

Recall This Book 74  
Recall this Buck  
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George Kalogeris (EF, JP)

Elizabeth Ferry: Greetings, listeners, and welcome to the Recall this Book. My name is Elizabeth Ferry and I'm really delighted to be here with my co-host John Plotz. Hey John.

John Plotz: Oh hey Elizabeth, it's great to be here.

Elizabeth Ferry: And with George Kalogeris who's joining us today. George is a poet. He teaches poetry and classics in translation at Suffolk University, and he's the author of several books, including *Winthropos*, which is recently out with the Louisiana State University Press, and which we'll be hearing from and talking about today. Welcome George.

George Kalogeris: Great to be here.

Elizabeth Ferry: For today's episode, we've decided that we're going to kind of go back and forth between reading poetry and talking a little bit about it to give as much space to George's wonderful poems as possible. So George, would you like to get us started?

George Kalogeris: Sure. *Winthropos*, the title of the book is from the Greekified name that my immigrant father gave to the town where I grew up. He and his brothers had a little grocery store. In the town, and there are a number of poems that are situated in the grocery store, so I'm going to start with one of those. One of those poems and it's called *Peponia*.

Honeydew melons, swelling their shipping crates,  
Kept cool in the damp cellar dark of my father's store:  
Out of sight but never so far out of mind  
That every so often a crowbar's iron talon  
Couldn't pry open their plywood lids, suspending  
The nails like fangs. If ripeness is all, it was all

In the way I saw the way my father cradled  
*Pepónia*, turning them over slowly enough  
To keep the luminous pallor of their moist  
Complexions fresh: still bright in the long look back  
Through the cellar dark. All in the way he'd never  
Say what he saw, but set them gently back down  
In their wooden crates. Then every so often another  
Aura would hover there, in the afterglow  
Of a dangling bulb's interrogating glare.  
Which still can make my father's sisters appear,  
Crouching together before a crumbling wall.  
I mean in that black and white snapshot my mother kept  
On her perfumed dresser, with its oval mirror.  
And those open, kerchiefed faces staring back  
From the open fields, late in the nineteen thirties.  
As if a crowbar angled into the dark  
Were leverage enough to release the fragrant, opulent  
Sheen of those who never cross over the water  
But hover near whenever I say *pepónia*:  
Honeydew melons, swelling their shipping crates.

John Plotz: George, is it OK if we put the poems  
themselves up on our page so that listeners can read as?

George Kalogeris: Sure, that would be great.

John Plotz: It I think that'd be great too because it was just.

George Kalogeris: That would be lovely too, yeah?

John Plotz: It was just fantastic to be reading along with you and  
hearing how you managed that amazing enjambment, those  
line breaks where the meaning kind of falls over from one  
line to the next.

George Kalogeris: It's a crucial point.

Elizabeth Ferry: Yeah, there's a couple of lines I wanted to

talk about and hear you talk about. I mean in the first place, just having the first, the first line and the last line be the same has this, gives this kind of rounded quality to the to the poem which is.

John Plotz: As round as the melons.

Elizabeth Ferry: All about rounding. Roundedness yeah and I mean I just love the emphasis of the word and the shape of the word right? I mean, I mean, it's clear that that this word *pepónia* is itself so kind of opulent and smooth and round. It reminds me a little bit. I don't know if you guys ever read Eudora Welty's essay in becoming a writer about the word moon, and she describes when she sort of discovered she wanted to be a writer and she felt the word moon like a grape in her mouth. And it just reminds me, yeah, a lot about that.

George Kalogeris: So that's wonderful.

Elizabeth Ferry: Can you say a little bit about: because you do this in a number of poems about choosing a word and making a Greek word? What kind of work the word does in a poem like this?

George Kalogeris: Yeah, I think it's a central point in a number of my poems and I don't know some words. It was the musical quality and it's a sort of talismanic power that certain words had and it was always, you know, in the house where I grew up, it was, you know, the language is moving back and forth between Greek and English and how those decisions were made, when to use a Greek word, when to use an English word, I think often had to do with the musicality. And I have another poem where and this is exactly what happened is I came home from school and it was the first week of school. I was in the 1st grade and I held up a fork and I held up a spoon and I said well why do you call this one spoon and this one *piroúni*? My mother. And she, of course, she had no answer to that, but I'm sure it had to do something with the

in my childhood mind the *piroúni* had something to do with the prongs and there was a very musical sound, so I felt that.

