

Classic Poetry Series

Constantine P. Cavafy
- poems -

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Constantine P. Cavafy(29 April 1863 – 29 April 1933)

Constantine P. Cavafy, also known as Konstantin or Konstantinos Petrou Kavafis, or Kavaphes was a renowned Greek poet who lived in Alexandria and worked as a journalist and civil servant. He published 154 poems; dozens more remained incomplete or in sketch form. His most important poetry was written after his fortieth birthday.

Biography

Cavafy was born in 1863 in Alexandria, Egypt, to Greek parents, and was baptized into the Greek Orthodox Church. His father was a prosperous importer-exporter who had lived in England in earlier years and acquired British nationality. After his father died in 1870, Cavafy and his family settled for a while in Liverpool in England. In 1876, his family faced financial problems due to the Long Depression of 1873, so, by 1877, they had to move back to Alexandria.

In 1882, disturbances in Alexandria caused the family to move again, though temporarily, to Constantinople. This was the year when a revolt broke out in Alexandria against the Anglo-French control of Egypt, thus precipitating the 1882 Anglo-Egyptian War. Alexandria was bombarded by a British fleet and the family apartment at Ramleh was burned.

In 1885, Cavafy returned to Alexandria, where he lived for the rest of his life. His first work was as a journalist; then he took a position with the British-run Egyptian Ministry of Public Works for thirty years. (Egypt was a British protectorate until 1926.) He published his poetry from 1891 to 1904 in the form of broadsheets, and only for his close friends. Any acclaim he was to receive came mainly from within the Greek community of Alexandria. Eventually, in 1903, he was introduced to mainland-Greek literary circles through a favourable review by Xenopoulos. He received little recognition because his style differed markedly from the then-mainstream Greek poetry. It was only 20 years later, after the Greek defeat in the Greco-Turkish War (1919-1922), that a new generation of almost nihilist poets (e.g. Karyotakis) would find inspiration in Cavafy's work.

A biographical note written by Cavafy reads as follows:

<i>"I am from Constantinople by descent, but I was born in Alexandria—at a house on Seriph Street; I left very young, and spent much of my childhood in England. Subsequently I visited this country as an adult, but for a short period of

time. I have also lived in France. During my adolescence I lived over two years in Constantinople. It has been many years since I last visited Greece. My last employment was as a clerk at a government office under the Ministry of Public Works of Egypt. I know English, French, and a little Italian."</i>

He died of cancer of the larynx on April 29, 1933, his 70th birthday. Since his death, Cavafy's reputation has grown. He is now considered one of the finest European and modern Greek poets. His poetry is taught at schools in mainland Greece and Cyprus, and across universities around the world.

E.M. Forster knew him personally and wrote a memoir of him, contained in his book *Alexandria, Forster, Arnold Toynbee, and T.S. Eliot* were among the earliest promoters of Cavafy in the English-speaking world before the Second World War. In 1966, David Hockney made a series of prints to illustrate a selection of Cavafy's poems, including *In the dull village*.

Work

Cavafy was instrumental in the revival and recognition of Greek poetry both at home and abroad. His poems are, typically, concise but intimate evocations of real or literary figures and milieux that have played roles in Greek culture. Uncertainty about the future, sensual pleasures, the moral character and psychology of individuals, homosexuality, and a fatalistic existential nostalgia are some of the defining themes.

Besides his subjects, unconventional for the time, his poems also exhibit a skilled and versatile craftsmanship, which is almost completely lost in translation. Cavafy was a perfectionist, obsessively refining every single line of his poetry. His mature style was a free iambic form, free in the sense that verses rarely rhyme and are usually from 10 to 17 syllables. In his poems, the presence of rhyme usually implies irony.

Cavafy drew his themes from personal experience, along with a deep and wide knowledge of history, especially of the Hellenistic era. Many of his poems are pseudo-historical, or seemingly historical, or accurately, but quirkily, historical.

One of Cavafy's most important works is his 1904 poem "Waiting for the Barbarians". In 1911, Cavafy wrote *Ithaca*, inspired by the Homeric return journey of Odysseus to his home island, as depicted in the *Odyssey*. The poem's theme is that enjoyment of the journey of life, and the increasing maturity of the soul as that journey continues, are all the traveler can ask for.

Almost all of Konstantinos Kavafis' work was in Greek; yet, his poetry remained unrecognized in Greece until after the publication of his first anthology in 1935. He is known for his prosaic use of metaphors, his brilliant use of historical imagery, and his aesthetic perfectionism. These attributes, amongst others, have assured him an enduring place in the literary pantheon of the Western World.

Historical poems

These poems are mainly inspired by the Hellenistic era with Alexandria at primary focus. Other poems originate from Helleno-romaic antiquity and the Byzantine era. Mythological references are also present. The periods chosen are mostly of decline and decadence (e.g. Trojans); his heroes facing the final end.

Sensual poems

The sensual poems are filled with lyricism and emotion; inspired by recollection and remembrance. The past and former actions, sometimes along with the vision for the future underlie the muse of Cavafy in writing these poems.

Philosophical poems

Also called instructive poems they are divided into poems with consultations to poets and poems that deal with other situations such as closure (for example, "The walls"), debt (for example, "Thermopylae"), and human dignity (for example, "The God Abandons Antony").

Museum

Cavafy's Alexandria apartment has since been converted into a museum. The museum holds several of Cavafy's sketches and original manuscripts as well as containing several pictures and portraits of and by Cavafy.

Other references

C. P. Cavafy appears as a character in the Alexandria Quartet of Lawrence Durrell.

The Weddings Parties Anything song 'The Afternoon Sun' is based on the Cavafy poem of the same title.

The American poet Mark Doty's book My Alexandria uses the place and imagery

of Cavafy to create a comparable contemporary landscape.

The Canadian poet and singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen memorably transformed Cavafy's poem "The God Abandons Antony," based on Mark Antony's loss of the city of Alexandria and his empire, into "Alexandra Leaving," a song around lost love

A Byzantine Nobleman In Exile Composing Verses

The frivolous can call me frivolous.
I've always been most punctilious about
important things. And I insist
that no one knows better than I do
the Holy Fathers, or the Scriptures, or the Canons of the Councils.
Whenever he was in doubt,
whenever he had any ecclesiastical problem,
Botaniatis consulted me, me first of all.
But exiled here (may she be cursed, that viper
Irimi Doukaina) , and incredibly bored,
it is not altogether unfitting to amuse myself
writing six- and eight-line verses,
to amuse myself poeticizing myths
of Hermes and Apollo and Dionysos,
or the heroes of Thessaly and the Peloponnese;
and to compose the most strict iambics,
such as—if you'll allow me to say so—
the intellectuals of Constantinople don't know how to compose.
It must be just this strictness that provokes their disapproval.

Constantine P. Cavafy

A Great Procession Of Priests And Laymen

A procession of priests and laymen—
each walk of life represented—
moves through streets, squares, and gates
of the famous city, Antioch.
At the head of this imposing procession
a handsome white-clad boy
carries the Cross, his arms raised—
our strength and hope, the holy Cross.
The pagans, lately so full of arrogance,
now reticent and cowardly,
quickly slink away from the procession.
Let them keep their distance, always keep their distance from us
(as long as they do not renounce their errors).
The holy Cross goes forward; it brings joy and consolation
to every quarter where Christians live;
and these God-fearing people, elated,
stand in their doorways and greet it reverently,
the strength, the salvation of the universe, the Cross.

This is an annual Christian festival.
But today, you see, it is more conspicuous.
The empire is delivered at last.
The vile, the appalling Julian
reigns no longer.

For most pious Jovian let us give our prayers.

Constantine P. Cavafy

A Prince From Western Libya

Aristomenis, son of Menelaos,
the Prince from Western Libya,
was generally liked in Alexandria
during the ten days he spent there.
As his name, his dress, modest, was also Greek.
He received honors gladly,
but he did not solicit them; he was unassuming.
He bought Greek books,
especially history and philosophy.
Above all he was a man of few words.
It got around that he must be a profound thinker,
and men like that naturally don't speak very much.

He was neither a profound thinker nor anything else—
just a piddling, laughable man.
He assumed a Greek name, dressed like the Greeks,
learned to behave more or less like a Greek;
and all the time he was terrified he would spoil
his reasonably good image
by coming out with barbaric howlers in Greek
and the Alexandrians, in their usual way,
would make fun of him, vile people that they are.

This was why he limited himself to a few words,
terribly careful of his syntax and pronunciation;
and he was driven almost out of his mind, having
so much talk bottled up inside him.

Constantine P. Cavafy

A Young Poet In His 24th Year

Brain, work now as well as you can.
A one-sided passion is destroying him.
He's in a maddening situation.
Every day he kisses the face he worships,
his hands are on those exquisite limbs.
He's never loved before with this degree of passion.
But the beautiful fulfillment of love
is lacking, that fulfillment is lacking
which both of them must want with the same intensity.

(They aren't equally given to the abnormal form of sensual pleasure;
only he is completely possessed by it.)

And so he's wearing himself out, all on edge.
Then—to make things worse—he's out of work.
He manages somehow to borrow
a little here and there (sometimes
almost begging for it) and he just gets by.
He kisses those adored lips, excites himself
on that exquisite body—though he now feels
it only acquiesces. And then
he drinks and smokes, drinks and smokes;
and he drags himself to the cafés all day long,
drags the weariness consuming his beauty.
Brain, work now as well as you can.

Constantine P. Cavafy

According To The Formulas Of Ancient Grecosyrian Magi

"What distillate can be discovered from herbs of a witching brew," said an aesthete,
"what distillate prepared according to the formulas of ancient Grecosyrian magi which for a day (if no longer its potency can last), or even for a short time can bring my twenty three years to me again; can bring my friend of twenty two to me again -- his beauty, his love.

"What distillate prepared according to the formulas of ancient Grecosyrian magi which, in bringing back these things, can also bring back our little room."

Constantine P. Cavafy

Addition

I do not question whether I am happy or unhappy.
Yet there is one thing that I keep gladly in mind --
that in the great addition (their addition that I abhor)
that has so many numbers, I am not one
of the many units there. In the final sum
I have not been calculated. And this joy suffices me.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Aemilianus Monae, Alexandrian, 628 - 655 A.D.

With words, with countenance, and with manners
I shall build an excellent panoply;
and in this way I shall face evil men
without having any fear or weakness.

They will want to harm me. But of those
who approach me none will know
where my wounds are, my vulnerable parts,
under all the lies that will cover me. --

Boastful words of Aemilianus Monae.
Did he ever build this panoply?
In any case, he did not wear it much.
He died in Sicily, at the age of twenty-seven.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Alexander Jannaios And Alexandra□

Full of their success, thoroughly satisfied,
King Alexander Jannaios
and his wife Queen Alexandra
move through the streets of Jerusalem
with musicians in the lead
and every kind of pomp and circumstance.
The work begun by the great Judas Maccabaios
and his four celebrated brothers
has now been concluded brilliantly,
work relentlessly carried on
among so many obstacles and dangers.
Nothing unseemly remains now.
All subservience to the haughty monarchs
of Antioch is over. Clearly
King Alexander Jannaios
and his wife Queen Alexandra
are equal to the Selefkids in every way.
Good Jews, pure Jews, devoted Jews above all.
But, as circumstances require,
also skilled in speaking Greek,
even on familiar terms with Greeks and Hellenized monarchs—
as equals, though, let that be understood.
The work begun by the great Judas Maccabaios
and his four celebrated brothers
has indeed been concluded brilliantly,
concluded in the most striking way.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Alexandrian Kings

The Alexandrians were gathered
to see Cleopatra's children,
Caesarion, and his little brothers,
Alexander and Ptolemy, whom for the first
time they lead out to the Gymnasium,
there to proclaim kings,
in front of the grand assembly of the soldiers.

Alexander -- they named him king
of Armenia, Media, and the Parthians.
Ptolemy -- they named him king
of Cilicia, Syria, and Phoenicia.
Caesarion stood more to the front,
dressed in rose-colored silk,
on his breast a bouquet of hyacinths,
his belt a double row of sapphires and amethysts,
his shoes fastened with white
ribbons embroidered with rose pearls.
Him they named more than the younger ones,
him they named King of Kings.

The Alexandrians of course understood
that those were theatrical words.

But the day was warm and poetic,
the sky was a light azure,
the Alexandrian Gymnasium was
a triumphant achievement of art,
the opulence of the courtiers was extraordinary,
Caesarion was full of grace and beauty
(son of Cleopatra, blood of the Lagidae);
and the Alexandrians rushed to the ceremony,
and got enthusiastic, and cheered
in greek, and egyptian, and some in hebrew,
enchanted by the beautiful spectacle --
although they full well knew what all these were worth,
what hollow words these kingships were.

An Old Man

At the noisy end of the cafe, head bent
over the table, an old man sits alone,
a newspaper in front of him.

And in the miserable banality of old age
he thinks how little he enjoyed the years
when he had strength, eloquence, and looks.

He knows he's aged a lot: he sees it, feels it.
Yet it seems he was young just yesterday.
So brief an interval, so brief.

And he thinks of Prudence, how it fooled him,
how he always believed - what madness -
that cheat who said: "Tomorrow. You have plenty of time."

He remembers impulses bridled, the joy
he sacrificed. Every chance he lost
now mocks his senseless caution.

But so much thinking, so much remembering
makes the old man dizzy. He falls asleep,
his head resting on the cafe table.

Constantine P. Cavafy

And I Lounged And Lay On Their Beds

When I went to that house of pleasure
I didn't stay in the front rooms where they celebrate,
with some decorum, the accepted modes of love.
I went into the secret rooms
and lounged and lay on their beds.
I went into the secret rooms
considered shameful even to name.
But not shameful to me -because if they were,
what kind of poet, what kind of artist would I be?
I'd rather be an ascetic. That would be more in keeping,
much more in keeping with my poetry,
than for me to find pleasure in the commonplace rooms.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Anna Comnena

In the prologue to her *Alexiad*,
Anna Comnena laments her widowhood.

Her soul is dizzy. "And with rivers
of tears," she tells us "I wet
my eyes... Alas for the waves" in her life,
"alas for the revolts." Pain burns her
"to the the bones and the marrow and the cleaving of the soul."

But it seems the truth is, that this ambitious woman
knew only one great sorrow;
she only had one deep longing
(though she does not admit it) this haughty Greek woman,
that she was never able, despite all her dexterity,
to acquire the Kingship; but it was taken
almost out of her hands by the insolent John.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Anna Dalassené

In the golden bull that Alexios Comnenos issued
to prominently honor his mother,
the very sagacious Lady Anna Dalassené --
distinguished in her works, in her ways --
there are many words of praise:
here let us convey of them
a beautiful, noble phrase
"Those cold words 'mine' or 'yours' were never spoken."

Constantine P. Cavafy

Antony's Ending

But when he heard the women wailing,
lamenting his sorry state
madam with her oriental gestures
and her slaves with their barbarized Greek
the pride in his soul rose up,
his Italian blood sickened with disgust
and all he'd worshipped blindly till then
his wild Alexandrian life
now seemed dull and alien.
And he told them 'to stop wailing for him,
that kind of thing was all wrong.
They ought to be singing his praises
for having been a great ruler,
a rich, heroic man.
And if he'd fallen now, he hadn't fallen humbly,
but as a Roman vanquished by a Roman.'

Constantine P. Cavafy

Apollonius Of Tyana In Rhodes

Apollonius was talking about
proper education and conduct with a young
man who was building a luxurious
house in Rhodes. "As for me" said the Tyanian
at last, "when I enter a temple
however small it may be, I very much prefer
to see a statue of ivory and gold
than a clay and vulgar one in a large temple".--

The "clay" and "vulgar"; the detestable:
that already some people (without enough training)
it deceives knavishly. The clay and vulgar.

