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## Hit by the Machine: Reading a Local Protest Poem on the Island of Symi, 120 Years Later

Julia Martin

The poem ‘Χειμερινός όνειρος,’ or ‘Winter Dream,’ by Metrophanes I Kalafatas, was written in 1903 in the hope of influencing the Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid Han II to ban the new deep-sea diving suits which had recently started to be used in the Aegean sponge industry at a devastating cost to both individuals and the social body. 120 years later, the poem’s bold rage against modernity and the Machine seems poignantly ineffectual and nostalgic. Yet its lyrical account of the non-commodifiable qualities of life on Symi before the arrival of the *skafandro* still offers a positive image for the contemporary renewal of sustainable eco-social community on the islands.

**Keywords:** sponge industry; Symi; Kalafatas; *skafandro*; the Machine; sustainability

The day-trippers had all left the island and the sponge-sellers and trinket stalls had packed away their wares. But outside one of the tourist shops in Symi harbour stood a forlorn figure who remained all night looking out to sea when everyone else had gone home. The stained old canvas diving suit had been filled with padding, tied with nylon cords and suspended from the roof to stand upright like an over-sized teddy bear with sad knock-knees and supplicant hands. And where the head should be, a spherical Navy Diving Helmet (SERIAL NO 5123, DATE OF MFG 1/45) was held in place with a chain around the neck. It was a heavy thing made of brass and copper, with small round windows at the front and sides, and a pipe at the back of the head that attached to a black rubber lifeline for air. *Skafandro*, they named it. The man-boat. The man who is a boat. The men who wore it were called *mechanikos*<sup>1</sup>.

For Metrophanes I Kalafatas, a school principal and poet from Rhodes at the turn of the twentieth century, the *skafandro* and the ‘mechanised’ way of life that it embodied, were utterly abhorrent. Yes, it was making some people very rich, but at a terrible cost. So in 1903 he set down his protest in a twenty-five page poem called ‘Χειμερινός όνειρος,’ or ‘Winter Dream,’ a particularly forceful rage against modernity and the Machine, written in the hope of influencing the Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid Han II to ban the new diving suits. While others at the time were holding meetings, casting stones into a circle in an ancient curse, or organising petitions, he wrote a poem. This was his activism. Now 120 years later I was visiting the islands of Symi, Halki, and Kalymnos in the Dodecanese to learn about the near-defunct sponge industry that once powered their economies. The book I was writing was more meditation than protest, but I did want to present the impact of sponge fishing in the Aegean as a microcosm of our present eco-social predicament. So when a Google search turned up a copy of the long poem in translation, I was glad of the chance to think about its use of literature as a medium for social critique, even a kind of activism.

In the first part of the poem the speaker dreams of a handsome woman who introduces herself as a personification the island itself, Mother Symi. Invoking the authority of Greek myth to spit her fury against the new diving tech, her eyes run with tears:

I hate it, the disgusting thing,  
 as much as the devil's legions,  
 as much as the head of Gorgon and Medusa,  
 the venomous viper's hiss.  
 The gear's repulsive shape  
 brings frigid horror to my limbs.  
 Once they were turned to stone by Medusa,  
 now by the ugly Helmet!  
 (M N Kalafatas 2003: 229–30)<sup>2</sup>

After the diver had said a prayer and crossed himself, he'd put on the helmet and his comrades would tighten the brass screws to fasten it down. Then he took a lumbering leap from the deck into the waves, consigning his life to the hands of his mates: young men like him who must crank the wheel of the air compressor, turn over the sand-timer every thirty seconds to be sure he was not down too long, steer the boat to follow his progress on the ocean floor, and wait for the tug that said he was ready to come up. Even on land, the suit looked claustrophobic.

In the poem this process is described by the Vessel, an animated sponge *caique*, who is outraged at what the *skafandro* has done to her brave divers. Instead of simply stripping and diving into the deep, she says, they must now be dressed by others in the outlandish suit that is a kind of prison:

Astride a chair they dress him up,  
 with screws they seal his body,  
 lead on his shoulders, heavy shoes,  
 upon his head the helmet. (243)

Kalafatas sets this oppressive burden of wearing the new tech against the memory of thousands of years of free diving.