Elizabeth Ferry: Right?

George Kalogeris: You know that the poems could move back and forth between those languages and try to sort of activate an original emotion which was in the case of my father, you know, not knowing as a kid, much about his history, except that he came from a tiny village in Arcadia way up in the mountains. And there was a kind of, you know, I knew there was some kind of unspoken trauma about it, like what happened to his mother. How come we never saw her? And you know, I didn't know the Nazis had gotten to that village? But I knew there was something that made him melancholy, but it made him always very tender. And that you know, the melons was something that had to be handled so delicately because they bruised easily. And Elizabeth, you used the word rounded. And you know that the melons, they're faceless. But they become like the faces of the sisters, and the sisters faces in the kerchiefs are rounded. And there's an oval mirror. And so there's some kind of echo of imagery as well as that you know that there's a kind of echo chamber in that word taking me back to Greece.

Elizabeth Ferry: Yes, the open kerchief faces staring back. Yeah, yeah, and maybe even a sense of openness. But there's something secret or not secret in a kind of stealthy sense, but some reticence also.

George Kalogeris: Yeah, no, I think reticence is precisely right. My father was very reticent. And there was something secret or maybe even, you know, this is a kind of one thing I like about this poem is that it, out of that darkness that there comes this luminousness and it's mysterious to me. As you know, recalling it as a kid. But the um, and I think in some ways that that, you know, what John mentioned about, you

know, seeing the lines on the page that tenth line. When I get to that 5th stanza to keep the luminous pallor of their moist, and then line break, complexions. You know. Suddenly for a second that there's like a face there in fresh and right there because it's iambic pentameter, complexions fresh, there's still three more beats, still bright in the long look back. And I was particularly happy with that because it brings it back into the cellar. Dark but something has come out of, been unlocked from, those wooden crates and it's in both the image and the way the meter springs over the line break, I hope, enter that next couplet.

Elizabeth Ferry: Yeah, that's wonderful, yeah?

John Plotz: Well, I was just thinking about like there's all different writers I admire who are kind of can be, where the poetry can be enigmatic on the page. Like incredibly visual and present. And yet there's a sense of mystery, and some of those writers I don't know, I guess I was thinking of Hart Crane for some reason it, you just feel like you're always going to be looking, like you're going to keep staring down into the depths, and he's always like 1-7 syllable word ahead of you or something. But then William Carlos Williams I think, you know, I feel like don't they call him an Imagist poet? You know that, I think he's the, there is that sense of presence? You know you've rendered it in the word, you know, often those are incredibly short poems, and yet there's still something elusive about it. Like that's, you know.

Elizabeth Ferry: Right, and it's not the same elusiveness as saying, well, what does the poem mean? Or something like that, right? It's just a kind of a non-question.

John Plotz: Can I ask about the word aura in that context George? Because it's not italicized like *pepónia*, but because you're kind of primed by *pepónia*, I didn't read it just as like the ordinary, visual, I mean, does it, does aura mean something

more than just like the ordinary visual aura, like afterglow or something? Or is it?

George Kalogeris: Well I, yeah I think it's a, you know, the way that aura is at one side of the line and afterglow is at another that they're kind of reflecting off each other, and there is this sort of, the child's first, I think, experience whenever those naked bulbs would go off in the dark, you know they'd still be an aura for a second. Yeah, and I think, you know, I don't know exactly what the interrogating glare is, but I, you know, I think as an adult it takes me into some of the, the aura is the aura of trauma.

John Plotz: Yeah, yeah.

George Kalogeris: That's in that interrogating way, it's like an interrogation lamp. Yeah, but it's more at that point. It's more the adult speaker translating what to the child was just, uh, kind of strange, maybe slightly ominous aura, so if it has a range of, I guess it has a range of radiance, you might say, you know, through it.