Constantine P. Cavafy

As Much As You Can

And if you can't shape your life the way you want,
at least try as much as you can
not to degrade it
by too much contact with the world,
by too much activity and talk.

Try not to degrade it by dragging it along,
taking it around and exposing it so often
to the daily silliness
of social events and parties,
until it comes to seem a boring hanger-on.

Constantine P. Cavafy

At The Café Door

Something they said beside me
made me look toward the café door,
and I saw that lovely body which seemed
as though Eros in his mastery had fashioned it,
joyfully shaping its well-formed limbs,
molding its tall build,
shaping its face tenderly,
and leaving, with a touch of the fingers,
a particular nuance on the brow, the eyes, the lips.

Constantine P. Cavafy

At The Theatre

I got bored looking at the stage
and raised my eyes to the box circle.
In one of the boxes I saw you
with your strange beauty, your decadent youthfulness.
My thoughts turned back at once
to all I'd heard about you that afternoon;
my mind and body were aroused.
And as I gazed enthralled
at your languid beauty, your languid youthfulness,
your tastefully discriminating dress,
in my imagination I kept picturing you
the way they'd talked about you that afternoon.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Before The Statue Of Endymion

I have come from Miletos to Latmos
on a white chariot drawn by four snow-white mules,
all their trappings silver.
I sailed from Alexandria in a purple trireme
to perform sacred rites—
sacrifices and libations—in honor of Endymion.
And here is the statue. I now gaze in ecstasy
at Endymion's famous beauty.
My slaves empty baskets of jasmine
and auspicious tributes revive the pleasure of ancient days.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Before Time Altered Them

They were full of sadness at their parting.
That wasn't what they themselves wanted: it was circumstances.
The need to earn a living forced one of them
to go far away—New York or Canada.
The love they felt wasn't, of course, what it once had been;
the attraction between them had gradually diminished,
the attraction had diminished a great deal.
But to be separated, that wasn't what they themselves wanted.
It was circumstances. Or maybe Fate
appeared as an artist and parted them now,
before their feeling died out completely, before Time altered them:
the one seeming to remain for the other always what he was,
the exquisite young man of twenty-four.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Body Remember

Body, remember not only how much you were loved
not only the beds you lay on.
but also those desires glowing openly
in eyes that looked at you,
trembling for you in voices-
only some chance obstacle frustrated them.
Now that it's all finally in the past,
it seems almost as if you gave yourself
to those desires too-how they glowed,
remember, in eyes that looked at you,
remember, body, how they trembled for you in those voices.

Constantine P. Cavafy

But Wise Men Perceive Approaching Things

Because gods perceive future things, men what is happening now,
but wise men perceive approaching things.

Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, VIII, 7.

Men know what is happening now.

The gods know the things of the future,
the full and sole possessors of all lights.
Of the future things, wise men perceive
approaching things. Their hearing

is sometimes, during serious studies,
disturbed. The mystical clamor
of approaching events reaches them.
And they heed it with reverence. While outside
on the street, the peoples hear nothing at all.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Caesarion

Partly to verify an era,
partly also to pass the time,
last night I picked up a collection
of Ptolemaic epigrams to read.
The plentiful praises and flatteries
for everyone are similar. They are all brilliant,
glorious, mighty, beneficent;
each of their enterprises the wisest.
If you talk of the women of that breed, they too,
all the Berenices and Cleopatras are admirable.

When I had managed to verify the era
I would have put the book away, had not a small
and insignificant mention of king Caesarion
immediately attracted my attention.....

Behold, you came with your vague
charm. In history only a few
lines are found about you,
and so I molded you more freely in my mind.
I molded you handsome and sentimental.
My art gives to your face
a dreamy compassionate beauty.
And so fully did I envision you,
that late last night, as my lamp
was going out -- I let go out on purpose --
I fancied that you entered my room,
it seemed that you stood before me; as you might have been
in vanquished Alexandria,
pale and tired, idealistic in your sorrow,
still hoping that they would pity you,
the wicked -- who whispered "Too many Caesars."

Constantine P. Cavafy

Candles

The days of the future stand in front of us
Like a line of candles all alight----
Golden and warm and lively little candles.
The days that are past are left behind,
A mournful row of candles that are out;
The nearer ones are still smoking,
Candles cold, and melted, candles bent.,
I don't want to see them; their shapes hurt me,
It hurts me to remember the light of them at first.
I look before me at my lighted candles,
I don't want to turn around and see with horror
How quickly the dark line is lengthening,
How quickly the candles multiply that have been put out.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Che Fece

For some people the day comes
when they have to declare the great Yes
or the great No. It's clear at once who has the Yes
ready within him; and saying it,
he goes from honor to honor, strong in his conviction.
He who refuses does not repent. Asked again,
he'd still say no. Yet that no-the right no-
drags him down all his life.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Come, O King Of The Lacedaimonians

Kratisklia didn't deign to allow
the people to see her weeping and grieving:
she walked in dignity and in silence.
Her calm face betrayed nothing
of her sorrow and her agony.
But even so, for a moment she couldn't hold back:
before she went aboard the detestable ship for Alexandria
she took her son to Poseidon's temple,
and once they were alone
she embraced him tenderly and kissed him
(he was "in great distress," says Plutarch, "badly
shaken").
But her strong character struggled through;
regaining her poise, the magnificent woman
said to Kleomenis: "Come, O King of the Lacedaimonians,
when we go outside
let no one see us weeping
or behaving in any way unworthy of Sparta.
At least this is still in our power;
what lies ahead is in the hands of the gods."

And she boarded the ship, going toward whatever lay "in the
hands of the gods."

Constantine P. Cavafy

Craftsmen Of Wine Bowls

On this wine bowl—pure silver,
made for the house of Herakleidis,
where good taste is the rule—
notice these graceful flowers, the streams, the thyme.
In the center I put this beautiful young man,
naked, erotic, one leg still dangling
in the water. O memory, I begged
for you to help me most in making
the young face I loved appear the way it was.
This proved very difficult because
some fifteen years have gone by since the day
he died as a soldier in the defeat at Magnesia.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Dangerous Things

Said Myrtias (a Syrian student
in Alexandria; in the reign of
Augustus Constans and Augustus Constantius;
in part a pagan, and in part a christian);
"Fortified by theory and study,
I shall not fear my passions like a coward.
I shall give my body to sensual delights,
to enjoyments dreamt-of,
to the most daring amorous desires,
to the lustful impulses of my blood, without
any fear, for whenever I want --
and I shall have the will, fortified
as I shall be by theory and study --
at moments of crisis I shall find again
my spirit, as before, ascetic."

Constantine P. Cavafy

Darius

The poet Phernazis is composing
the important part of his epic poem.
How Darius, son of Hystaspes,
assumed the kingdom of the Persians. (From him
is descended our glorious king
Mithridates, Dionysus and Eupator). But here
philosophy is needed; he must analyze
the sentiments that Darius must have had:
maybe arrogance and drunkenness; but no -- rather
like an understanding of the vanity of grandeurs.
The poet contemplates the matter deeply.

But he is interrupted by his servant who enters
running, and announces the portendous news.
The war with the Romans has begun.
The bulk of our army has crossed the borders.

The poet is speechless. What a disaster!
No time now for our glorious king
Mithridates, Dionysus and Eupator,
to occupy himself with greek poems.
In the midst of a war -- imagine, greek poems.

Phernazis is impatient. Misfortune!
Just when he was positive that with "Darius"
he would distinguish himself, and shut the mouths
of his critics, the envious ones, for good.
What a delay, what a delay to his plans.

And if it were only a delay, it would still be all right.
But it yet remains to be seen if we have any security
at Amisus. It is not a strongly fortified city.
The Romans are the most horrible enemies.
Can we hold against them
we Cappadocians? It is possible at all?
It is possible to pit ourselves against the legions?
Mighty Gods, protectors of Asia, help us.--

But in all his turmoil and trouble,

the poetic idea too comes and goes persistently--
the most probable, surely, is arrogance and drunkenness;
Darius must have felt arrogance and drunkenness.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Days Of 1896□

He became completely degraded. His erotic tendency,
condemned and strictly forbidden
(but innate for all that) , was the cause of it:
society was totally prudish.

He gradually lost what little money he had,
then his social standing, then his reputation.
Nearly thirty, he had never worked a full year—
at least not at a legitimate job.
Sometimes he earned enough to get by
acting the go-between in deals considered shameful.
He ended up the type likely to compromise you thoroughly
if you were seen around with him often.

But this isn't the whole story—that would not be fair.
The memory of his beauty deserves better.
There is another angle; seen from that
he appears attractive, appears
a simple, genuine child of love,
without hesitation putting,
above his honor and reputation,
the pure sensuality of his pure flesh.

Above his reputation? But society,
prudish and stupid, had it wrong.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Days Of 1901

The exceptional thing about him was
that in spite of all his loose living,
his vast sexual experience,
and the fact that usually
his attitude matched his age,
in spite of this there were moments—
extremely rare, of course—when he gave the impression
that his flesh was almost virginal.

His twenty-nine-year-old beauty,
so tested by sensual pleasure,
would sometimes strangely remind one
of a boy who, somewhat awkwardly, gives
his pure body to love for the first time.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Days Of 1903

I never found them again -- the things so quickly lost....
the poetic eyes, the pale
face.... in the dusk of the street....

I never found them again -- the things acquired quite by chance,
that I gave up so lightly;
and that later in agony I wanted.
The poetic eyes, the pale face,
those lips, I never found again.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Days Of 1908

That was the year when he stayed
Without work, for a living played
Cards, or backgammon; or borrowed and never paid.

He was offered a place at a small
Stationer's, three pounds a month. It didn't suit him.
It was not decent pay at all.
He refused it without hesitation;
He was twenty-five, and of good education.

Two or three shillings he made, more or less.
From cards and backgammon what could a boy skim;
At the common places, the cafés of his grade,
Although he played sharply, and picked stupid players.
As for borrowing, that didn't always come off.
He seldom struck a dollar, oftener he'd fall
To half, and sometimes as low as a shilling.

Sometimes, when he got away from the grim
Night-sitting, for a week at a time or more,
He would cool himself at the baths, with a morning swim.

The shabbiness of his clothes was tragical.
He always wore the same suit, always displayed
A suit of cinnamon brown discoloured and frayed.

O summer days of nineteen hundred and eight, I recall
The picture of you, and out of it seems to fade,
Harmoniously, that cinnamon suit discoloured and frayed.

The picture of you has preserved him
Just as he would take off, would fling down
The unworthy clothes, the mended under clothes,
And remain all naked; faultlessly beautiful; a wonder.
Uncombed and lifted up his hair was;
His limbs a little sunburnt
From the morning nakedness at the baths and on the beach.

December, 1903

And if I can't speak about my love-
if I don't talk about your hair, your lips, your eyes,
still your face that I keep within my heart,
the sound of your voice that I keep within my mind,
the days of September rising in my dreams,
give shape and colour to my words, my sentences,
whatever theme I touch, whatever thought I utter.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Desires

Like beautiful bodies of the dead, who had not grown old
and they shut them with tears, in a magnificent mausoleum,
with roses at the head and jasmine at the feet --
that is how desires look that have passed
without fulfillment; without one of them having achieved
a night of sensual delight, or a moonlit morn.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Dimaratos

His subject, 'The Character of Dimaratos',
which Porphyry proposed to him in conversation
was outlined by the young sophist as follows
(he planned to develop it rhetorically later):
'First a courtier of King Dareios,
and after that of King Xerxes,
now with Xerxes and his army,
at last Dimaratos will be vindicated.
He'd been treated very unjustly.
He was definitely Ariston's son, but his enemies
bribed the oracle brazenly.
And it wasn't enough that they deprived him of his kingship,
but when he finally gave in and decided
to live quietly as a private citizen,
they had to insult him even in front of the people,
they had to humiliate him publicly at the festival.
As a result, he serves Xerxes assiduously.
Along with the great Persian army,
he'll make it back to Sparta too;
and once he's king again, how quickly
he'll throw him out, how thoroughly
he'll shame that schemer Leotychidis.
So now he spends his days full of anxiety,
advising the Persians, explaining
what they should do to conquer Greece.
Much worrying, much thinking, and for this reason
Dimaratos finds his days so burdensome;
much worrying, much thinking, and for this reason
Dimaratos can't find a moment's joy
because what he's feeling can't be called joy
(it isn't; he won't admit it;
how can he call it joy? his distress couldn't be greater)
now things make it quite clear to him
that it's the Greeks who are going to win.'

Constantine P. Cavafy

Envoys From Alexandria

They had not seen, for ages, such beautiful gifts in Delphi
as these that had been sent by the two brothers,
the rival Ptolemaic kings. After they had received them
however, the priests were uneasy about the oracle. They will need
all their experience to compose it with astuteness,
which of the two, which of such two will be displeased.
And they hold secret councils at night
and discuss the family affairs of the Lagidae.

But see, the envoys have returned. They are bidding farewell.
They are returning to Alexandria, they say. And they do not ask
for any oracle. And the priests hear this with joy
(of course they will keep the marvellous gifts),
but they also are utterly perplexed,
not understanding what this sudden indifference means.
For they are unaware that yesterday the envoys received grave news.
The oracle was given in Rome; the division took place there.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Exiles

It goes on being Alexandria still. Just walk a bit
along the straight road that ends at the Hippodrome
and you'll see palaces and monuments that will amaze you.

Whatever war-damage it's suffered,
however much smaller it's become,
it's still a wonderful city.

And then, what with excursions and books
and various kinds of study, time does go by.
In the evenings we meet on the sea front,
the five of us (all, naturally, under fictitious names)
and some of the few other Greeks
still left in the city.

Sometimes we discuss church affairs
(the people here seem to lean toward Rome)
and sometimes literature.

The other day we read some lines by Nonnos:
what imagery, what rhythm, what diction and harmony!
All enthusiasm, how we admired the Panopolitan.
So the days go by, and our stay here
isn't unpleasant because, naturally,
it's not going to last forever.

We've had good news: if something doesn't come
of what's now afoot in Smyrna,
then in April our friends are sure to move from Epiros,
so one way or another, our plans are definitely working out,
and we'll easily overthrow Basil.

And when we do, at last our turn will come.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Far Off

I should like to relate this memory ...
but it is so faded now ... scarcely anything is left --
because it lies far off, in the years of my early manhood.

A skin as if made of jasmine ...
that night in August -- was it August? -- that night ...
I can just barely remember the eyes; they were, I think, blue ...
Ah yes, blue; a sapphire blue.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Following The Recipe Of Ancient Syrio-Greek Magicians

Said an aesthete: "What distillation from magic herbs
can I find—what distillation, following the recipe
of ancient Greco-Syrian magicians—
that will bring back to me for one day (if its power
doesn't last longer) or even for a few hours,
my twenty-third year,
bring back to me my friend of twenty-two,
his beauty, his love.

What distillation, following the recipe
of ancient Greco-Syrian magicians, can be found
to bring back also—as part of this return of things past—
even the little room we shared."

Constantine P. Cavafy

Footsteps

On an ebony bed decorated
with coral eagles, sound asleep lies
Nero --- unconscious, quiet, and blissful;
thriving in the vigor of flesh,
and in the splendid power of youth.

But in the alabaster hall that encloses
the ancient shrine of the Aenobarbi
how restive are his Lares.
The little household gods tremble,
and try to hide their insignificant bodies.
For they heard a horrible clamor,
a deathly clamor ascending the stairs,
iron footsteps rattling the stairs.
And now in a faint the miserable Lares,
burrow in the depth of the shrine,
one tumbles and stumbles upon the other,
one little god falls over the other
for they understand what sort of clamor this is,
they are already feeling the footsteps of the Furies.

