

Homecomings

ANTHONY HIRST

No hearse, no tall black hats, no stiff attire
to greet Vangelis, shipped back to his island
from a mainland hospital. No sooner
is the stern door down than half a dozen
of his friends rush in and come out brandishing
elaborate floral banners, which they stack
against a bright red Mazda truck,
its tailgate lowered ready when four younger men
bring out, not shoulder-high but like a packing case,
the lace-trimmed casket which has travelled,
for convenience, in the car-deck. It's loaded,
secured with a single loop of rope,
the banners laid each side, and old Vangelis
sets off on the last of many jolting
rides up to the village where the soil
that was his livelihood's prepared for him.

His widow, meanwhile, forgotten by the men
in their anxiety to get their friend ashore,
emerges, unaccompanied, from the hold,
and takes a few uncertain steps.
But half-way down the ramp she stops and looks around.
A hand goes up to cover quivering lips,
as she can gauge at last, against the blurred
outlines of this familiar waterfront,
the exact dimensions of her loss.
She won't be stranded there for long, between
the vessel that can carry her no further
and the shore she first set foot on as a bride,
before the women, waiting for this moment, will
envelop her, and clutching both her arms
draw her back into their common life.