John Plotz: Maybe that's actually a good transition. If you were going to read *Just My Imagination*, 'cause what one of the things I was saying before that I love about that poem is that question of the memory that existed back in the younger, the younger you. And then you're returning to it as an older you and, you know, I always think of Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* there where it's like old Pip and young Pip are kind of there together in the voice.

George Kalogeris: Yeah, and I think that you're, the point you're making is, when we get to the end of the poem, that's explicitly what happens where I, I hope at the end of the poem, you're in both, I'm in both places at once. Yeah, I'm younger and older and both events are happening and it also, thanks for mentioning this poem too, Elizabeth had picked out the *Pepónia* and you picked up this one. And this one allows me to talk about the town as a town, it's not necessarily

connected with the Greek world at all. Yeah, but it is connected with the very large Jewish community that was there when I was growing up in the Highlands part of town. And there was a poetry bookstore there. And that's where I really started to start being a serious reader of poetry, and they had a wonderful community. And there was a young guy, a beautiful young guy from that community who was a wonderful playwright and he was older than me. He was a few years older than me, but he was kind of a, you know, a star in the senior class. As you'll see in the poem and. Well, I'll read the poem and we can talk about it.

John Plotz: Yeah, and you can I just, I'm just going to encourage readers who have access to the show notes to look as George reads.

John Plotz: I think it's a great, you know, to have that double effect if you can.

George Kalogeris: *Just My Imagination*

I was back in Winthrop, driving through the town  
Where I grew up. The radio's off, but passing  
By the brand new high school it's vintage Motown  
Comes blaring through the Bose speakers in Neil  
Shapiro's yellow Camaro. The top is down.  
It's nineteen seventy-one. We're cruising the beach.  
The great Temptations are singing as if they could drown  
In the waves of what keeps running away with them.  
I love the way they stretch out the crucial noun:  
*Imagin—a—shun*. The girls on their towels are lying  
Face-up or face-down. Their skin is golden-brown.  
Neil is the president of the senior class  
As well as the drama club. The sun is a crown  
On his wavy luxuriant hair. Not one of our classmates  
Is yet a shade in their underworld cap and gown  
As Beauty walks by and he sings: *I hear a tender  
Rhapsody, but in—now slowing down—  
Reality she doesn't even know me . . .*  
Then speeding up to flee her laughing frown.

But no fleeing *Myelofibrosis*. Mellifluous term  
For the terminal cancer that never made a sound  
As it pulsed to the tribal beat of his chosen blood.  
And now there's no one around except the renowned  
Smokey Robinson & the Miracles  
Intoning their syrupy-scalding *Tears of a Clown*  
They call *Pagli—a—chi*. Congenial Neil, as white  
As a ghost as he waits for the vials to fill. The town  
Conducting a blood-drive. The need for "Ashkenazi  
Jews." The Mayo Clinic. The Music of Motown.  
The reel-to-reel cassette not yet obsolete.  
The canvas top on the yellow Camaro is down.  
We're passing The Neil Shapiro Center for  
The Performing Arts. He's Emerson College bound.

John Plotz: Yeah, I was also I was starting to sort of try to formulate a question about whether this was a, whether this is kind of a power of poetry to do this, to pull things together, or whether it's just that this is what we all live in, we live in memory, you know, we live in, you know, we walk down a street and we think about, you know, the people who used to walk down with it. I was just visiting my parents and I still realized, you know, I still called the house. 2 doors down, you know Mrs. Walker's house. Even though yeah, you know, she's been dead since 1982 and so I guess it's a question I was gonna ask you the question, George, is kind of like poetry versus –

George Kalogeris: That's lovely.

John Plotz: You know the reality of memory, but you were mentioning the music and in a way, the lyric quality of the music is what kind of cuts between those things, right? 'Cause music is always like that, that it just brings you back.