Constantine P. Cavafy

For Ammonis, Who Died At 29, In 610

Raphael, they're asking you to write a few lines
as an epitaph for the poet Ammonis:
something very tasteful and polished. You can do it,
you're the one to write something suitable
for the poet Ammonis, our Ammonis.

Of course you'll speak about his poems-
but say something too about his beauty,
about that subtle beauty we loved.

Your Greek is always elegant and musical.
But we want all your craftsmanship now.
Our sorrow and our love move into a foreign language.
Pour your Egyptian feeling into the Greek you use.

Raphael, your verses, you know, should be written
so they contain something of our life within them,
so the rhythm, so every phrase clearly shows
that an Alexandrian is writing about an Alexandrian.

Constantine P. Cavafy

From The School Of The Renowned Philosopher

For two years he studied with Ammonios Sakkas,
but he was bored by both philosophy and Sakkas.

Then he went into politics.

But he gave that up. That Prefect was an idiot,
and those around him, somber-faced officious nitwits:
their Greek—poor fools—absolutely barbaric.

After that he became
vaguely curious about the Church: to be baptized
and pass as a Christian. But he soon
changed his mind: it would certainly have caused a row
with his parents, ostentatious pagans,
and—horrible thought—
they would have cut off at once
their extremely generous allowance.

But he had to do something. He began to haunt
the corrupt houses of Alexandria,
every secret den of debauchery.

In this fortune favored him:
he'd been given an extremely handsome figure.
And he enjoyed the divine gift.

His looks would last
at least another ten years. And after that?
Maybe he'll go back to Sakkas.
Or if the old man has died meanwhile,
he'll go to another philosopher or sophist:
there's always someone suitable around.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Greek From Ancient Times

Antioch is proud of its splendid buildings,
its beautiful streets, the lovely countryside around it,
its teeming population;
proud too of its glorious kings, its artists
and sages, its very rich
yet prudent merchants. But far more
than all this, Antioch is proud to be a city
Greek from ancient times, related to Argos
through Ione, founded by Argive colonists
in honor of Inachos' daughter.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Grey

Looking at an opal, a half-grey opal,
I remembered two beautiful grey eyes
I had seen it must have been twenty years before . . .

For a month we loved each other
Then he went away, I think to Smyrna,
To work there; we never saw each other again.

The grey eyes ---- if he lives ---- have lost their beauty;
The beautiful face will have been spoiled.

O Memory, preserve them as they were.
And, Memory, all you can of this love of mine
Whatever you can bring back to me tonight.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Growing In Spirit

He who hopes to grow in spirit
will have to transcend obedience and respect.
He'll hold to some laws
but he'll mostly violate
both law and custom, and go beyond
the established, inadequate norm.
Sensual pleasures will have much to teach him.
He won't be afraid of the destructive act:
half the house will have to come down.
This way he'll grow virtuously into wisdom.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Half An Hour

I never had you, nor will I ever have you
I suppose. A few words, an approach
as in the bar yesterday, and nothing more.
It is, undeniably, a pity. But we who serve Art
sometimes with intensity of mind, and of course only
for a short while, we create pleasure
which almost seems real.
So in the bar the day before yesterday -- the merciful alcohol
was also helping much --
I had a perfectly erotic half-hour.
And it seems to me that you understood,
and stayed somewhat longer on purpose.
This was very necessary. Because
for all the imagination and the wizard alcohol,
I needed to see your lips as well,
I needed to have your body close.

Constantine P. Cavafy

He Asked About The Quality

He left the office where he'd been given
a trivial, poorly paid job
(something like eight pounds a month, including bonuses)
left at the end of the dreary work
that kept him bent all afternoon,
came out at seven and walked off slowly,
idling his way down the street. Good-looking,
and interesting: showing as he did that he'd reached
his full sensual capacity.
He'd turned twenty-nine the month before.
He idled his way down the main street
and the poor side-streets that led to his home.
Passing in front of a small shop that sold
cheap and flimsy merchandise for workers,
he saw a face inside, a figure
that compelled him to go in, and he pretended
he wanted to look at some coloured handkerchiefs.
He asked about the quality of the handkerchiefs
and how much they cost, his voice choking,
almost silenced by desire.
And the answers came back in the same mood,
distracted, the voice hushed,
offering hidden consent.
They kept on talking about the merchandise
but the only purpose: that their hands might touch
over the handkerchiefs, that their faces, their lips,
might move close together as though by chance
a moment's meeting of limb against limb.
Quickly, secretly, so the shop owner sitting at the back
wouldn't realize what was going on.

Constantine P. Cavafy

He Came To Read

He came to read. Two or three books
are open; historians and poets.
But he only read for ten minutes,
and gave them up. He is dozing
on the sofa. He is fully devoted to books
but he is twenty-three years old, and he's very handsome;
and this afternoon love passed
through his ideal flesh, his lips.
Through his flesh which is full of beauty
the heat of love passed;
without any silly shame for the form of the enjoyment.....

Constantine P. Cavafy

He Had Planned To Read

He had planned to read. Two or three books lie open,
books by historians, by poets.
But he read for barely ten minutes,
then gave it up, falling half-asleep on the sofa.
He's completely devoted to books
but he's twenty-three, and very good-looking;
and this afternoon Eros penetrated
his ideal flesh, his lips,
an erotic warmth penetrated
his lovely flesh
with no ridiculous shame about the form the pleasure took....

Constantine P. Cavafy

He Vows

Every so often he vows to start a better life.
But when night comes with her own counsels,
with her compromises, and with her promises;
but when night comes with her own power
of the body that wants and demands, he returns,
forlorn, to the same fatal joy.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Herodis Attikos

What glory, this, for Herodis Attikos!
Alexander of Selefkia, one of our better sophists,
on reaching Athens to lecture
finds the city deserted
because Herodis was in the country and all the young men
had followed him there to hear him.
This makes sophist Alexander
write Herodis a letter
begging him to send the Greeks back.
And the tactful Herodis answers at once:
'Along with the Greeks, I'm coming too.'

How many young men now in Alexandria,
in Antioch or Beirut
(being trained by Hellenism as its future orators),
meeting at choice banquets
where the talk is sometimes about fine sophistry,
sometimes about their exquisite love affairs,
suddenly find their attention wandering and fall silent?
Their glasses untouched,
they think about Herodis' fortune-
what other sophist has been given this kind of honour?
Whatever his wish, whatever he does,
the Greeks (the Greeks!) follow him,
not to criticize or debate,
not even to choose any longer,
only to follow.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Hidden

From all I've done and all I've said
let them not seek to find who I've been.
An obstacle stood and transformed
my acts and way of my life.
An obstacle stood and stopped me
many a time as I was going to speak.
My most unobserved acts,
and my writings the most covered --
thence only they will feel me.
But mayhaps it is not worth to spend
this much care and this much effort to know me.
For -- in the more perfect society --
someone else like me created
will certainly appear and freely act.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Hidden Things

Let them not seek to discover who I was
from all that I have done and said.
An obstacle was there that transformed
the deeds and the manner of my life.
An obstacle was there that stopped me
many times when I was about to speak.
Only from my most imperceptible deeds
and my most covert writings--
from these alone will they understand me.
But perhaps it isn't worth exerting
such care and such effort for them to know me.
Later, in the more perfect society,
surely some other person created like me
will appear and act freely.

Constantine P. Cavafy

I Went

I was not bound. I let myself go completely; went
To those indulgences, half actual,
And half were turned about in my own brain;
Went into the illuminated night;
And drank strong wines, as when
The champions of pleasure drink strong wine.

Constantine P. Cavafy

I've Looked So Much...

I've looked on beauty so much
that my vision overflows with it.

The body's lines. Red lips. Sensual limbs.
Hair as though stolen from Greek statues,
always lovely, even uncombed,
and falling slightly over pale foreheads.
Figures of love, as my poetry desired them
...in the nights when I was young,
encountered secretly in those nights.

Constantine P. Cavafy

If Actually Dead

“Where did the Sage withdraw to, where did he disappear?
After his many miracles,
the renown of his teaching
which spread to so many countries,
he suddenly hid himself and nobody knew for certain
what happened to him
(nor did anybody ever see his grave).
Some reported that he died at Ephesus.
But Damis does not record that in his memoir.
Damis says nothing about the death of Apollonios.
Others said that he disappeared at Lindos.
Or maybe the story is true
about his assumption in Crete,
at the ancient sanctuary of Diktynna.
But then again we have that miraculous,
that supernatural apparition of his
before a young student at Tyana.
Maybe the time has not yet come for him to return
and show himself to the world again;
or maybe, transfigured, he moves among us
unrecognized—. But he will come again
as he was, teaching the ways of truth; and then of course
he will bring back the worship of our gods
and our elegant Hellenic rites.”

These were the musings of one of the few pagans,
one of the very few still left,
as he sat in his shabby room just after reading
Philostratos' On Apollonios of Tyana.
But even he—a trivial and cowardly man—
played the Christian in public and went to church.
It was the time when Justin, known as the elder,
reigned in total piety,
and Alexandria, a godly city,
detested pitiful idolators.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Imenos

'... to be cherished even more
s a sensual pleasure achieved morbidly, corruptingly-
it rarely finds the body able to feel what it requires-
that morbidly, corruptingly, creates
an erotic intensity which health cannot know'

Extract from a letter

written by young Imenos (from a patrician family)
notorious in Syracuse for his debauchery
in the debauched times of Michael the Third.

Constantine P. Cavafy

In 200 B.C.

"Alexander son of Philip, and the Greeks except the Lacedaemonians--"

We can very well imagine
that they were utterly indifferent in Sparta
to this inscription. "Except the Lacedaemonians",
but naturally. The Spartans were not
to be led and ordered about
as precious servants. Besides
a panhellenic campaign without
a Spartan king as a leader
would not have appeared very important.
O, of course "except the Lacedaemonians."

This too is a stand. Understandable.

Thus, except the Lacedaemonians at Granicus;
and then at Issus; and in the final
battle, where the formidable army was swept away
that the Persians had massed at Arbela:
which had set out from Arbela for victory, and was swept away.

And out of the remarkable panhellenic campaign,
victorious, brilliant,
celebrated, glorious
as no other had ever been glorified,
the incomparable: we emerged;
a great new Greek world.

We; the Alexandrians, the Antiocheans,
the Seleucians, and the numerous
rest of the Greeks of Egypt and Syria,
and of Media, and Persia, and the many others.
With our extensive territories,
with the varied action of thoughtful adaptations.
And the Common Greek Language
we carried to the heart of Bactria, to the Indians.

As if we were to talk of Lacedaemonians now!

In A Town Of Osroini

Yesterday, around midnight, they brought us our friend Remon,
who'd been wounded in a taverna fight.
Through the windows we left wide open,
the moon cast light over his beautiful body as it lay on the bed.
We're a mixture here: Syrians, immigrant Greeks, Armenians, Medes.
Remon is one of these too. But last night,
when the moon shone on his sensual face,
our thoughts went back to Plato's Charmidis.

Constantine P. Cavafy

In A Township Of Asia Minor

The news about the outcome of the sea-battle at Actium was of course unexpected.

But there's no need for us to draft a new proclamation.

The name's the only thing that has to be changed.

There, in the concluding lines, instead of: "Having freed the Romans from Octavius, that disaster,

that parody of a Caesar,"

we'll substitute: "Having freed the Romans

from Antony, that disaster,..."

The whole text fits very nicely.

"To the most glorious victor,
matchless in his military ventures,
prodigious in his political operations,
on whose behalf the township ardently wished
for Antony's triumph,..."

here, as we said, the substitution: "for Octavius Caesar's triumph,
regarding it as Zeus' finest gift—

to this mighty protector of the Greeks,
who graciously honors Greek customs,
who is beloved in every Greek domain,
who clearly deserves exalted praise,
and whose exploits should be recorded at length
in the Greek language, in both verse and prose,
in the Greek language, the vehicle of fame,"
et cetera, et cetera. It all fits brilliantly.

Constantine P. Cavafy

In Alexandria, 31 B.C.

From his village near the outskirts of town,
still dust-covered from the journey in,
the peddler arrives. And "Incense!" "Gum!"
"The best olive oil!" "Perfume for your hair!"
he hawks through the streets. But with all the hubbub,
the music, the parades, who can hear him?
The crowd shoves him, drags him along, knocks him around.
And when he asks, now totally confused, "What's going on here?"
someone tosses him too the huge palace lie:
that Antony is winning in Greece.

Constantine P. Cavafy

In An Old Book

Forgotten between the leaves of an old book—
almost a hundred years old—
I found an unsigned watercolor.
It must have been the work of a powerful artist.
Its title: "Representation of Love";

"...love of extreme sensualists" would have been more to the point.

Because it became clear as you looked at the work
(it was easy to see what the artist had in mind)
that the young man in the painting
was not designated for those
who love in ways that are more or less healthy,
inside the bounds of what is clearly permissible—
with his deep chestnut eyes,
the rare beauty of his face,
the beauty of anomalous charm,
with those ideal lips that bring
sensual delight to the body loved,
those ideal limbs shaped for beds
that common morality calls shameless.

Constantine P. Cavafy

In Church

I love the church: its labara,
its silver vessels, its candleholders,
the lights, the ikons, the pulpit.

Whenever I go there, into a church of the Greeks,
with its aroma of incense,
its liturgical chanting and harmony,
the majestic presence of the priests,
dazzling in their ornate vestments,
the solemn rhythm of their gestures-
my thoughts turn to the great glories of our race,
to the splendor of our Byzantine heritage.

Constantine P. Cavafy

In Despair

He has lost him completely. And now he is seeking
on the lips of every new lover
the lips of his beloved; in the embrace
of every new lover he seeks to be deluded
that he is the same lad, that it is to him he is yielding.

He has lost him completely, as if he had never been at all.
For he wanted -- so he said -- he wanted to be saved
from the stigmatized, the sick sensual delight;
from the stigmatized, sensual delight of shame.
There was still time -- as he said -- to be saved.

He has lost him completely, as if he had never been at all.
In his imagination, in his delusions,
on the lips of others it is his lips he is seeking;
he is longing to feel again the love he has known.

Constantine P. Cavafy

In Sparta

He didn't know, King Kleomenis, he didn't dare—
he just did not know how to tell his mother
a thing like this: that Ptolemy demanded,
to guarantee their treaty, that she too go to Egypt
and be held there as a hostage—
a very humiliating, indecorous thing.
And he would be about to speak yet always hesitate,
would start to tell her yet always stop.

But the magnificent woman understood him
(she had already heard some rumors about it)
and she encouraged him to come out with it clearly.
And she laughed, saying of course she would go,
indeed was happy that in her old age
she could be useful to Sparta still.

As for the humiliation—that didn't touch her at all.
Of course an upstart like the Lagid
couldn't possibly comprehend the Spartan spirit;
so his demand could not in fact humiliate
a Royal Lady like herself:
mother of a Spartan king.

Constantine P. Cavafy

In The Boring Village

In the boring village where he works—
clerk in a textile shop, very young—
and where he's waiting out the two or three months ahead,
another two or three months until business falls off
so he can leave for the city and plunge headlong
into its action, its entertainment;
in the boring village where he's waiting out the time—
he goes to bed tonight full of sexual longing,
all his youth on fire with the body's passion,
his lovely youth given over to a fine intensity.
And in his sleep pleasure comes to him;
in his sleep he sees and has the figure, the flesh he longed for...

Constantine P. Cavafy

In The Evening

It wouldn't have lasted long anyway
years of experience make that clear.
But Fate did put an end to it a bit abruptly.
It was soon over, that wonderful life.
Yet how strong the scents were,
what a magnificent bed we lay in,
what pleasures we gave our bodies.

An echo from my days of indulgence,
an echo from those days came back to me,
something from the fire of the young life we shared:
I picked up a letter again,
read it over and over till the light faded.

Then, sad, I went out on to the balcony,
went out to change my thoughts at least by seeing
something of this city I love,
a little movement in the streets, in the shops.

