

A. Kendra Greene

A Marble Boy

Ships often go down, go down and are never heard from again. In the first century BC, a ship freighted with sculpture for Roman collectors went down near Antikythera. The elm planks splintered; all that marble and bronze sunk quickly. And for a long time it stayed sunk. The collectors waiting on the shipment grew older and died; the empire it had been destined for collapsed.

But then in 1900, Elias Stadiatos, a sponge diver, saw the wreckage; saw the wreckage and came up in his copper helmet and canvas suit and described a chaos of horses and rotting dead. The captain thought him mad, dove down himself and then surfaced with a statue's bronze arm. Over two years, those sponge fishers from Symi went down into the waters and resurrected 108 sculptures. They went down 50 meters, under waves sometimes whipped and white-capped on the surface, went down to the still and the dark of the sea floor. And they came up again, gasping, with gods and heroes and athletes and dancers lost for 2,000 years. They pulled heaving horses into the 20th century air. They dragged Hercules to dry land. They rescued, too, a crouching marble boy, the right half of his body perfect and white and smooth, while his left side was pocked and withered, limbs worn to nubs, and a salt burn of fissures and craters wracking the side of his neck and creeping across one cheek.

They stopped work on the wreck when divers started dying. They buried their dead. The prize find, the so-called Antikythera mechanism, a kind of computer or clock or astrolabe, was cleaned up and put behind glass. A few statues were installed in the half-shaded courtyard of the museum café. The rest of it, everything that failed to merit a pedestal or vitrine in the halls of Greece's National Museum, was assigned an accession number and plunged deep into deep storage—deep into the still and the calm and the dark.