George Kalogeris: Yeah, and it's, you know, it has that, you know, sort of freezes the, you know, it preserves the moment in Amber. And for that reason I, you know, I think it also has



within it, you know, it also speaks to the passage of time and the sorrow that's there. There's a great moment in the in the *Odyssey* where Odysseus, his son finds his father has not come home in in 20 years and he finds he gets to the palace of Menelaus and Menelaus is there with Helen. Helen brings in a bowl of wine that she spikes with a magic potion that comes from Egypt. And it allows them to talk about the past without weeping. And earlier in in the *Odyssey*. Telemachus, his mother is walking down the steps, and she hears the Bard playing a song, and she says, tell him to stop playing that song. It's too sad. I can't bear the song it brings back too many memories. So that I think poetry both, you know, it has both of those instincts going that the song is going to bring back the sorrow and, you know, it's something that instinctively is painful and the verse is going to cut both ways I hope, if that makes sense.

John Plotz: Yeah, but George can I actually, can I follow up with that then. So does it mean for you, for your own poetic practice, does it have to be your stories? Your past, your memory that are kind of that crystal around which the feeling can congeal? You know, 'cause, like, the example of the *Odyssey* is such a great one to think with 'cause those that I feel, like the sorrow of, you know, of Helen is so real for all of us, even though we don't even think she existed. But we still feel it. But you know, there's a poetic practice it's all about. You know, imagined people who the poet can make those lives, and those crystals come alive. But your poetry, in this book at least, is so wound up in your own, like, the original, the ground level is your own stories, your own past.

George Kalogeris: Yeah, I think it's really interesting way to think about it. I mean I think that I try, you know, because I have, you know, this wonderful resource, which is the Greek and it leads immediately to the classical past or to the ancient past. Then I always try to have, uh, you know, try not to exploit that, but to find ways in which it has a, some kind of intertwined way of folding with my own experience. I don't want to use

it simply as a metaphor. Or simply as a way of enriching or embellishing. In my previous book there was quite a bit of material on Pausanias, who was a second century common era prose writer who wrote this terrific, you know, multi volume compilation of his walking around Greece. And because he spent a lot of time in Arcadia and Sparta, which is my parents' regions, I felt I could, you know, connect that with stories I heard from them. And that, so that was a way of I think, you know, keeping it from being a kind of. Which can be beautifully done. I mean, there's plenty of classical poems that are simply about the, those, Helen and those figures from the Odyssey, but I thought I had a, you know, a resource here that was rich and that I could connect it to my own life. And it would be the modern Greek world that activated Greek American world.

Elizabeth Ferry: It gives a, what you're saying now gives an interesting angle on the title of the poem right, which is from The Temptations song, obviously.

George Kalogeris: Ah, wonderful point. Yeah, that's terrific.

Elizabeth Ferry: Uhm, but you know it. The sort of way in which the poem is your imagination, running away with you, and there's the only, that's the only place where Neil Shapiro can drive his Camaro. And also this Neil Shapiro Center for the Arts can be together, right?

George Kalogeris: That's beautiful, that's, I hadn't thought of that. But that's a beautiful insight Elizabeth. And you know, I'm just thinking about how, you know, this poem doesn't have anything Greek about it, but Neil is kind of a Greek hero. I mean, he's kind of like a young Achilles. I mean, he's beautiful and I think it's kind of humorous in a way he's not only the president of the senior class, but he's the president of the drama club too. And his life is, you know, he's sort of enacting that as I'm riding in his car with him. And the, you know, the lights.

Elizabeth Ferry: And the sun is a crown on his WAVY, luxuriant hair.

George Kalogeris: Yeah, he's like, he's crowned like he has a laurel wreath. But which is all, you know, dangerous in the Greek world because he's too bright in a way and the gods never liked that.

Elizabeth Ferry: Right, right so?

John Plotz: Hey yeah, I can I, I'll just tell you guys a little bit of what I'm wrestling with here is that I'm, you know, 'cause I'm mostly a fiction person, not a poetry person. And nowadays there's this really interesting, I don't know if it's a debate going on, but a kind of tussle about what people call autofiction or the way in which, you know, fiction that comes out of what is transparently the writer's life and so then there's people get on different sides of the battle lines about whether you're supposed to be writing fiction about you, or whether you're supposed to be making it up and –

George Kalogeris: Right?