Constantine P. Cavafy

In The Harbor

Emis - young, twenty-eight-
reached this Syrian harbor in a Tenian ship,
his plan to learn the incense trade.
But ill during the voyage,
he died as soon as he was put ashore.
His burial, the poorest possible, took place here.
A few hours before dying he whispered something
about 'home', about 'very old parents.'
But nobody he called home
in the great pan Hellenic world.
Better that way; because as it is,
though he lies buried in this harbor,
his parents will always have the hope he's still alive.

Constantine P. Cavafy

In The Month Athyr

I can just read the inscription on this ancient stone.
"Lo[r]d Jesus Christ." I make out a "So[u]l."
"In the mon[th] of Athyr' 'Lefkio[s] went to sleep."
Where his age is mentioned—"lived to the age of"—
the Kappa Zeta shows that he went to sleep a young man.
In the corroded part I see "Hi[m]...Alexandrian."
Then there are three badly mutilated lines—
though I can pick out a few words, like "our tea[r]s,"
"grief,"
then "tears" again, and "sorrow to [us] his [f]riends."
I think Lefkios must have been greatly loved.
In the month of Athyr Lefkios went to sleep.

Constantine P. Cavafy

In The Same Space

Environment, of house, of city centres, city quarters
Which I look upon and where I walk; years and years.

I have created you in the midst of joy and in the midst of sorrows;
With so many circumstances, with so many things.

And you have been made sensation, the whole of you, for me.

Constantine P. Cavafy

In The Street

His attractive face a bit pale,
his brown eyes looking tired, dazed,
twenty-five years old but could be taken for twenty,
with something of the artist in the way he dresses
-the colour of his tie, shape of his collar
he drifts aimlessly down the street,
as though still hypnotized by the illicit pleasure,
the very illicit pleasure he's just experienced.

Constantine P. Cavafy

In The Tavernas

I wallow in the tavernas and brothels of Beirut.
I didn't want to stay
in Alexandria. Tamides left me;
he went off with the Prefect's son to earn himself
a villa on the Nile, a mansion in the city.
It wouldn't have been right for me to stay in Alexandria.
I wallow in the tavernas and brothels of Beirut.
I live a vile life, devoted to cheap debauchery.
The one thing that saves me,
like durable beauty, like perfume
that goes on clinging to my flesh, is this: Tamides,
most exquisite of young men, was mine for two years,
and mine not for a house or a villa on the Nile.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Interruption

We interrupt the work of the gods,
hasty and inexperienced beings of the moment.
In the palaces of Eleusis and Phthia
Demeter and Thetis start good works
amid high flames and dense smoke. But
always Metaneira rushes from the king's
chambers, disheveled and scared,
and always Peleus is fearful and interferes.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Ionian

Just because we've torn their statues down,
and cast them from their temples,
doesn't for a moment mean the gods are dead.
Land of Ionia, they love you yet,

their spirits still remember you.
When an August morning breaks upon you
a vigour from their lives stabs through your air;
and sometimes an ethereal and youthful form
in swiftest passage, indistinct,

passes up above your hills.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Ionic

That we've broken their statues,
that we've driven them out of their temples,
doesn't mean at all that the gods are dead.
O land of Ionia, they're still in love with you,
their souls still keep your memory.
When an August dawn wakes over you,
your atmosphere is potent with their life,
and sometimes a young ethereal figure
indistinct, in rapid flight,
wings across your hills.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Ithaca

When you set out for Ithaca
ask that your way be long,
full of adventure, full of instruction.
The Laistrygonians and the Cyclops,
angry Poseidon - do not fear them:
such as these you will never find
as long as your thought is lofty, as long as a rare
emotion touch your spirit and your body.
The Laistrygonians and the Cyclops,
angry Poseidon - you will not meet them
unless you carry them in your soul,
unless your soul raise them up before you.

Ask that your way be long.
At many a Summer dawn to enter
with what gratitude, what joy -
ports seen for the first time;
to stop at Phoenician trading centres,
and to buy good merchandise,
mother of pearl and coral, amber and ebony,
and sensuous perfumes of every kind,
sensuous perfumes as lavishly as you can;
to visit many Egyptian cities,
to gather stores of knowledge from the learned.

Have Ithaca always in your mind.
Your arrival there is what you are destined for.
But don't in the least hurry the journey.
Better it last for years,
so that when you reach the island you are old,
rich with all you have gained on the way,
not expecting Ithaca to give you wealth.
Ithaca gave you a splendid journey.
Without her you would not have set out.
She hasn't anything else to give you.

And if you find her poor, Ithaca hasn't deceived you.
So wise you have become, of such experience,
that already you'll have understood what these Ithakas mean.

Constantine P. Cavafy

I've Brought To Art

I sit in a mood of reverie.

I've brought to Art desires and sensations:
things half-glimpsed,
faces or lines, certain indistinct memories
of unfulfilled love affairs.

Let me submit to Art:

Art knows how to shape forms of Beauty,
almost imperceptibly completing life,
blending impressions, blending day with day.

Constantine P. Cavafy

I've Looked So Much...

I've looked on beauty so much
that my vision overflows with it.
The body's lines. Red lips. Sensual limbs.
Hair as though stolen from Greek statues,
always lovely, even uncombed,
and falling slightly over pale foreheads.
Figures of love, as my poetry desired them
. . . . in the nights when I was young,
encountered secretly in my nights.

Constantine P. Cavafy

John Kantakuzinos Triumphs

He sees the fields that still belong to him:
the wheat, the animals, the trees laden with fruit;
and beyond them his ancestral home
full of clothes, costly furniture, silverware.

They'll take it all away from him—O God—they'll take it all
away from him now.

Would Kantakuzinos show pity for him
if he went and fell at his feet? They say he's merciful,
very merciful. But those around him? And the army?—
Or should he fall down and plead before Lady Irini?

Fool that he was to get mixed up in Anna's party!
If only Lord Andronikos had never married her!
Has she ever done anything good, shown any humanity?
Even the Franks don't respect her any longer.
Her plans were ridiculous, all her plotting farcical.
While they were threatening everyone from Constantinople,
Kantakuzinos demolished them, Lord John demolished them.

And to think he'd planned to join Lord John's party!
And he would have done it, and would have been happy now,
a great nobleman still, his position secure,
if the bishop hadn't dissuaded him at the last moment
with his imposing hieratic presence,
his information bogus from beginning to end,
his promises, and all his drivel.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Julian And The Antiochians

<i>Neither the letter C, they say, nor the
letter K had ever harmed the city.... We,
finding interpreters... learned that these
are the initial letters of names, the first
of Christ and the second of Konstantios.

</I>

Julian, Misopogon (The Beard-Hater)

Was it conceivable that they would ever give up
their beautiful way of life, the range
of their daily pleasures, their brilliant theatre
which consummated a union between Art
and the erotic proclivities of the flesh?

Immoral to a degree—and probably more than a degree—
they certainly were. But they had the satisfaction that their life
was the notorious life of Antioch,
delectably sensual, in absolute good taste.

To give up all this, indeed, for what?

His hot air about the false gods,
his boring self-advertisement,
his childish fear of the theatre,
his graceless prudery, his ridiculous beard.

O certainly they preferred C,
certainly they preferred K—a hundred times over.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Julian At The Mysteries

But when he found himself in darkness,
in the earth's awful depths,
with a group of unholy Greeks,
and bodiless figures appeared before him
with haloes of light,
the young Julian for a moment lost his nerve:
an impulse from his pious years came back
and he crossed himself.
The Figures vanished at once;
the haloes faded away, the lights went out.
The Greeks glanced at each other.
The young man said: 'Did you see the miracle?
I'm frightened, friends. I want to leave.
Didn't you see how the demons vanished
the second they saw me make the holy sign of the cross?'
The Greeks chuckled scornfully:
'Shame on you, shame, to talk that way
to us sophists and philosophers!
If you want to say things like that,
say them to the Bishop of Nicomedia and his priests.
The greatest gods of our glorious Greece
appeared before you.
And if they left, don't think for a minute
that they were frightened by a gesture.
It was just that when they saw you
making that vile, that crude sign,
their noble nature was disgusted
and they left you in contempt.'
This is what they said to him, and the fool
recovered from his holy, blessed fear,
convinced by the unholy words of the Greeks.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Julian In Nicomedia

Things impolitic and dangerous:
praise for Greek ideals,
supernatural magic, visits to pagan temples.
Enthusiasm for the ancient gods.
Frequent talks with Chrysanthios.
Speculation with Maximus, the astute philosopher.
And look what's happened. Gallos is extremely worried.
Konstantios has become suspicious.
Julian's advisors weren't at all prudent.
The matter, says Mardonios, has gone too far,
the talk it has aroused must be stopped at all cost.—
So Julian goes to the church at Nicomedia,
a lector again, and there
with deep reverence he reads out loud
passages from the Holy Scriptures,
and everyone marvels at his Christian piety.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Julian Seeing Contempt

"Observing, then, that there is great contempt for the gods among us"—he says in his solemn way.

Contempt. But what did he expect?

Let him organize religion as much as he liked,
write to the High Priest of Galatia as much as he liked,
or to others of his kind, inciting them, giving instructions.

His friends weren't Christians; that much was certain.

But even so they couldn't play
as he could (brought up a Christian)
with a new religious system,
ludicrous in both theory and application.

They were, after all, Greeks. Nothing in excess, Augustus.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Kaisarion

Partly to throw light on a certain period,
partly to kill an hour or two,
last night I picked up and read
a volume of inscriptions about the Ptolemies.
The lavish praise and flattery are much the same
for each of them. All are brilliant,
glorious, mighty, benevolent;
everything they undertake is full of wisdom.
As for the women of their line, the Berenices and Cleopatras,
they too, all of them, are marvelous.

When I'd verified the facts I wanted
I would have put the book away had not a brief
insignificant mention of King Kaisarion
suddenly caught my eye...

And there you were with your indefinable charm.
Because we know
so little about you from history,
I could fashion you more freely in my mind.
I made you good-looking and sensitive.
My art gives your face
a dreamy, an appealing beauty.
And so completely did I imagine you
that late last night,
as my lamp went out—I let it go out on purpose—
it seemed you came into my room,
it seemed you stood there in front of me, looking just as you would have
in conquered Alexandria,
pale and weary, ideal in your grief,
still hoping they might take pity on you,
those scum who whispered: "Too many Caesars."

Constantine P. Cavafy

Kimon, Son Of Learchos, 22, Student Of Greek Literature (In Kyrini)

'My end came while I was happy.
Ermotelis had me for his inseparable friend.
During my last days, though he tried to make me believe
that he wasn't worried, I often noticed his eyes
red from crying. And when he'd think
I'd fallen asleep, he'd collapse at the edge of my bed
as though out of his mind. But we were both young men
of the same age, twenty-three years old.
Fate is a traitor. Maybe some other passion
would have taken Ermotelis from me.
It ended the right way: our love undivided.'
This epitaph for Marylos, son of Aristodimos,
who died in Alexandria a month ago,
was sent to me, his cousin Kimon, in my mourning.
It was sent by the author, a poet friend of mine,
sent because he knew I was related to Marylos-
but that's all he knew.
My heart is full of sorrow over Marylos.
We grew up together, like brothers.
I'm deeply saddened. His premature death
completely wiped out any grudge...
any grudge I may have had against Marylos,
even if he did steal Ermotelis' love away from me-
so that if Ermotelis should want me again now,
it won't be at all the same as it was.
I know this susceptible nature of mine. The image of Marylos
will come between us, and I'll hear Marylos say to me:
'See, you're satisfied now.
You've taken him back again as you longed to, Kimon;
see, you've lost your excuse for maligning me now.

Constantine P. Cavafy

King Claudius

My mind now moves to distant places.
I'm walking the streets of Elsinore,
through its squares, and I recall
the very sad story-
that unfortunate king
killed by his nephew
because of some fanciful suspicions.
In all the homes of the poor
he was mourned secretly
(they were afraid of Fortinbras).
A quiet, gentle man,
a man who loved peace
(his country had suffered much
from the wars of his predecessor),
he behaved graciously toward everyone,
humble and great alike.
Never high-handed, he always sought advice
in the kingdom's affairs
from serious, experienced people.
Just why his nephew killed him
was never actually explained.
The prince suspected him of murder,
and the basis of his suspicion was this:
walking one night along an ancient battlement
he thought he saw a ghost
and he had a conversation with this ghost;
what he supposedly heard from the ghost
were certain accusations against the king.
It must have been a fit of fancy,
an optical illusion
(the prince was nervous in the extreme;
while he was studying at Wittenberg,
many of his fellow students thought him a maniac).
A few days later he went
to his mother's room to discuss
certain family affairs. And suddenly,
while he was talking, he lost his self-control,
started shouting, screaming
that the ghost was there in front of him.

But his mother saw nothing at all.
And that same day, for no apparent reason,
he killed an old gentleman of the court.
Since the prince was due to sail for England
in a day or two,
the king hustled him off post-haste
in order to save him.
But the people were so outraged
by the monstrous murder
that rebels rose up
and tried to storm the palace gates,
led by the dead man's son,
the noble lord Laertes
(a brave young man, also ambitious;
in the confusion, some of his friends called out:
'Long live King Laertes!').
Later, once the kingdom had calmed down
and the king was lying in his grave-
he was killed by his nephew, the prince,
who never went to England
but escaped from the ship on his way there-
a certain Horatio came forward
and tried to exonerate the prince
by telling some stories of his own.
He said that the voyage to England
had been a secret plot, and orders
had been given to kill the prince there
(but this was never clearly ascertained).
He also spoke of poisoned wine-
wine poisoned by the king.
It's true that Laertes spoke of this too.
But couldn't he have been lying?
Couldn't he have been mistaken?
And when did he say all this?
While dying of his wounds, his mind reeling,
his talk seemingly delirious.
As for the poisoned weapons,
it was shown later that the poisoning
hadn't been done by the king at all:
Laertes himself had done it.
But Horatio, whenever pressed,
would produce even the ghost as a witness:

the ghost said this and that,
the ghost did this and that!
Because of all this, though letting Horatio talk,
most people in their hearts
pitied the poor king,
who, with all these ghosts and fairy tales,
was unjustly killed and disposed of.
Yet Fortinbras, who profited
by winning the throne so easily,
gave full attention and weight
to every word Horatio said.

Constantine P. Cavafy

King Dimitrios

When the Macedonians deserted him
and showed they preferred Pyrrhos,
King Dimitrios (a noble soul) didn't behave
-so they said-

at all like a king.

He took off his golden robes,
threw away his purple buskins,
and quickly dressing himself
in simple clothes, he slipped out-
just like an actor who,
the play over,
changes his costume and goes away.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Kleitos' Illness

Kleitos, a likeable young man,
about twenty-three years old
with a first-class education, a rare knowledge of Greek
is seriously ill. He caught the fever
that reaped a harvest this year in Alexandria.
The fever found him already worn out morally
by the pain of knowing that his friend, a young actor,
had stopped loving and wanting him.
He's seriously ill, and his parents are terribly worried.
An old servant who brought him up
is also full of fear for Kleitos' life;
and in her panic
she remembers an idol she used to worship
when she was young, before she came there as a maid,
to the house of distinguished Christians, and turned Christian
herself.
She secretly brings some votive bread, some wine and honey,
and places them before the idol. She chants whatever phrases
she remembers from old prayers: odds and ends. The ninny
doesn't realize that the black demon couldn't care less
whether a Christian gets well or not.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Long Ago

I'd like to speak of this memory...
but it's so faded now...as though nothing is left—
because it was so long ago, in my early adolescent years.