For as long as history can remember, men from the Aegean islands had harvested the sea floor by diving deep on a single breath without masks or any mechanical assistance. Sponge-hunters, sponge-swimmers, sponge-cutters. The ancient Greek texts have many names for them, men of phenomenal stamina and lung capacity who would first say their prayers to Apollo and then dive naked and open-eyed into the deep with a rope around the waist, carrying only a sickle for cutting and a heavy lead weight which they used to sink swiftly to the sponge beds. It was dangerous work but their craft was highly valued, and the skill was transmitted over generations from man to man through direct experience. The strongest naked divers were island heroes of legendary status, and they could marry the best wives. In time their prayers might be whispered to a different god, the sickle was replaced by a small steel knife, and the lead weight became a smooth flat stone, the bellstone, which they used to propel themselves underwater. But the technology for sponge-diving in the Dodecanese remained virtually identical until 1863.

In that year, Fotis Mastoridis came home to the island of Symi from a job clearing shipwrecks in the East Indies with his employer's farewell gift of a complete deep-sea diving suit and a hand-cranked air compressor. It was, he knew, a revolution. Sponge divers would now be able to dive to depths they'd never reached before, stay underwater almost indefinitely, and pluck sponges from the bountiful seabed like bunches of grapes from a vine. But as the tale

goes, one of many in which the politics of machismo seem inextricable from the culture of sponge-diving, the naked divers of Symi had no interest in trying out the new diving suit. It was only when Evgenia, Fotis's three-months' pregnant wife, agreed to be lowered into the harbour dressed in the entire kit that they were shamed into putting it on themselves. It was a pivotal moment for the whole region. As Kalafatas recognises very clearly, and with considerable distress, once it became possible for a human being to become a boat, a *mechanikos*, everything changed.

In the poem, the Vessel bitterly laments that those who now dive 'inside the suits' go on to assume the airs of an arrogant class of nouveau riche, desperate to spend their new-found wealth on foreign commodities before death or paralysis takes them out of the loop. Back on the island they wear gold chains and Western clothes, and stroll in rich pants and velvet vests, then leave them to be auctioned when they depart for the next trip from which they may never return (244). Certainly, the plunder of the seabed that the *skafandro* made possible meant that not only the merchants and captains, but also the divers themselves enjoyed for a while levels of previously unheard-of affluence. Among many stories of conspicuous consumption on Symi around the time the poem was written, one of the more startling and memorable is of bank notes being rolled up into cigars.

The terrible human cost to this luxurious lifestyle is faced in the poem with open eyes. Many divers perish on the Vessel's deck, he writes, and their corpses never return home. Many others are disabled:

But many beautiful young men are lost.  
hale and strong as lions.  
They end up beggars, impotent,  
miserable, awful, they walk the streets. (245)

'I believe they also called it Satan's Machine,' I said, pointing to the polished helmet in Dinos the Original Sponge Shop. 'So many people died.'

Panormitis nodded grimly. After being on the island a couple of days, I'd found that almost everyone I met had some story to tell about sponges. But the men in this particular shop were especially friendly and well-informed. Panormitis's father was a sponge captain, and Dinos had inherited the sponge shop from his father Kiriakos who opened its doors in 1939 when sponges were still a highly prized commodity in daily use. Now the small room was a tourist destination, stacked with memorabilia and filled from floor to ceiling with golden sponges, among them big shells, a few pieces of coral, framed black-and-white photographs of heroic divers, a highly polished *skafandro* helmet, two model sponge diving *caiques* in full sail, and a couple of salvaged Grecian urns encrusted with barnacles. There was also a picture commemorating Evgenia Mastoridis's memorable first dive.

Almost immediately after she returned alive and well from her brief descent into Yialos harbour in her husband's deep-sea diving gear, the ancient Dodecanese sponge trade was transformed. Beginning first with Symi, and soon spreading to the islands of Kalymnos and Halki, the fleets began using the new technology to go deeper than ever before, and to harvest an unimagined bounty of the most luxurious sponges. And while the demands of recently industrialised people in London, Paris, Vienna, and New York for high-quality sponge might have seemed inexhaustible, the *skafandro* now made it possible for the island economies to rise to the challenge. Each year more *caiques* were built in the shipyard at Harani, more magnificent Venetian style houses appeared on the hill, the island populations swelled as never before, and in a single season the sponge merchants, the captains, and even the divers themselves became richer than they'd ever imagined possible.