John Plotz: And I realize you just help, you guys are just helping me realize how different that is on the lyric poetry side because it's not as if, you know, George, it's not as if you're just holding up a mirror here to your own, you know, to your own interior. You're doing something where, you know, you're getting at these sorrows of the world, or the ways that the past comes back at us.

Elizabeth Ferry: Right?

John Plotz: But it almost seems as if it has to be routed through your own experiences, otherwise, you know, what would you have? What, how could you ground those feelings if you didn't ground them in, you know, things that triggered your own, your own emotions.

George Kalogeris: Yes, yeah. No, I think that's right. I think that's gets you

back to the source of your own feeling.

Elizabeth Ferry: Mm-hmm, but also that that those feelings have a universality to them also right?

George Kalogeris: Yeah, I always loved that Yates said something to the effect that, you know, the private was deeper than the personal, and that if he got down to the private he could hit a common root that everyone felt, yeah. Yeah, you know, the root of a great tree.

John Plotz: So I was, I was going to ask, you know, George, as we sort of, you know, take the turn and head for home, do you, can you, can you talk a little bit about how this book fits with your earlier books? Like do you see it, you know, is it continuous with them? Do you see yourself tackling something new or different?

George Kalogeris: No, it's a great question. I do see it continuous because the other book was *Guide to Greece* and it was, I think, you know, had more classical material because of Pausanias, and I think it had material that I sort of felt like I was laying a groundwork. And *Winthropos* was, and you know, the other book. As I mentioned before about Pausanias, he traveled all over Greece, different provinces, and this book is like about a single province.

John Plotz: Yeah yeah, yeah.

George Kalogeris: But it's my town *Winthropos* and so then I, you know, I think that this, I mean I thought of this, that's a trilogy. I mean, I thought of this back when I was writing *Guide to Greece* that there could be one more that, you know, unlike *Winthropos*, which is mainly focused in the town. That it spreads out, you know, and I mean the word that comes to my mind is *Magna Gracia*, which is the kind of diaspora the greater Greece. It doesn't mean anything. You know? There's nothing heightened about the magna, it's just a spreading. But if the book could spread even further, yeah,

maybe, you know, into my memory as well as into other places, but there would be a third one that was, had, didn't have either of those two kind of groundings in them.

John Plotz: I always thought that *Magna Grecia* specifically meant the southern Italian settlements. It means just, OK.

George Kalogeris: It does, no it does. It does mean that, but it comes to, uh, I think for the Greek experience it comes to mean, the other, the other diasporic, you know, travels and we at least, you know, at least I think in terms of the imagination.

John Plotz: That's fascinating, yeah. Yeah, that's a great title 'cause there's so many.

George Kalogeris: My way of thinking about it.

John Plotz: There's so many Irish words for that too. I mean, you get, you know, West Ireland. Or you know that that way of expressing that that Irishness isn't really located in Ireland anymore. So yeah.

George Kalogeris: Yeah, that's dislocating it more. I think locating is, there's no locus, is all at different places, yeah?

Elizabeth Ferry: It's sort of a diasporic imagination. Yeah, yeah.

George Kalogeris: Yeah, maybe if I could read.

John Plotz: That's great. I want to read that book.

George Kalogeris: If I could read one more, please, and I wanted to read it in in dedication to Elizabeth's father David was, has been such a great friend and mentor to me and is a master poet and really our greatest practitioner of iambic pentameter poetry, and almost all the, well, all the ones that I read, iambic pentameter. But I've talked to him quite a bit about this poem and he asked me if I would read it. And it doesn't, it's not connected to any of the kind of, ideas we talked

about before, but maybe it is connected to all of them in some bigger way. Birds and Cemeteries.

It must be the shade that draws them. Or else the grass.  
And it seems they always alight away from their flocks,  
Alone. It's so quiet here you can't help but hear  
Their talons clink as they hop from headstone to headstone.  
Their sharp, inquisitive beaks cast quizzical glances.  
The lawn is mown. The gate is always open.  
The names engraved on the stones, and the uplifting words  
Below the names, are lapidary as ever.  
But almost never even a chirp from the birds,  
Let alone a wild shriek, as they perch on a tomb.  
And then they fly away, looking as if  
They couldn't remember why it was they came—  
But were doing what our souls are supposed to do  
On the day we die, if the birds could read the words.