A skin as though of jasmines...
that August evening— was it August?—
I can still just recall the eyes: blue, I think they were...
Ah yes, blue: a sapphire blue.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Longings

Like the beautiful bodies of those who died before growing old,
sadly shut away in sumptuous mausoleum,
roses by the head, jasmine at the feet -
so appear the longings that have passed
without being satisfied, not one of the granted
a single night of pleasure, or one of its radiant mornings.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Lovely White Flowers

He went inside the cafe where they used to sit together.
It was here, three months ago, that his friend told him:
'We're completely broke -so hard up, the two of us,
that we're stuck with the cheapest places.
I can't go around with you any more -it's no use hiding the fact.
I've got to tell you, somebody else is after me.'
The 'somebody else' had promised him two suits, some silk handkerchiefs.
He himself, to get his friend back,
went through hell rounding up twenty pounds.
His friend came back to him for the twenty pounds-
but along with that, for their old intimacy,
their old love, for the deep feeling between them.
The 'somebody else' was a liar, a real bum:
he'd ordered only one suit for his friend,
and that under pressure, after much begging.
But now he doesn't want the suits any longer,
he doesn't want the silk handkerchiefs at all,
or twenty pounds, or twenty piastres even.
Sunday they buried him, at ten in the morning.
Sunday they buried him, almost a week ago.
He laid flowers on his cheap coffin,
lovely white flowers, very much in keeping
with his beauty, his twenty-two years.
When he went to the cafe that evening
he happened to have some vital business there
to that same cafe where they used to go together,
it was a knife in his heart,
that dead cafe where they used to go together.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Manuel Comninos

One dreary September day
Emperor Manuel Komninos
felt his death was near.

The court astrologers -bribed, of course- went on babbling
about how many years he still had to live.

But while they were having their say,
he remembered an old religious custom
and ordered ecclesiastical vestments
to be brought from a monastery,
and he put them on, glad to assume
the modest image of a priest or monk.

Happy all those who believe,
and like Emperor Manuel end their lives
dressed modestly in their faith.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Melancholy Of Jason Kleander, Poet In Kommagini, A.D. 595

The aging of my body and my beauty
is a wound from a merciless knife.
I'm not resigned to it at all.
I turn to you, Art of Poetry,
because you have a kind of knowledge about drugs:
attempts to numb the pain, in Imagination and Language.

It is wound from a merciless knife.
Bring your drugs, Art of Poetry—
they numb the wound at least for a little while.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Monotony

One monotonous day is followed
by another monotonous, identical day. The same
things will happen, they will happen again --
the same moments find us and leave us.

A month passes and ushers in another month.
One easily guesses the coming events;
they are the boring ones of yesterday.
And the morrow ends up not resembling a morrow anymore.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Morning Sea

Let me stop here. Let me, too, look at nature awhile.
The brilliant blue of the morning sea, of the cloudless sky,
the yellow shore; all lovely,
all bathed in light.

Let me stand here. And let me pretend I see all this
(I really did see it for a minute when I first stopped)
and not my usual day-dreams here too,
my memories, those images of sensual pleasure.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Myris: Alexandria, A.D. 340

When I heard the terrible news, that Myris was dead,
I went to his house, although I avoid
going to the houses of Christians,
especially during times of mourning or festivity.
I stood in the corridor. I didn't want
to go further inside because I noticed
that the relatives of the deceased looked at me
with obvious surprise and displeasure.
They had him in a large room
and from the corner where I stood
I could catch a glimpse of it: all precious carpets,
and vessels in silver and gold.
I stood and wept in a corner of the corridor.
And I thought how our parties and excursions
wouldn't be worthwhile now without Myris;
and I thought how I'd no longer see him
at our wonderfully indecent night-long sessions
enjoying himself, laughing, and reciting verses
with his perfect feel for Greek rhythm;
and I thought how I'd lost forever
his beauty, lost forever
the young man I'd worshipped so passionately.
Some old women close to me were talking with lowered
 voices
about the last day he lived:
the name of Christ constantly on his lips,
his hand holding a cross.
Then four Christian priests
came into the room, and said prayers
fervently, and orisons to Jesus,
or to Mary (I'm not very familiar with their religion).
We'd known of course that Myris was a Christian,
known it from the very start,
when he first joined our group the year before last.
But he lived exactly as we did:
more devoted to pleasure than all of us,
he scattered his money lavishly on amusements.
Not caring what anyone thought of him,
he threw himself eagerly into night-time scuffles

when our group happened to clash
with some rival group in the street.
He never spoke about his religion.
And once we even told him
that we'd take him with us to the Serapeion.
But -I remember now-
he didn't seem to like this joke of ours.
And yes, now I recall two other incidents.
When we made libations to Poseidon,
he drew himself back from our circle and looked elsewhere.
And when one of us in his fervour said:
'May all of us be favoured and protected
by the great, the sublime Apollo'-
Myris, unheard by the others, whispered: 'Not counting
me.'

The Christian priests were praying loudly
for the young man's soul.
I noticed with how much diligence,
how much intense concern
for the forms of their religion, they were preparing
everything for the Christian funeral.
And suddenly an odd sensation took hold of me:
indefinably I felt
as if Myris were going from me;
I felt that he, a Christian, was united
with his own people and that I was becoming
a stranger, a total stranger. I even felt
a doubt come over me: that I'd been deceived by my passion
and has always been a stranger to him.
I rushed out of their horrible house,
rushed away before my memory of Myris
could be captured, could be perverted by their Christianity.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Nero's Turn

Nero was not worried when he heard
the prophecy of the Delphic Oracle.
"Let him fear the seventy three years."
He still had ample time to enjoy himself.
He is thirty. More than sufficient
is the term the god allots him
to prepare for future perils.

Now he will return to Rome slightly tired,
but delightfully tired from this journey,
full of days of enjoyment --
at the theaters, the gardens, the gymnasia...
evenings at cities of Achaia...
Ah the delight of nude bodies, above all...

Thus fared Nero. And in Spain Galba
secretly assembles and drills his army,
the old man of seventy three.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Of Coloured Glass

I am very moved by one detail
in the coronation at Vlachernai of John Kantakuzinos
and Irini, daughter of Andronikos Asan.
Because they had only a few precious stones
(our afflicted empire was extremely poor)
they wore artificial ones: numerous pieces of glass,
red, green, or blue. I find
nothing humiliating or undignified
in those little pieces of colored glass.
On the contrary, they seem
a sad protest against
the unjust misfortune of the couple being crowned,
symbols of what they deserved to have,
of what surely it was right that they should have
at their coronation—a Lord John Kantakuzinos,
a Lady Irini, daughter of Andronikos Asan.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Of Dimitrios Sotir

Everything he'd hoped for turned out wrong.
He'd seen himself doing great things,
ending the humiliation that had kept his country down
ever since the battle of Magnesia
seen himself making Syria a powerful state again,
with her armies, her fleets,
her big fortresses, her wealth.
He'd suffered in Rome, become bitter
when he sensed in the talk of friends,
young men of the great families,
that in spite of all their delicacy, their politeness
toward him, the son
of King Selefkos Philopator-
when he sensed that in spite of this there was always
a secret contempt for the Hellenized dynasties:
their heyday was over, they weren't fit for anything serious,
were completely unable to rule their peoples.
He'd cut himself off, indignant, swearing
it would be quite different from the way they thought.
Why, wasn't he himself full of determination?
He would act, he would fight, he would put it all right again.
If he could only find a way of getting to the East,
only manage to escape from Italy,
then all this inner strength,
all this energy,
he'd pass on to his people.
Only to be in Syria!
He was so young when he left his country
he hardly remembered what it looked like.
But in his mind he'd always thought of it
as something sacred that you approach reverently,
as a beautiful place unveiled, a vision
of Greek cities and Greek ports.
And now?
Now despair and sorrow.
They were right, the young men in Rome.
The dynasties resulting from the Macedonian Conquest
can't be kept going any longer.
It doesn't matter. He'd made the effort,

fought as much as he could.
And in his bleak disillusion
there's only one thing in which he still takes pride:
that even in failure
he shows the world his same indomitable courage.
The rest: they were dreams and wasted energy.
This Syria -it almost seems it isn't his country
this Syria is the land of Valas and Herakleidis.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Of The Jews (50 A.D.)

Painter and poet, runner and discus-thrower,
beautiful as Endymion: Ianthis, son of Antony.
From a family on friendly terms with the Synagogue.

"My most valuable days are those
when I give up the pursuit of sensuous beauty,
when I desert the elegant and severe cult of Hellenism,
with its over-riding devotion
to perfectly shaped, corruptible white limbs,
and become the man I would want to remain forever:
son of the Jews, the holy Jews."

A most fervent declaration on his part: "...to remain forever
a son of the Jews, the holy Jews."

But he did not remain anything of the kind.
The Hedonism and Art of Alexandria
kept him as their dedicated son.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Of The Shop

He wrapped them carefully, neatly
in costly green silk.

Roses of ruby, lilies of pearl,
violets of amethyst. As he himself judged,

as he wanted them, they look beautiful to him; not as he saw
or studied them in nature. He will leave them in the safe,

a sample of his daring and skillful craft.
When a buyer enters the shop

he takes from the cases other wares and sells -- superb jewels --
bracelets, chains, necklaces, and rings.

Constantine P. Cavafy

On An Italian Shore

Kimos, son of Menedoros, a young Greek-Italian,
devotes his life to amusing himself,
like most young men in Greater Greece
brought up in the lap of luxury.

But today, in spite of his nature,
he is preoccupied, dejected. Near the shore
he watched, deeply distressed, as they unload
ships with booty taken from the Peloponnese.

G r e e k l o o t : b o o t y f r o m C o r i n t h .

Today certainly it is not right,
it is not possible for the young Greek-Italian
to want to amuse himself in any way.

Constantine P. Cavafy

On Board Ship

It's like him, of course,
this little pencil portrait.
Hurriedly sketched, on the ship's deck,
the afternoon magical,
the Ionian Sea around us.
It's like him. But I remember him as better looking.
He was almost pathologically sensitive,
and this highlighted his expression.
He appears to me better looking
now that my soul brings him back, out of Time.
Out Of Time. All these things are very old
the sketch, the ship, the afternoon.

Constantine P. Cavafy

On Hearing Of Love

On hearing about great love, respond, be moved
like an aesthete. Only, fortunate as you've been,
remember how much your imagination created for you.
This first, and then the rest
that you experienced and enjoyed in your life:
the less great, the more real and tangible.
Of loves like these you were not deprived.

Constantine P. Cavafy

On The March To Sinopi

Mithridatis, glorious and powerful,
ruler of great cities,
master of strong armies and fleets,
on the march to Sinopi took a route
through a remote part of the country
where a soothsayer lived.

Mithridatis sent one of his officers
to ask the soothsayer how much more wealth,
how much more power, he'd accumulate in the future.

He dispatched one of his officers,
then continued his march to Sinopi.

The soothsayer withdrew into a secret room.
About a half an hour later he came out
troubled, and said to the officer:
"I wasn't able to clarify things very well.
Today is not a propitious day—
there were some murky shadows, I didn't understand them fully—.
But, I think, the king should be content with what he has.
Anything more will prove dangerous for him.
Remember, officer, to tell him that:
for God's sake to be satisfied with what he has.
Fortune changes suddenly.
Tell King Mithridatis this:
it's extremely rare to come across anyone like his ancestor's companion,
that noble companion who wrote in the earth with his lance
those timely words that saved him: 'Escape, Mithridatis.' "

Constantine P. Cavafy

On The Outskirts Of Antioch

We in Antioch were astonished when we heard
what Julian was up to now.

Apollo had made things clear to him at Daphni:
he didn't want to give an oracle (as though we cared!),
he didn't intend to speak prophetically, unless
his temple at Daphni was purified first.
The nearby dead, he declared, got on his nerves.

There are many tombs at Daphni.
One of those buried there
was the triumphant and holy martyr Vavylas,
wonder and glory of our church.

It was him the false god hinted at, him he feared.
As long as he felt him near he didn't dare
pronounce his oracle: not a murmur.
(The false gods are terrified of our martyrs.)

Unholy Julian got worked up,
lost his temper and shouted: "Raise him, carry him out,
take him away immediately, this Vavylas.
You there, do you hear? He gets on Apollo's nerves.
Grab him, raise him at once,
dig him out, take him away, throw him out,
take him wherever you want. This isn't a joke.
Apollo said the temple has to be purified."

We took it, the holy relic, and carried it elsewhere.
We took it, we carried it away in love and in honor.

And hasn't the temple done brilliantly since!
In no time at all a colossal fire
broke out, a terrible fire,
and both the temple and Apollo burned to nothing.

Ashes the idol: dirt to be swept away.

Julian exploded, and he spread it around—

what else could he do?—that we, the Christians,
had set the fire. Let him say so.
It hasn't been proved. Let him say so.
The essential thing is—he exploded.

Constantine P. Cavafy

On The Shop

He wrapped them carefully, neatly
in costly green silk.

Roses of ruby, lilies of pearl,
violets of amethyst. As he himself judged,

as he wanted them, they look beautiful to him; not as he saw
or studied them in nature. He will leave them in the safe,

a sample of his daring and skillful craft.
When a buyer enters the shop

he takes from the cases other wares and sells -- superb jewels --
bracelets, chains, necklaces, and rings.

Constantine P. Cavafy

On The Stairs

As I was going down those ill-famed stairs
you were coming through the door, and for a second
I saw your unfamiliar face and you saw mine.
Then I hid so you wouldn't see me again,
and you hurried past me, hiding your face,
and slipped inside the ill-famed house
where you couldn't have found pleasure any more than I did.
And yet the love you were looking for, I had to give you;
the love I was looking for -so your tired, knowing eyes
implied
you had to give me.
Our bodies sensed and sought each other:
our blood and skin understood.
But we both hid ourselves, flustered.

Constantine P. Cavafy

One Night

The room was penurious and common,
Hidden over a disreputable tavern,
The alley could be seen from the window,
Unclean and narrow. From below
Came the voices of a few workmen
Who were playing cards and having a good time.

There on the vulgar on the humble bed
I had the body of love, I had the lips,
The sensuous, the rosy lips of wine,
Rosy with such a wine, that even now
Here as I write, after so many years,
In my solitary house, I am drunk again.

Constantine P. Cavafy

One Of Their Gods

When one of them passed through the market place
of Seleucia, toward the hour that night falls
as a tall and perfectly handsome youth,
with the joy of immortality in his eyes,
with his scented black hair,
the passers-by would stare at him
and one would ask the other if he knew him,
and if he were a Greek of Syria, or a stranger. But some,
who watched with greater attention,
would understand and stand aside;
and as he vanished under the arcades,
into the shadows and into the lights of the evening,
heading toward the district that lives
only at night, with orgies and debauchery,
and every sort of drunkenness and lust,
they would ponder which of Them he might be,
and for what suspect enjoyment
he had descended to the streets of Seleucia
from the Venerable, Most Hallowed Halls.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Orophernis

The figure on this four drachma coin
who seems to have a smile on his face
his beautiful, delicate face
this figure is Orophernis, son of Ariarathis.

A child, they threw him out of Cappadocia,
out of his great ancestral palace,
and sent him to grow up in Ionia,
to be forgotten there among foreigners.

Oh those exquisite Ionian nights
when fearlessly, and entirely in a Greek way,
he came to know sensual pleasure totally.
In his heart, Asiatic always,
but in manners and language, a Greek;
with his turquoise jewellery, his Greek clothes,
his body perfumed with oil of jasmine,
he was the most handsome, the most perfect
of Ionia's handsome young men.

Later, when the Syrians entered Cappadocia
and made him king,
he became fully engrossed in his kingship
so as to enjoy himself in a new way each day,
greedily hoarding gold and silver,
delightedly gloating over
the piles of wealth glittering before his eyes.
As for worrying about the country and running it-
he had no idea what was going on.