Looking back, the tale of unsustainable resource extraction was bound to be short-lived. It was the Golden Age of sponge fishing, but the real cost was uncountable. When divers and their families called the *skafandro* Satan's Machine it was because it killed people or disabled them for life. Once the sponge industry had largely relinquished the ancient way of naked diving in favour of the new gear, its magical promise – that you could go down to 70 m, walk about the sea floor gathering sponges, bring them to the surface, and then simply return for more, several times in a single day – brought with it the shadow of excruciating suffering. In the poem, when Mother Symi angrily mourns the vigorous youths sent to Hades, the 'many unburied dead' who 'survive /to walk the markets /poisoned by the helmet's drink' (230), she is outspoken in her condemnation of the role of the diving bosses as the key agents of this suffering: 'their gear causes this torment,' she says, 'this scourging poverty' (230).

At first, the problem was that nobody really understood the physics of decompression. As is now well known, if you're underwater and breathing compressed air, your inhalation includes a high percentage of nitrogen which goes into a supersaturated solution in the body. If you ascend too fast, or stay down too long, or dive too often in one day, the decompressing nitrogen froths out in bubbles that clog the bloodstream and restrict the oxygen supply. This experience of decompression sickness, or the Bends, is agony. Like a heart attack, the say, taking place in different parts of the body at once. The Dodecanese divers called it being 'hit by the Machine.' In the early days of Satan's Machine, nobody kept reliable records of how many divers were hit overall, but the impact was devastating. It's said that during the first thirty years after its introduction, from the island of Kalymnos alone 300 young men died and 600 more were paralysed (Kalafatas 2003: 15–16).

Then in 1908, the physician and physiologist John Scott Haldane produced the first recognised decompression table for the British Admiralty. His work was based on experiments that involved saturating guinea-pigs, mice, rats, hens, rabbits, and most especially goats in deep water. For some reason, it was the poor goats who were the best subjects, enduring long lonely hours in compression chambers and painful decompressions, and suffering the ear problems, blindness, paralysis, disability of the limbs (especially the fore-leg), and death that accompanied the research. The extent of trauma that the goats experienced in the process is recorded in Haldane's notes in his mention of their continuous bleating. As a result of this torturous work he developed guidelines for safer decompression that involved, in particular, a slow and measured ascent from the deep. But even once this crucial information had reached the Dodecanese, most divers would not follow the recommended rates.

Luckily, Panormitis said, his father didn't have to deal with any of that. By the time he was captaining the *caiques*, they harvested the sponges without having to employ divers at all. The sponge boat would simply trawl a metal bar across the ocean floor, scooping up everything that stood in its way into a great net, including sponges. As he described it I glimpsed for a moment that bar scouring the rippling forests of the sea, tearing out seaweeds, corals, sponges, breaking limbs, crushing heads and fins, snapping the fine sheaths of shellfish, scooping out an entire realm of living beings, the actual living people of the sea shovelled up into the light in a writhing mass, the living mind of the sea raked over in quest of sponge. It's a method that has since been banned, but it sounds about right for the 1950s: naively over-confident technology, and no limits to the plunder.

Not that the earlier spongers had many qualms. In the days of naked diving, the minimal available tech set a natural restriction to the quantity and quality of sponges that could be removed from the sea. Yet even so, by the mid-nineteenth century a class of people on Symi and Kalymnos had become very rich and powerful from mining the seabed for all it was worth, and as early as 1840 the Aegean ecoregion had become so depleted that when new sponge beds were discovered along the coast of North Africa, it became lucrative for the sponge captains to make the annual journey all the way to Libya, or Benghazi.

After the *skafandro* arrived on the scene in 1863, the opportunities seemed infinite. It was now possible to dive to depths from which no human being had ever returned alive. Critically, this meant the sponge industry began to excavate the sea at a rate faster than the sponge beds could regrow. It was one of those ecological tipping points which is seldom discerned for what it is at the time, until it's way too late. Or perhaps it is in fact discerned, but the interests profiting from annihilating future generations simply do not care. So while Satan's Machine is usually remembered as an instrument of human suffering, the impact of such apparatuses of exploitation is seldom extricable from the suffering of other beings and the devastation of the environment. As the ecological thinker John Elder once said to me rather simply and a little ironically when we parted company at an airport after an international conference on literature and the environment in Eugene, Oregon, in 2005, 'That which is not sustainable will not be sustained.'