George Kalogeris: And this is the last poem in the book, and one of the connections with David, I could say this for a minute, is those lines, the line is the lawn is mown, the gate is always open. And in David's great translation of the Aeneid, which is really his own great long poem. In English there are some lines about where Anchises tells Aeneas that. Oh, the lines appear anyway in the underworld I don't recall if Anchises says it or the devil, but that, the you know, the way down to hell is easy. It's getting back out that's the difficult thing. So the gate that, there's gates that are always open in the cemetery. Until that point.

Elizabeth Ferry: I also hear him in some towards the end of the poem, then they fly away looking as if they couldn't remember why it was they came, but we're doing what our souls are supposed to do on the day we die. If the birds couldn't read the words, that kind of colloquialism.

George Kalogeris: Yes yes yeah.

Elizabeth Ferry: Right and also, and also the end that I, without

being a scholar of epic, looking as if to me it feels like a sort of a moment, like as in an epic where you say you know the epic simile is about to begin.

George Kalogeris: Yeah, simile, yeah, they know exactly exactly right that. Simile, and the way David can do it with, you know, those commonplace phrases. Those colloquialisms that keep it in American poem and these, these birds are, you know, they're flying to heaven like a civil souls are supposed to fly to heaven. Which is the, you know, some of the uplifting words on the tombs are saying.

Elizabeth Ferry: Right, but at the same time it feels like a very Kalogeris poem as well.

George Kalogeris: Oh thanks, thanks.

John Plotz: There's also there's something about the rhythm of it too, and maybe the ordinary language quality actually reminds me of Seamus Heaney, and I don't know if you have anything to say to that George, but I, like, I was thinking of that poem "Bogland", which is, you know, also a poem with a lot of magnitude, since it's about this image of Ireland itself. As you know, the wet center is bottomless, but it's very ordinary, like the length, you know every, this sort of phrasing is just like ordinary observation, ordinary observation, but there's a, there's something about the rhythm of it that sounds like him to me.

George Kalogeris: No, I think he's been a great influence on me too, and certainly he's a tremendous poet and his work as, is his, you know, his sense of being both in a kind of, you know, less educated family, much less educated family than he experienced and yet, you know, using that, that farm material as well as he uses quite a bit of the classical world as well. So he was very important in that way and also the way that, you know, I think, that "Bogland" and the bog people and the pump, the well the way that ordinary objects become so elemental and –

John Plotz: Yeah, yeah.

George Kalogeris: You know what Elizabeth said before universality? Uh, they speak to a, you know, a wide range of poignant experiences.

John Plotz: Yeah, that's helpful. Yeah, that makes sense, yeah?

Elizabeth Ferry: So George, I think we'll say goodbye for today and just thank you so deeply for reading and for giving us the opportunity to talk through the poems together.

George Kalogeris: Well, thanks so much. It's been a delight and what terrific questions and terrific attention.

John Plotz: Yeah, thank you George yeah.

George Kalogeris: So thanks enormously.

Elizabeth Ferry: Yeah, no thanks. *Recall this Book* is the brainchild of John Plotz and Elizabeth Ferry. It's affiliated with Public Books and under normal times has been recorded and edited in the Media lab of the Brandeis Library. Our music comes from a song by Eric Chasalow and Barbara Cassidy, *Fly away*. Sound editing is by Naomi Cohen and production assistance including website design and social media is done by Miranda Peery. Mark Dilello oversees and advises on all tech matters and we appreciate the support of Dean Dorothy Hodgson and the Mandel Center for the Humanities at Brandeis. We always want to hear from you with your comments, criticisms, or suggestions for future episodes. You can email us directly or you can contact us via social media and our website. Finally, if you enjoyed today's show, please be sure to write a review or rate us on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you get your podcasts. You may be interested in checking out past episodes, including episodes with wonderful poets such as Sean Hill and a conversation between David Ferry who's already been invoked and the



poet Roger Reeves. So thank you for listening and we will see you next time.