The Cappadocians quickly got rid of him,
and he ended up in Syria, at the palace of Dimitrios,
where he spent his time amusing himself and loafing.

But one day unfamiliar thoughts
broke in on his completely idle life:
he remembered how through his mother Antiochis
and that old grandmother Stratoniki
he too was connected with the Syrian crown,

he too almost a Selekid.
For a while he gave up lechery and drink
and ineptly, half dazed,
tried to start an intrigue,
do something, come up with a plan;
but he failed pitifully and that was that.

His end must have been recorded somewhere only to be lost;
or maybe history passed over it
and rightly didn't bother to notice
anything so trivial.

The figure on this four drachma coin,
something of whose young charm can still be seen,
a ray of his poetic beauty
this sensuous image of an Ionian boy,
this is Orophernis, son of Ariarathis.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Outside The House

Walking yesterday in an outlying neighbourhood,
I went by the house
I used to go to when I was very young.
There Eros with his wonderful power
laid hold of my body.

And yesterday
when I walked down the old road,
shops, pavement, stones,
walls and balconies and windows-
all were suddenly made beautiful by the spell of love:
there was nothing ugly left there.

And as I stood staring at the door,
stood lingering outside the house,
my whole being radiated
the sensual passion stored up inside me.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Passing Through

The things he timidly imagined as a schoolboy
are openly revealed to him now. And he walks the streets,
stays out all night, gets involved. And as is right (for our kind of art)
his blood -fresh and hot
offers itself to pleasure.
His body is overcome
by forbidden erotic ecstasy; and his young limbs
give in to it completely.
In this way a simple boy
becomes something worth our looking at, for a moment
he too passes through the exalted World of Poetry,
the young sensualist with blood fresh and hot.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Philhellene

Make sure the engraving is done skillfully.
The expression serious, majestic.
The diadem preferably somewhat narrow:
I don't like that broad kind the Parthians wear.
The inscription, as usual, in Greek:
nothing excessive, nothing pompous—
we don't want the proconsul to take it the wrong way:
he's always nosing things out and reporting back to Rome—
but of course giving me due honor.
Something very special on the other side:
some discus-thrower, young, good-looking.
Above all I urge you to see to it
(Sithaspis, for God's sake don't let them forget)
that after "King" and "Savior,"
they engrave "Philhellene" in elegant characters.
Now don't try to be clever
with your "where are the Greeks?" and "what things Greek
here behind Zagros, out beyond Phraata?"
Since so many others more barbarian than ourselves
choose to inscribe it, we will inscribe it too.
And besides, don't forget that sometimes
sophists do come to us from Syria,
and versifiers, and other triflers of that kind.
So we are not, I think, un-Greek.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Picture Of A 23-Year-Old Youth Painted By His Friend Of The Same Age, An Amature

He finished the painting yesterday noon. Now
he studies it in detail. He has painted him in a
gray unbuttoned coat, a deep gray; without
any vest or any tie. With a rose-colored shirt;
open at the collar, so something might be seen
also of the beauty of his chest, of his neck.

The right temple is almost entirely
covered by his hair, his beautiful hair
(parted in the manner he perfers it this year).

There is the completely voluptuous tone
he wanted to put into it when he was doing the eyes,
when he was doing the lips.... His mouth, the lips
that are made for consummation, for choice love-making.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Pictured

My work, I'm very careful about it, and I love it.
But today I'm discouraged by how slowly it's going.
The day has affected my mood.
It gets darker and darker. Endless wind and rain.
I'm more in the mood for looking than for writing.
In this picture, I'm now gazing at a handsome boy
who is lying down close to a spring,
exhausted from running.
What a handsome boy; what a heavenly noon
has caught him up in sleep.
I sit and gaze like this for a long time,
recovering through art from the effort of creating it.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Poseidonians

The Poseidonians forgot the Greek language
after so many centuries of mingling
with Tyrrhenians, Latins, and other foreigners.
The only thing surviving from their ancestors
was a Greek festival, with beautiful rites,
with lyres and flutes, contests and wreaths.
And it was their habit toward the festival's end
to tell each other about their ancient customs
and once again to speak Greek names
that only few of them still recognized.
And so their festival always had a melancholy ending
because they remembered that they too were Greeks,
they too once upon a time were citizens of Magna Graecia;
and how low they'd fallen now, what they'd become,
living and speaking like barbarians,
cut off so disastrously from the Greek way of life.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Prayer

A sailor drowned in the sea's depths
Unaware, his mother goes and lights

a tall candle before the ikon of our Lady
praying that he'll come back quickly, that the weather may be good

her ear cocked always to the wind.
While she prays and supplicates,

the ikon listens, solemn, sad,
knowing the son she waits for never will come back.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Priest At The Serapeion

My kind old father
whose love for me has always stayed the same
I mourn my kind old father
who died two days ago, just before dawn.

Jesus Christ, I try continually
in my every thought, word, and deed
to keep the commandments
of your most holly Church; and I reject
all who deny you. But now I mourn:
I grieve, O Christ, for my father
even though he was -terrible as it is to say it
priest at that cursed Serapeion.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Priest At The Serapeum

My dear old father,
who always loved me the same;
my dear old father I lament
who died the day before yesterday, just before dawn.

Jesus Christ, it is my daily effort
to observe the precepts
of Thy most holy church in all my acts,
in all words, in all thoughts.
And all those who renounce Thee
I shun.-- But now I lament;
I bewail, Christ, for my father
although he was -- a horrible thing to say --
a priest at the accursed Serapeum.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Remember, Body...

Body, remember not only how much you were loved,
not only the beds on which you lay,
but also those desires which for you
plainly glowed in the eyes,
and trembled in the voice -- and some
chance obstacle made them futile.
Now that all belongs to the past,
it is almost as if you had yielded
to those desires too -- remember,
how they glowed, in the eyes looking at you;
how they trembled in the voice, for you, remember, body.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Return

Return often and take me,
beloved sensation, return and take me --
when the memory of the body awakens,
and an old desire runs again through the blood;
when the lips and the skin remember,
and the hands feel as if they touch again.

Return often and take me at night,
when the lips and the skin remember...

Constantine P. Cavafy

Returning From Greece

Well, we're nearly there, Hermippos.
Day after tomorrow, it seems - that's what the captain said.
At least we're sailing our seas,
the waters of our own countries - Cyprus, Syria, Egypt -
waters we know and love.
Why so silent? Ask your heart:
didn't you too feel happier
the further we got from Greece?
What's the point of fooling ourselves?
That wouldn't be properly Greek, would it?

It's time we admitted the truth:
we're Greeks also - what else are we?-
but with Asiatic tastes and feelings,
tastes and feelings
sometimes alien to Hellenism.

It isn't correct, Hermippos, for us philosophers
to be like some of our petty kings
(remember how we laughed at them
when they used to come to our lectures?)
who through their showy Hellenified exteriors
(Macedonian exteriors, naturally)
let a bit of Arabia peep out now and then,
a bit of Media they can't keep back.
And to what laughable lengths the fools went
trying to cover it up!

No, that's not at all correct for us.
For Greeks like us that kind of pettiness won't do.
We simply can't be ashamed
of the Syrian and Egyptian blood in our veins;
we should really honour it, delight in it.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Sculptor Of Tyana

As you'll have heard, I'm no beginner.
I've handled a lot of stone in my time,
and in my own country, Tyana, I'm really quite famous.
Actually, a number of senators here
have also commissioned works of mine.
Let me show you
a few of them. Notice this Rhea:
reverential, all fortitude, most primitive.
Notice Pompey. And Marius here,
and Paulus Aemilius, and Scipio Africanus.
The likeness as close as I could make it.
And Patroklos (I still have to touch him up a bit).
Near those pieces of yellowish marble there
stands Kaisarion.
And for some time now I've been busy
working on a Poseidon. I'm studying
his horses in particular: how to shape them exactly.
They have to be made so light
that it's clear their bodies, their legs,
aren't touching the earth but galloping over water.
But here's my favourite work,
created with the most care and feeling.
This one -it was a hot summer day
and my mind rose to ideal things-
this one came to me in a vision, this young Hermes.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Sensual Pleasures

My life's joy and incense: recollection of those hours
when I found and captured pleasure as I wanted it.

My life's joy and incense: that I refused
all indulgence in routine love affairs.

Constantine P. Cavafy

September, 1903

At least let me now deceive myself with illusions
so as not to feel my empty life.
And yet I came so close so many times.
And yet how paralyzed I was, how cowardly;
why did I keep my lips sealed
while my empty life wept inside me,
my desires wore robes of mourning?
To have been so close so many times
to those sensual eyes, those lips,
to that body I dreamed of, loved-
so close so many times.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Simeon

Yes, I know his new poems;
all Beirut is raving about them.
I'll study them some other day.
I can't today because I'm rather upset.
Certainly he's more learned in Greek than Libanius.
A better poet than Meleager though? I wouldn't say so.
But Mebis, why talk about Libanius
and books and all these trivialities?
Mebis, yesterday (it happened by chance)
I found myself under Simeon's pillar.
I slipped in among the Christians
praying and worshipping in silence there,
revering him. Not being a Christian myself
I couldn't share their spiritual peace-
I trembled all over and suffered;
I shuddered, disturbed, completely caught up.
Please don't smile; for thirty-five years -think of it-
winter and summer, night and day, for thirty-five years
he's been living, suffering, on top of a pillar.
Before either of us was born (I'm twenty-nine,
you must be younger than me),
before we were born, just imagine it,
Simeon climbed up his pillar
and has stayed there ever since facing God.
I'm in no mood for work today-
but Mebis, I think it better that you tell them this:
whatever the other sophists may say,
I at least recognize Lamon
as Syria's leading poet.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Since Nine O'Clock

Half past twelve. Time has gone by quickly
since nine o'clock when I lit the lamp
and sat down here. I've been sitting without reading,
without speaking. Completely alone in the house,
whom could I talk to?

Since nine o'clock when I lit the lamp
the shade of my young body
has come to haunt me, to remind me
of shut scented rooms,
of past sensual pleasure - what daring pleasure.
And it's also brought back to me
streets now unrecognizable,
bustling night clubs now closed,
theatres and cafes no longer here.

The shade of my young body
also brought back the things that make us sad:
family grief, separations,
the feelings of my own people, feelings
of the dead so little acknowledged.

Half past twelve. How the time has gone by.
Half past twelve. How the years have gone by.

Constantine P. Cavafy

So Much I Gazed

So much I gazed on beauty,
that my vision is replete with it.

Contours of the body. Red lips. Voluptuous limbs.
Hair as if taken from greek statues;
always beautiful, even when uncombed,
and it falls, slightly, over white foreheads.
Faces of love, as my poetry
wanted them.... in the nights of my youth,
in my nights, secretly, met....

Constantine P. Cavafy

Sophist Leaving Syria

Eminent sophist, now that you are leaving Syria
with plans to write a book about Antioch,
it's worth your mentioning Mevis in your work—
the famous Mevis, unquestionably
the best looking, the most adored young man
in all Antioch. No one of the others
living his kind of life, no one of them gets paid
what he gets paid. To have Mevis
just for two or three days, they often give
as much as a hundred staters. I said in Antioch;
but in Alexandria as well, in fact in Rome even,
you can't find a young man as attractive as Mevis.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Supplication

The sea took a sailor to its depths.--
His mother, unsuspecting, goes and lights

a tall candle before the Virgin Mary
for his speedy return and for fine weather --

and always she turns her ear to the wind.
But while she prays and implores,

the icon listens, solemn and sad,
knowing that the son she expects will no longer return.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Temethos, Antiochian, A.D. 400

Lines written by young Temethos, madly in love.
The tile: 'Emonidis' -the favourite
of Antiochos Epiphanis; a very good-looking young man
from Samosata. But if the lines come out
ardent, full of feeling, it's because Emonidis
(belonging to another, much older time:
the 137th year of the Greek kingdom,
maybe a bit earlier) is in the poem
merely as a name -a suitable one nevertheless.
The poem gives voice to the love Temethos feels,
a beautiful kind of love, worthy of him.
We the initiated
his intimate friends- we the initiated
know about whom those lines were written.
The unsuspecting Antiochians read simply 'Emonidis'.

Constantine P. Cavafy

That's The Man

Unknown -a stranger in Antioch- the man from Edessa
writes and writes. And at last, there,
the final canto's done. That makes

eighty-three poems in all. But so much writing,
so much versifying, the intense strain
of phrasing in Greek, has worn the poet out,
and now everything has gone stale.

But a thought suddenly brings him out of his dejection:
the sublime 'That's the man'
which Lucian once heard in his sleep.

Constantine P. Cavafy

The Afternoon Sun

This room, how well I know it.
Now they're renting it, and the one next to it,
as offices. The whole house has become
an office building for agents, businessmen, companies.
This room, how familiar it is.
The couch was here, near the door,
a Turkish carpet in front of it.
Close by, the shelf with two yellow vases.
On the right -no, opposite- a wardrobe with a mirror.
In the middle the table where he wrote,
and the three big wicker chairs.
Beside the window the bed
where we made love so many times.
They must still be around somewhere, those old things.
Beside the window the bed;
the afternoon sun used to touch half of it.
. . . One afternoon at four o'clock we separated
for a week only . . . And then-
that week became forever.

Constantine P. Cavafy

The Bandaged Shoulder

He said that he had hurt himself on a wall or that he had fallen.
But there was probably another reason
for the wounded and bandaged shoulder.

With a somewhat abrupt movement,
to bring down from a shelf some
photographs that he wanted to see closely,
the bandage was untied and a little blood ran.

I bandaged the shoulder again, and while bandaging it
I was somewhat slow; because it did not hurt,
and I liked to look at the blood. That
blood was a part of my love.

When he had left, I found in front of the chair,
a bloody rag, from the bandages,
a rag that looked in belonged in garbage;
which I brought up to my lips,
and which I held there for a long time --
the blood of love on my lips.

Constantine P. Cavafy

The Battle Of Magnesia

He's lost his old fire, his courage.
Now his tired, almost decrepit body
will be his first concern. And the rest of his life he'll spend
without worrying. So Philip says, anyway.
Tonight he's playing a game with dice;
he's in a mood to amuse himself.
Cover the table with roses. What if Antiochos
was defeated at Magnesia? They say
the bulk of his brilliant army was totally crushed.
Maybe they're stretching it a bit; it can't all be true.
Let's hope so anyway. Because though enemies, they do belong to our race.
But one "let's hope so" is enough. Perhaps even too much.
Of course Philip won't put off the festivities.
However much his life has worn him out,
one blessing remains: his memory is still intact.
He recalls the extent of their mourning in Syria, the kind of sorrow they felt,
when Macedonia, their motherland, was smashed to pieces.
Let the banquet begin. Slaves! The music, the lights!

Constantine P. Cavafy

The City

You said, "I will go to another land, I will go to another sea.
Another city will be found, a better one than this.
Every effort of mine is a condemnation of fate;
and my heart is -- like a corpse -- buried.
How long will my mind remain in this wasteland.
Wherever I turn my eyes, wherever I may look
I see black ruins of my life here,
where I spent so many years destroying and wasting."

You will find no new lands, you will find no other seas.
The city will follow you. You will roam the same
streets. And you will age in the same neighborhoods;
and you will grow gray in these same houses.
Always you will arrive in this city. Do not hope for any other --
There is no ship for you, there is no road.
As you have destroyed your life here
in this little corner, you have ruined it in the entire world.