While Kalafatas does not share our twenty-first century concern about these ecological dimensions, he does frame his protest against the *skafandro* very explicitly in terms of its social impact. Not long after the arrival of the new tech, people on the sponge diving islands of Symi, Kalymnos, and Halki began a succession of angry demonstrations in response to the death and paralysis that the new diving gear was causing, and the poetic activism of 'Winter Dream' is part of this upsurge of rage. But the poem also goes further to see the Machine not just as a source of personal suffering for the aptly named *mechanicos* and their families, but as a devilish harbinger of commodity capitalism and a mechanised way of life.

In the poem Mother Symi makes the implications of this mechanical imagery explicit. The diving gear, in her view, is the pivotal technology that has caused her people to abandon their traditional ways, and to give up local handcraft for foreign commodities. It broke down the guilds, she says, house painters and tailors have become idle, the European dress now reigns, and because of the *skafandro*, Symiots have lost their characteristic honour, pride, and ethics. In their place, self-interest glories, and 'arrogance rules,/ pouring out of those Helmets' (230). What she bitterly calls the 'virtues of the suit' are nothing but 'common anguish' and 'heartless wilful evil' (231). The key agents of this social perversion are the sponge captains and merchants whom Kalafatas depicts as being ruthlessly profit-driven:

Many die without justice.  
and many walk the markets lame.  
Our merchants seeing them turn deaf,  
scramble to their cashiers.  
to earn high yields on their returns. (231)

Witnessing this delusion and injustice, the poem appeals for the island community to return to its senses: to recognise the true wealth of its heritage, which is more precious than any commodity. 'Gifted with priceless goods I was,' Mother Symi says, 'and wealthy in all I needed' (234). For the Vessel too, her disgust at the new diving technology is entangled with a deep sense of loss and fury at the end of sail and fine craft. Once, she remembers, 'I was a sea-bird trailing /my belly proud, skimming the waves/with bold, bright many-coloured paints /adorned like a true bride' (243). But now the decks of the *caique* are befouled by the filth of the sponge-divers. 'They stink my guts, festoon my sides, /torture me by steam-engines,' she laments, and by the engines of the Age of Steam: 'Now forced by engine, my life drains, /I cannot even breathe' (242–3). In place of this, the Sultan's wished-for ban is imagined as having the power to turn back time to a Golden Age. If the rumour of it is true, the divers say to the Vessel, 'the gear will cease, /your nails turn gold and silver, /your sails to silk, your ropes to steel, /no engine nor its shame (246).

Of course it didn't work. If even the angel of history cannot make whole what has been smashed amid the storm we call progress, what hope has one poem?

As regards the impassioned appeal of 'Winter Dream' to ban the diving tech, economic interests predictably trumped ethical and humanitarian priorities. The Sultan had already received several delegations begging for an end to the new technology, and several bans had in fact been issued. But each time, sponge merchants and captains in collusion with local Turkish police would find ways to ignore the ban, or else the fleet would quickly set off for the seven-month summer season quickly to be out of reach of the news. And then each time, the pressures of the market were strong enough for the ban to be revoked, and things continued as before.

More broadly, to the extent that the protest against the *skafandro* in 'Winter Dream' is really a rage against modernity and the Machine, it simply has no viable alternative to offer. Instead, since the old form of sponge diving had been at the heart of Symiot life since antiquity, Kalafatas insists that the only way to eradicate the toxic delusion that now besets the community is for the island to return to 'the first technique' of diving. Poignantly, the poem's entire longing for Symi to rediscover itself as a wholesome social order is concentrated in this idea of a mythic return to the purity of naked diving, and the simplicity of the bellstone:

The diving gear is old and soon will cease,  
The divers will again be strong,  
the time has come, the end is near,  
the diving stone will rule once more.  
The diving gear has weakened,  
the naked dive will bloom again,  
our forefathers' art will flower.  
Long live the first technique! (229)

To read these impossible words downloaded on my iPad, sitting alone on a warm afternoon on the balcony of a holiday rental with a cup of camomile tea beside me – yellow flowers picked from a crack in the path – at that particular time of day when the air around the cottage was thick with the voices of sparrows and the scent of fig leaves, and the massive Blue Star ferry powered into the harbour far below, laden with people and cargo, and the island breathed in and out in its wake, to witness from the location of this present moment the hopeful rage of the twenty-five pages of 'Winter Dream' ... was to glimpse a community on the cusp of irrevocable change.

