this stage."

He gave a husky chuckle and showed me our bathroom.

Pericles went for a long delayed piss while I undressed.

It was a warm night. I opened the window between the beds. The sea air rushed in.

"I usually sleep in the nude in the summer," I admitted.

"Me too. How else will you sleep on the sticky nights? You have to lay your body out free, to catch the cool. Or you wake up in your sweat. And your head is like a sheep's back."

Though it was only spring.

Then he was standing beside me naked.

His slim dark form silvered by the rising moon.

My erection must have distracted the coast guard.

The warm salty air wrapped us round. An erotic massage.

Putting my arms around his shoulders, I bent to kiss his head.

Pericles sank into my side. Our flesh burning both.

My kisses continuing wet and passionate. Down to his ears, his neck. To suck and softly bite.

His hand brushing against my cock as I held and caressed his buttocks. Imbibing his intense stillness as my fingers slid down deep into his cleft.

Pericles' cock erect and springy.

He took hold of mine and began to stroke it slowly.

While my finger probed and tickled.

Finally he murmured,

"The mosquitoes will make a feast. If we stand here."

I assented.

"There's a little electric thing you plug in." He found a vapourizer and got it going.

"Which bed shall we use, Muscle?" One hand tugging at his short thick stem. The other fondling his balls.

"I don't care," he sighed voluptuously. "Let us be together. Inside I am falling down something. I think I need you tonight. To be beside me friendly."

His sensuality was genuine. But he was stirring it up.

Relying on sex to erase perhaps his first depression.

He needed distraction, reassurance, love.

We stretched out on the fresh white sheet. Sharing a pillow.

I gazed on him. Rapt.

"Muscle... your skin is like silk."

He lay there enjoying my praise. As my hands moved slowly over his body. An exquisite journey.

I wanted to tell him he was beautiful. But feared the word.

Which might disturb his idea of himself.

Instead I took his hair in my fingers and turned his face to me.

We rolled together like the two halves of a clam. Our tongues tangling and sparring.

"Let me pleasure you."

I began to suck his cock. Swelling in my mouth.

His legs slide together. Scrotum draws tight. Back arches.

Gripping my neck. He spurts repeatedly onto my tongue.

Ambrosia.

I take him in my arms again. Gradually he calms after orgasm.

"Wanna smoke, Muscle?"

"Yeah, a smoke tastes best after you come."

He inhales with pleasure. Head back on the pillow, eyes half closed.

I draw one muscly leg across me and caress the inside of his thigh.

He moves the other leg. With a wet finger I begin to probe his anus.

"Does that hurt?"

"Nah."

In fact he feels wide open.

There is a long peaceful silence as he prolongs his cigarette. And I lie happily fingering his arse.

I go out to search in the bathroom cabinet. When I return he is lying on his stomach, cigarette stubbed.

"Does that feel better?"

"Mm. What is it?"

"Nivea cream. All I could find."

I lick his hot buttocks until he starts to giggle. "Tickle?"

"Mm."

"Tasty too."

Gripping his narrow waist, I move on top. Rubbing my grateful cock all over his arse. Creamed up, I enter him. "Hurt?"

"No."

"How does it feel?"

"Big. Like it always is when you play with me. It feels like you."

"First time, eh?" "No."

Oh?



"I never took a man's before," he explains. "Just with another kid."

My hands slide up his sides. Stroke his chest. Squeeze his nipples.

"It was just a game, though. That time," he concludes. Sex always is.

Unless there be some love shared.

"O.K., Muscle?" I am riding on his buttocks.

"I can stand it. Have to get used to your cock, that's all."

"It gets better each time," I promise. "You'll... get a better feeling. We'll be closer together.... Do you believe me, Pericles?"

"I know."

More pounding. Diving in deeper. Fever rising.

Now I am lost to all but blinding passion. As I hold him tightly in my arms. Biting on his neck. Thrusting. Banging.

Seconds on the precipice of pain.

And the joyful release. As I empty myself into him. Fearing I shall never stop. But do, in time.

He squeezes me nicely with his ring as I withdraw. "Thank, Muscle," I gasp. My sweaty cheek resting on his smooth chest.

LATER WE REPEAT the rites with more success. Exchanging tentative terms of endearment. We snuggle into each other ready to sleep. Blissful, I drift off first...