Constantine P. Cavafy

The Displeasure Of Selefkidis

Dimitrios Selefkidis was displeased
to learn that a Ptolemy
had reached Italy in such a squalid state:
poorly dressed and on foot,
only three or four slaves. This way
their dynasty will become a joke,
the laughter of Rome.
Selefkidis of course knows
that basically even now they've become something like
servants
to the Romans; he also knows
that the Romans give and take away
their thrones arbitrarily, as they please.
But they should maintain a certain dignity
at least in their appearance;
they shouldn't forget that they are still kings,
are still (alas) called kings.
This is why Dimitrios Selefkidis was displeased;
and right away he offered Ptolemy
purple robes, a magnificent diadem,
precious jewels, numerous servants and retainers,
his most expensive horses,
so that he might present himself at Rome as he should,
as an Alexandrian Greek monarch.
But Ptolemy, who'd come to beg,
knew his business and refused it all:
he didn't have the slightest need for these luxuries.
Shabbily dressed, humble, he entered Rome,
put himself up in the house of a minor artisan,
and then presented himself
as a poor, ill-fated creature to the Senate
in order to make his begging more effective.

Constantine P. Cavafy

The Favour Of Alexander Valas

I'm not in the least put out that my chariot wheel broke
and I lost that silly race.

I'll drink great wines the whole night,
lying among lovely roses. Antioch is all mine.

I'm the most celebrated young man in town
Valas' weakness, he simply adores me.

You'll see, tomorrow they'll say the race wasn't fair
(though if I'd been crude enough to insist on it secretly,
the flatterers would have given first place even to my limping
chariot).

Constantine P. Cavafy

The First Step

The young poet Evmenis
complained one day to Theocritus:
"I've been writing for two years now
and I've composed only one idyll.
It's my single completed work.
I see, sadly, that the ladder
of Poetry is tall, extremely tall;
and from this first step I'm standing on now
I'll never climb any higher."
Theocritus retorted: "Words like that
are improper, blasphemous.
Just to be on the first step
should make you happy and proud.
To have reached this point is no small achievement:
what you've done already is a wonderful thing.
Even this first step
is a long way above the ordinary world.
To stand on this step
you must be in your own right
a member of the city of ideas.
And it's a hard, unusual thing
to be enrolled as a citizen of that city.
Its councils are full of Legislators
no charlatan can fool.
To have reached this point is no small achievement:
what you've done already is a wonderful thing."

Constantine P. Cavafy

The Footsteps

Eagles of coral
adorn the ebony bed
where Nero lies fast asleep
callous, happy, peaceful,
in the prime of his body's strength,
in the fine vigour of youth.

But in the alabaster hall that holds
the ancient shrine of the Aenobarbi
how restless the household deities!
The little gods tremble
and try to hide their insignificant bodies.
They've heard a terrible sound,
a deadly sound coming up the stairs,
iron footsteps that shake the staircase;
and, faint with fear, the miserable Lares
scramble to the back of the shrine,
shoving each other and stumbling,
one little god falling over another,
because they know what kind of sound that is,
know by now the footsteps of the Furies.

Constantine P. Cavafy

The Funeral Of Sarpedon

Zeus mourns deeply:
Patroklos has killed Sarpedon.
Now Patroklos and the Achaians rush on
to snatch up the body, to dishonour it.
But Zeus doesn't tolerate that at all.
Though he let his favourite child be killed
this the Law required
he'll at least honour him after death.
So he now sends Apollo down to the plain
with instructions about how the body should be tended.
Apollo reverently raises the hero's body
and carries it in sorrow to the river.
He washes the dust and blood away,
heals the terrible wounds so there's no trace left,
pours perfume of ambrosia over it,
and dresses it in radiant Olympian robes.
He bleaches the skin, and with a pearl comb
combs out the jet black hair.
He spreads and arranges the beautiful limbs.
Now he looks like a young king, a royal charioteer-
twenty-five or twenty-six years old-
resting himself after winning
the prize in a famous race,
his chariot all gold and his horses the fastest.
Having finished his task this way,
Apollo calls for the two brothers,
Sleep and Death, and orders them
to take the body to Lykia, the rich country.
So the two brothers, Sleep and Death,
set off on foot toward the rich country, Lykia;
and when they reached the door
of the king's palace,
they handed over the honoured body
and then returned to their other concerns.
And once the body was received in the palace
the sad burial began, with processions and honours and dirges,
with many libations from sacred vessels,
with all pomp and circumstance.
Then skilled workers from the city

and celebrated craftsmen in stone
came to make the tombstone and the tomb.

Constantine P. Cavafy

The Glory Of The Ptolemies

I'm Lagides, king -through my power and wealth
complete master of the art of pleasure.
There's no Macedonian, no barbarian, equal to me
or even approaching me. The son of Selefkos
is really a joke with his cheap lechery.
But if you're looking for other things, note this too:
my city's the greatest preceptor, queen of the Greek world,
genius of all knowledge, of every art.

Constantine P. Cavafy

The God Abandons Anthony

When suddenly, at midnight, you hear
an invisible procession going by
with exquisite music, voices,
don't mourn your luck that's failing now,
work gone wrong, your plans
all proving deceptive -- don't mourn them uselessly.
As one long prepared, and graced with courage,
say goodbye to her, the Alexandria that is leaving.
Above all, don't fool yourself, don't say
it was a dream, your ears deceived you:
don't degrade yourself with empty hopes like these.
As one long prepared, and graced with courage,
as is right for you who were given this kind of city,
go firmly to the window
And listen with deep emotion, but not
with whining, the pleas of a coward;
listen -- your final delectation -- to the voices,
to the exquisite music of that strange procession,
and say goodbye to her, to the Alexandria you are losing.

Constantine P. Cavafy

The Grave Of The Grammarian Lysias

Very close to you, as you enter on the right, in the Beirut library, we buried the sage Lysias,
the grammarian. The spot is beautifully right.
We placed him near those things of his that he perhaps remembers even there -- scholia, texts, grammars, scriptures, numerous commentaries in tomes on hellenisms.
This way, his grave will also be seen and honored by us, when we pass among the books.

Constantine P. Cavafy

The Horses Of Achilles

When they saw Patroklos dead
—so brave and strong, so young—
the horses of Achilles began to weep;
their immortal nature was upset deeply
by this work of death they had to look at.
They reared their heads, tossed their long manes,
beat the ground with their hooves, and mourned
Patroklos, seeing him lifeless, destroyed,
now mere flesh only, his spirit gone,
defenseless, without breath,
turned back from life to the great Nothingness.

Zeus saw the tears of those immortal horses and felt sorry.
"At the wedding of Peleus," he said,
"I should not have acted so thoughtlessly.
Better if we hadn't given you as a gift,
my unhappy horses. What business did you have down there,
among pathetic human beings, the toys of fate.
You are free of death, you will not get old,
yet ephemeral disasters torment you.
Men have caught you up in their misery."
But it was for the eternal disaster of death
that those two gallant horses shed their tears.

Constantine P. Cavafy

The Ides Of March

Fear grandeurs, O soul.
And if you cannot overcome
your ambitions, pursue them with hesitation
and caution. And the more you advance,
the more inquisitive, careful you must be.

And when you reach your peak, Caesar at last;
when you assume the form of a famous man,
then above all beware when you go out in the street,
a conspicuous ruler with followers,
if by chance from the mob approaches
some Artemidorus, bringing a letter
and says hastily 'Read this immediately,
these are grave matters that concern you,'
do not fail to stop; do not fail to push aside
all those who salute and kneel
(you can see them later); let even the Senate
itself wait, and immediately recognise
the grave writings of Artemidorus.

Greek Original:

Μάρτιαι
Ειδοί
Τα μεγαλεία
να φοβάσαι, ω
ψυχή.
Και τες
φιλοδοξίες
σου να
υπερνικήσεις
αν δεν
μπορείς, με
δισταγμό
και
προφυλάξεις
να τες

ακολουθείς.
Κι όσο
εμπροστά
προβαίνεις.,
τόσο
εξεταστική.,
προσεκτική
να είσαι.

Κι όταν θα
φθάσεις
στην ακμή
σου., Καίσαρ
πια.
έτσι
περιωνύμου
ανθρώπου
σχήμα όταν
λάβεις.,
τότε κυρίως
πρόσεξε σαν
βγεις στον
δρόμον έξω.,
εξουσιαστής
περίβλεπτος με
συνοδεία.,
αν τύχει και
πλησιάσει
από τον όχλο
κανένας
Αρτεμίδωρος., που φέρνει
γράμμα.,
και λέγει
βιαστικά
<Διάβασε
αμέσως
τούτα.,
είναι
μεγάλα

πράγματα
που σ'
ενδιαφέρουν>, >, >
μη λείψεις
να σταθείς
μη λείψεις
τους
διαφόρους
που
χαιρετούν
και
προσκυνούν
να τους
παραμερίσεις
(τους
βλέπεις πιο
αργά· ας
περιμένει
ακόμη
κ' η
Σύγκλητος
αυτή, κ' ευθύς
να τα
γνωρίσεις
τα σοβαρά
γραφόμενα
του
Αρτεμιδώρου.
65;.

Constantine P. Cavafy

The Mirror In The Hall

The rich house had in the hall
An enormous mirror, very old;
Bought at least eighty years ago.

A very handsome boy, assistant at a tailor's
(On Sundays an amateur athlete),
Was standing there with a parcel. He handed it
To someone of the house, and he took it inside
To fetch the receipt. The tailor's assistant
Was left alone, and waited.
He went up to the mirror and began to look at himself
And put his tie straight. After five minutes
They brought him the receipt. He took it and went away.

But the old mirror which had seen, and seen,
In the many years it had been
In existence, thousands of things and faces;
The old mirror was glad now
And was proud to have received upon itself
That entire beauty for a few minutes.

Constantine P. Cavafy

The Next Table

He must be barely twenty-two years old
yet I'm certain just about that long ago
I enjoyed the very same body.

It isn't erotic fever at all.
And I came into the casino only a few minutes ago,
so I haven't had time to drink very much.
I enjoyed that very same body.

And if I don't remember where, this one lapse of memory doesn't mean a thing.

There, now that he's sitting down at the next table,
I recognize every motion he makes -and under his clothes
I see again the limbs that I loved, naked.

Constantine P. Cavafy

The Photograph

In this obscene photograph sold in the street
secretly (have to watch out for the police),
in this whorish photograph,
how could there be such a dream-like face?
How did you get in here?

Who knows what a degrading, vulgar life you lead;
how horrible the surroundings must have been
when you posed to have this picture taken;
what a cheap soul you must have.
But in spite of all this, and even more, you remain for me
the dream-like face, the figure
shaped for and dedicated to the Hellenic kind of pleasure-
that's how you remain for me
and how my poetry speaks about you.

Constantine P. Cavafy

'The Rest I Will Tell To Those Down In Hades'

'Indeed,' said the proconsul, closing the book,
'This line is beautiful and very true.
Sophocles wrote it in a deeply philosophic mood.
How much we'll tell down there, how much,
and how very different we'll appear.
What we protect here like sleepless guards,
wounds and secrets locked inside us,
protect with such great anxiety day after day,
we'll reveal freely and clearly down there.'
'You might add,' said the sophist, half smiling,
'if they talk about things like that down there,
if they bother about them at all any more.'

Constantine P. Cavafy

The Retinue Of Dionysos □

Damon the craftsman (none better
in the Peloponnese) is giving the last touches
to his Retinue of Dionysos
carved in Parian marble: the god leading
in divine glory, with power in his stride;
after him, Intemperance; and beside Intemperance,
Intoxication pours out the satyrs' wine
from an amphora wreathed in ivy;
near them, Sweetwine, the delicate,
eyes half-closed, soporific;
and behind come the singers
Tunemaker and Melody and Reveller—
the last holding the honored processional torch
which he never lets die—and then Ceremony, so modest.
Damon carves all these. And as he works
his thoughts turn now and then
to the fee he's going to receive
from the king of Syracuse:
three talents, a large sum.
Adding this to what he has already,
he'll live grandly from now on, like a rich man,
and—think of it—he'll be able to go into politics:
he too in the Senate, he too in the Agora.

Constantine P. Cavafy

The Satrapy

What a misfortune, although you are made
for fine and great works
this unjust fate of yours always
denies you encouragement and success;
that base customs should block you;
and pettiness and indifference.
And how terrible the day when you yield
(the day when you give up and yield),
and you leave on foot for Susa,
and you go to the monarch Artaxerxes
who favorably places you in his court,
and offers you satrapies and the like.
And you accept them with despair
these things that you do not want.
Your soul seeks other things, weeps for other things;
the praise of the public and the Sophists,
the hard-won and inestimable Well Done;
the Agora, the Theater, and the Laurels.
How can Artaxerxes give you these,
where will you find these in a satrapy;
and what life can you live without these.

Constantine P. Cavafy

The Souls Of Old Men

Inside their worn, tattered bodies
sit the souls of old men.
How unhappy the poor things are
and how bored by the pathetic life they live.
How they tremble for fear of losing that life, and how much
they love it, those befuddled and contradictory souls,
sitting -half comic and half tragic-
inside their old, threadbare skins.

Constantine P. Cavafy

The Town

You said: "I'll go to another land, to other seaways wandering,
Some other town may yet be found better than this,
Where every effort of mine is a writ of guiltiness;
And my heart seems buried like a corpse. My mind---
How long is it to be in this decay confined?
Wherever I turn, wherever I lift my eyes,
The blackening ruins of my life arise,
here I have spent so many years spoiling and swquandering."

"You'll find no other places, no new seas in all your wanderings,
The town will follow you about. You'll range
In the same streets. In the same suburbs change
From youth to age; inn this same house grow white.
No hope of another town; this is where you'll always alight.
There is no road to another, there is no ship
To take you there. As here in this small strip
You spoiled your life, the whole earth felt your squanderings."

Constantine P. Cavafy

The Twenty-Fifth Year Of His Life

He goes regularly to the taverna
where they'd met the previous month.
He made inquiries, but they weren't able to tell him
anything.
From what they said, he gathered the person he'd met
was someone completely unknown,
one of the many unknown and shady young types
who dropped in there.
But he still goes to the taverna regularly, at night,
and sits there gazing toward the doorway,
gazing toward the doorway until he's worn out.
Maybe he'll walk in. Tonight maybe he'll turn up.
He does this for nearly three weeks.
His mind's sick with longing.
The kisses are there on his mouth.
His flesh, all of it, suffers from endless desire,
the feel of that other body is on his,
he wants to be joined with it again.
Of course he tries not to give himself away.
But sometimes he almost doesn't care.
Besides, he knows what he's exposing himself to,
he's come to accept it: quite possibly this life of his
will land him in a devastating scandal.

Constantine P. Cavafy

The Window Of The Tobacco Shop

They stood among many others
close to a lighted tobacco shop window.
Their looks met by chance
and timidly, haltingly expressed
the illicit desire of their bodies.
Then a few uneasy steps along the street
until they smiled, and nodded slightly.

And after that the closed carriage,
the sensitive approach of body to body,
hands joined, lips meeting.

Constantine P. Cavafy

The Windows

In these dark chambers here what weary days
I spend, walk up and down as in a maze
To find the windows.----Only to unclose
One of these windows will be some relief.---
But somehow windows this room hasn't got,
Or I can't find them. Perhaps I' better not.
Perhaps the light would be another grief.
What fresh surprises ther might be, who knows?

Constantine P. Cavafy

Theatre Of Sidon (400 B.C.)

Son of an honorable citizen—most important of all, a good-looking young man of the theatre, amiable in many ways.

I sometimes write highly audacious verses in Greek and these I circulate—surreptitiously, of course.

O gods, may those puritans who prattle about morals never see those verses about an exceptional kind of sexual pleasure, the kind that leads toward a condemned, a barren love.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Their Beginning

Their illicit pleasure has been fulfilled.
They get up and dress quickly, without a word.
They come out of the house separately, furtively;
and as they move off down the street a bit unsettled,
it seems they sense that something about them betrays
what kind of bed they've just been lying on.
But what profit for the life of the artist:
tomorrow, the day after, or years later, he'll give voice
to the strong lines that had their beginning here.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Theodotus

If you are truly one of the select few,
watch how you acquire your power.
However much you are glorified, however much
the cities in Italy and in Thessaly
acclaim your achievements,
however many decrees in your honor
your admirers may have issued in Rome,
neither your joy nor your triumph will last,
nor will you feel like a superior -- what do you mean superior? -- man
when in Alexandria, Theodotus brings you,
upon a bloodstained tray,
the head of the wretched Pompey.