And yet. There is something about the long poem's rage against the Machine that will not let me go.

The social disruption that came to the islands soon after it was written was far more devastating than anything Kalafatas described, or probably could have imagined. Just nine years later, Italy occupied the Dodecanese in 1912 after 400 years of Ottoman rule. This meant that Symiot shipbuilders could no longer log trees on the Turkish mainland to build their legendary fast boats, there was no more access to the fields of Anatolia for grazing, Italy denied the Dodecanese sponge fleets permission to dive for sponges off the North African coast, at least for a while, and with the Aegean seabed largely fished out of sponge, the economic impact was severe. Within a short time, the islands descended into hunger, even starvation, and populations plummeted. Then the brutal German occupation during World War 2 brought an even more desperate time when homes and public buildings were bombed out, and the islanders were driven to foraging for dandelions and eating the cats and dogs. After the War, the demand for sea sponges had been reduced by the appearance of the synthetic sponge, and in 1986, the few sponges that remained after over-fishing had ravaged the seabed were destroyed in a great and mysterious sponge death that took place in that year. Meanwhile Symi and the other glorious Aegean islands were discovered by summer tourism which now replaced sponges as the new industry that fed the few remaining islanders. These days, though the hills are still marked with the

memory of abandoned terraces, fruit and vegetables and all other foods are shipped in from Rhodes or Nysiros. Hardly anyone grows their own tomatoes.

Against this present dispensation, nostalgia aside, the picture of Symiot life that Kalafatas paints does succeed in offering a compelling description of a functioning community. Whereas the sponge bosses want to make quick money at the expense of the broader social body, he insists that the true wealth of the island is something ‘priceless.’ This uncommodifiable thing is a quality of social life to be found in safe ports, serene places, skilful shipbuilders, beautiful churches, enchanted views, monks who tirelessly build cells and tend orchards, priests who flood the people’s gentle hearts with gifts and feed the hungry with the sky’s own bread, and also in the work of professors, doctors, pharmacists, libraries, schools, girls in girl-schools with their teachers, and in the provision of free health care and education to everyone (234–6).

120 years later, concluding this essay, I suddenly realise who I want to share this with. Vasilis Roussakis, the deputy-mayor of Halki whom I recently met, is part of a bold new greening initiative to renew the island and make it sustainable and self-sufficient, the first GreEco island. When Kalafatas sees the community of Symi being eroded by the Machine, the only positive way forward that he can imagine is back, back to a premodern age of sail and the purity of naked diving. By contrast, Halki’s response to the global crisis of environment and development is the vision of a wholesome eco-social order that involves solutions that are definitively technological and cutting-edge: smart green tech for ecological sustainability.

I write to Vasilis who is also, in a nice karmic turn, the grandson of a *skafandro* diver. Would he be interested to read this lyrical description of the true wealth of Symi before the arrival of the new diving tech? Maybe it can speak to the transformation, recovery, and repopulation of Halki which he and others are now working for, now in the wake of the Machine, now at the other end of modernity when we find ourselves once again at the brink of catastrophe. The deputy-mayor writes back at once. Yes, please send it. He would be more than happy to read it. He would really appreciate it.

### Notes on Contributor

**Julia Martin** teaches English and Creative Non-fiction at the University of the Western Cape and has published widely in the field of literature and ecology. Her publications include *Writing Home, A Millimetre of Dust: Visiting Ancestral Sites*, and *The Blackridge House: A Memoir*. She also collaborated with Gary Snyder on *Nobody Home: Writing, Buddhism, and Living in Places*, and co-authored *Syntax of the River: The Pattern Which Connects* with Barry Lopez.

### Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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2. Unless otherwise indicated, all subsequent quotations are from this text.

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