And do not rely on the fact that in your life,
circumscribed, regulated, and prosaic,
there are no such spectacular and terrifying things.
Perhaps at this very hour, Theodotus is entering
the well-appointed house of one of your neighbors --
invisible, bodiless --
carrying such a hideous head.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Theophilos Palaiologos

This is the last year, this the last
of the Greek emperors. And, alas,
how sadly those around him talk.

Kyr Theophilos Palaiologos

in his grief, in his despair, says:

'I would rather die than live.'

Ah, Kyr Theophilos Palaiologos,

how much of the pathos, the yearning of our race,

how much weariness-

such exhaustion from injustice and persecution-

your six tragic words contained.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Thermopylae

Honour to those who in their lives
are committed and guard their Thermopylae.
Never stirring from duty;
just and upright in all their deeds,
but with pity and compassion too;
generous whenever they are rich, and when
they are poor, again a little generous,
again helping as much as they are able;
always speaking the truth,
but without rancor for those who lie.

And they merit greater honor
when they foresee (and many do foresee)
that Ephialtes will finally appear,
and in the end the Medes will go through.

Constantine P. Cavafy

They Should Have Provided

I have almost been reduced to a homeless pauper.
This fatal city, Antioch,
has consumed all my money;
this fatal city with its expensive life.

But I am young and in excellent health.
My command of Greek is superb
(I know all there is about Aristotle, Plato;
orators, poets, you name it.)
I have an idea of military affairs,
and have friends among the mercenary chiefs.
I am on the inside of administration as well.
Last year I spent six months in Alexandria;
I have some knowledge (and this is useful) of affairs there:
intentions of the Malefactor, and villainies, et cetera.

Therefore I believe that I am fully
qualified to serve this country,
my beloved homeland Syria.

In whatever capacity they place me I shall strive
to be useful to the country. This is my intent.
Then again, if they thwart me with their methods --
we know those able people: need we talk about it now?
if they thwart me, I am not to blame.

First, I shall apply to Zabinas,
and if this moron does not appreciate me,
I shall go to his rival Grypos.
And if this idiot does not hire me,
I shall go straight to Hyrcanos.

One of the three will want me however.

And my conscience is not troubled
about not worrying about my choice.
All three harm Syria equally.

But, a ruined man, why is it my fault.

Wretched man, I am trying to make ends meet.
The almighty gods should have provided
and created a fourth, good man.
Gladly would I have joined him.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Things Ended

Engulfed by fear and suspicion,
mind agitated, eyes alarmed,
we try desperately to invent ways out,
plan how to avoid
the obvious danger that threatens us so terribly.
Yet we're mistaken, that's not the danger ahead:
the news was wrong
(or we didn't hear it, or didn't get it right).
Another disaster, one we never imagined,
suddenly, violently, descends upon us,
and finding us unprepared -there's no time now
sweeps us away.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Those Who Fought For The Achaean League

Valiant are you who fought and fell gloriously;
fearless of those who were everywhere victorious.
Blameless, even if Diaeos and Critolaos were at fault.
When the Greeks want to boast,
"Our nation turns out such men" they will say
of you. And thus marvellous will be your praise. --

Written in Alexandria by an Achaean;
in the seventh year of Ptolemy Lathyrus.

Constantine P. Cavafy

To Antiochos Epiphanis

The young Antiochian said to the king:
'My heart pulses with a precious hope.
The Macedonians, Antiochos Epiphanis,
the Macedonians are back in the great fight.
Let them only win, and I'll give anyone who wants them
the lion and the horses, the coral Pan,
the elegant palace, the gardens of Tyre,
and everything else you've given me, Antiochos Epiphanis.'
The king may have been moved a little,
but then he remembered his father, his brother,
and said nothing: an eavesdropper
might repeat something they'd said.
In any case, as was to be expected,
the terrible defeat came swiftly, at Pydna.

Constantine P. Cavafy

To Call Up The Shades

One candle is enough. Its gentle light
will be more suitable, will be more gracious
when the Shades arrive, the Shades of Love.

One candle is enough. Tonight the room
should not have too much light. In deep reverie,
all receptiveness, and with the gentle light—
in this deep reverie I will form visions
to call up the Shades, the Shades of Love.

Constantine P. Cavafy

To Have Taken The Trouble

I'm practically broke and homeless.
This fatal city, Antioch,
has devoured all my money:
this fatal city with its extravagant life.

But I'm young and extremely healthy.
Prodigious master of Greek,
I know Aristotle and Plato through and through,
poets, orators, or anyone else you could mention.
I have some idea about military matters
and friends among the senior mercenaries.
I also have a foot in the administrative world;
I spent six months in Alexandria last year:
I know (and this is useful) something about what goes on there-
the scheming of Kakergetis, his dirty deals, and the rest of it.

So I consider myself completely qualified
to serve this country,
my beloved fatherland, Syria.

Whatever job they give me,
I'll try to be useful to the country. That's what I intend.
But if they frustrate me with their manoeuvres-
we know them, those smart operators: no need to say more here-
if they frustrate me, it's not my fault.

I'll approach Zabinas first,
and if that idiot doesn't appreciate me,
I'll go to his rival, Grypos.
And if that imbecile doesn't appoint me,
I'll go straight to Hyrkanos.

One of the three will want me anyway.

And my conscience is quiet
about my not caring which one I choose:
the three of them are equally bad for Syria.

But, a ruined man, it's not my fault.

I'm only trying, poor devil, to make ends meet.
The almighty gods ought to have taken the trouble
to create a fourth, a decent man.
I would gladly have gone along with him.

Constantine P. Cavafy

To Sensual Pleasure

My life's joy and incense: recollection of those hours
when I found and captured pleasure as I wanted it.

My life's joy and incense: that I refused
all indulgence in routine love affairs.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Tomb Of Evrion

In this tomb—ornately designed,
the whole of syenite stone,
covered by so many violets, so many lilies—
lies handsome Evrion,
an Alexandrian, twenty-five years old.
On his father's side, he was of old Macedonian stock,
on his mother's side, descended from a line of magistrates.
He studied philosophy with Aristokleitos,
rhetoric with Paros, and at Thebes
the sacred scriptures. He wrote a history
of the province of Arsinoites. That at least will survive.
But we've lost what was really precious: his form—
like a vision of Apollo.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Tomb Of Iases

Iases here I lie. To whom this proud
City for youth and beauty gave much fame.
The learned wise admired me, and the crowd
Of simpletons. From both I had the same

Joy. But the Hermes and Narcissus fashion
Wasted and killed me. Traveller, you will not blame,
If Alexandrian. You know the passion
Of our life here, the pleasure and the flame.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Tomb Of Ignatos

Here I'm not the Kleon famous in Alexandria
(where they're not easily dazzled)
for my marvelous houses, my gardens,
for my horses and chariots,
for the jewels and silks I wore.
Far from it—here I'm not that Kleon:
his twenty-eight years are to be wiped out.
I'm Ignatios, lector, who came to his senses very late;
but even so, in that way I lived ten happy months
in the peace, the security of Christ.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Tomb Of Lanis

The Lanis you loved, Markos, isn't here
in this tomb you come to weep by, lingering hours on end.
The Lanis you loved is closer to you
when you're in your room at home and you look at his portrait—
the portrait that still keeps something of what was valuable in him,
something of what it was you used to love.

Remember, Markos, that time you brought in
the famous Kyrenian painter from the Proconsul's palace?
What artistic subtlety he used trying to persuade you both,
the minute he saw your friend,
that he absolutely must do him as Hyacinth.
In that way his portrait would come to be better known.

But your Lanis didn't hire out his beauty like that:
reacting strongly, he told him to portray
neither Hyacinth nor anyone else,
but Lanis, son of Rametichos, an Alexandrian.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Tomb Of The Grammarian Lysias

In the Beirut library, just to the right as you go in,
we buried wise Lysias, the grammarian.

The spot is beautifully chosen.

We put him near those things of his
that he remembers maybe even there:
notes, texts, commentaries, variants,
voluminous studies of Greek idioms.

Also, this way, as we go to the books,
we'll see, we'll honour his tomb.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Trojans

Our efforts are those of the unfortunate;
our efforts are like those of the Trojans.
Somewhat we succeed; somewhat
we regain confidence; and we start
to have courage and high hopes.

But something always happens and stops us.
Achilles in the trench before us
emerges and with loud cries terrifies us.--

Our efforts are like those of the Trojans.
We believe that with resolution and daring
we will alter the blows of destiny,
and we stand outside to do battle.

But when the great crisis comes,
our daring and our resolution vanish;
our soul is agitated, paralyzed;
and we run around the walls
seeking to save ourselves in flight.

Nevertheless, our fall is certain. Above,
on the walls, the mourning has already begun.
The memories and the sentiments of our days weep.
Bitterly Priam and Hecuba weep for us.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Two Young Men, 23 To 24 Years Old

He'd been sitting in the cafe since ten-thirty
expecting him to turn up any minute.
Midnight had gone, and he was still waiting for him.
It was now after one-thirty, and the cafe was almost deserted.
He'd grown tired of reading newspapers
mechanically. Of his three lonely shillings
only one was left: waiting that long,
he'd spent the others on coffees and brandy.
And he'd smoked all his cigarettes.
So much waiting had worn him out.
Because alone like that for so many hours,
he'd also begun to have disturbing thoughts
about the immoral life he was living.
But when he saw his friend come in
weariness, boredom, thought all disappeared at once.
His friend brought unexpected news.
He'd won sixty pounds playing cards.
Their good looks, their exquisite youthfulness,
the sensitive love they shared
were refreshed, livened, invigorated
by the sixty pounds from the card table.
Now all joy and vitality, feeling and charm,
they went -not to the homes of their respectable families
(where they were no longer wanted anyway)-
they went to a familiar and very special
house of debauchery, and they asked for a bedroom
and expensive drinks, and they drank again.
And when the expensive drinks were finished
and it was close to four in the morning,
happy, they gave themselves to love.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Understanding

The years of my youth, my sensual life --
how clearly I see their meaning now.

What needless repentances, how futile....

But I did not understand the meaning then.

In the dissolute life of my youth
the desires of my poetry were being formed,
the scope of my art was being plotted.

This is why my repentances were never stable.
And my resolutions to control myself, to change
lasted for two weeks at the very most.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Unfaithfulness

When Thetis and Peleus got married
Apollo stood up at the sumptuous wedding feast
and blessed the bridal pair
for the son who would come from their union.
'Sickness will never visit him,' he said,
'and his life will be a long one.'
This pleased Thetis immensely:
the words of Apollo, expert in prophecies,
seemed a guarantee of security for her child.
And when Achilles grew up
and all Thessaly said how beautiful he was,
Thetis remembered the god's words.
But one day some elders came in with the news
that Achilles had been killed at Troy.
Thetis tore her purple robes,
pulled off rings, bracelets,
flung them to the ground.
And in her grief, remembering that wedding scene,
she asked what the wise Apollo was up to,
where was this poet who spouts
so eloquently at banquets, where was this prophet
when they killed her son in his prime?
And the elders answered that Apollo himself
had gone down to Troy
and with the Trojans had killed her son.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Very Seldom

He's an old man. Used up and bent,
crippled by time and indulgence,
he slowly walks along the narrow street.
But when he goes inside his house to hide
the shambles of his old age, his mind turns
to the share in youth that still belongs to him.

His verse is now recited by young men.
His visions come before their lively eyes.
Their healthy sensual minds,
their shapely taut bodies
stir to his perception of the beautiful.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Voices

Ideal and beloved voices
of those who are dead, or of those
who are lost to us like the dead.

Sometimes they speak to us in our dreams;
sometimes in thought the mind hears them.

And with their sound for a moment return
other sounds from the first poetry of our life --
like distant music that dies off in the night.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Waiting For The Barbarians

What are we waiting for, assembled in the forum?

The barbarians are due here today.

Why isn't anything happening in the senate?

Why do the senators sit there without legislating?

Because the barbarians are coming today.

What laws can the senators make now?

Once the barbarians are here, they'll do the legislating.

Why did our emperor get up so early,

and why is he sitting at the city's main gate

on his throne, in state, wearing the crown?

Because the barbarians are coming today

and the emperor is waiting to receive their leader.

He has even prepared a scroll to give him,

replete with titles, with imposing names.

Why have our two consuls and praetors come out today

wearing their embroidered, their scarlet togas?

Why have they put on bracelets with so many amethysts,

and rings sparkling with magnificent emeralds?

Why are they carrying elegant canes

beautifully worked in silver and gold?

Because the barbarians are coming today

and things like that dazzle the barbarians.

Why don't our distinguished orators come forward as usual

to make their speeches, say what they have to say?

Because the barbarians are coming today

and they're bored by rhetoric and public speaking.

Why this sudden restlessness, this confusion?

(How serious people's faces have become.)

Why are the streets and squares emptying so rapidly,

everyone going home so lost in thought?

Because night has fallen and the barbarians have not come.

And some who have just returned from the border say

there are no barbarians any longer.

And now, what's going to happen to us without barbarians?
They were, those people, a kind of solution.

Constantine P. Cavafy

Walls

With no consideration, no pity, no shame,
they have built walls around me, thick and high.
And now I sit here feeling hopeless.
I can't think of anything else: this fate gnaws my mind -
because I had so much to do outside.
When they were building the walls, how could I not have noticed!
But I never heard the builders, not a sound.
Imperceptibly they have closed me off from the outside world.

Constantine P. Cavafy

When The Watchman Saw The Light

Winter, summer, the watchman sat there looking out
from the roof of Atreus' palace.

Now he has good news to report. He's seen the fire light up
in the distance and he's happy; besides, the drudgery's over now:
it's hard to sit there night and day in heat and cold,
waiting for a fire to show
on the peak of Arachnaion.

Now the longed-for signal has appeared. Yet when happiness comes
it brings less joy than one expected.

But at least we've gained this much: we've rid ourselves
of hope and expectation. Many things will happen
to the house of Atreus: no need to be wise
to guess this now the watchman has seen the light.
So let's not exaggerate.

The light is good; and those coming are good,
their words and actions also good.

And let's hope all goes well.

But Argos can do without the house of Atreus.

Ancient houses are not eternal.

Of course many people will have much to say.

We should listen. But we won't be deceived
by words such as Indispensable, Unique, and Great.

Someone else indispensable and unique and great
can always be found at a moment's notice.

Constantine P. Cavafy

λάμψι του
μεσημεριού.

Constantine P. Cavafy

When They Come Alive

Try to keep them, poet,
those erotic visions of yours,
however few of them there are that can be stilled.
Put them, half-hidden, in your lines.
Try to hold them, poet,
when they come alive in your mind
at night or in the noonday brightness.

Constantine P. Cavafy

You Didn'T Understand

Vacuous Julian had the following to say about our religious beliefs: 'I read, I understood, I condemned'. He thought we'd be devastated by that 'condemned', the silly ass. Witticisms like that don't get by with us Christians. Our quick reply: 'You read but didn't understand; had you understood, you wouldn't have condemned.'

Constantine P. Cavafy

Young Men Of Sidon

The actor they'd brought in to entertain them
also recited a few choice epigrams.
The room opened out on the garden
and the delicate odour of flowers
mingled with the scent
of the five perfumed young Sidonians.
There were readings from Meleager, Krinagoras, Rhianos.
But when the actor recited
'Here lies Aeschylus, the Athenian, son of Euphorion'
(stressing maybe more than he should have
'his renowned valour' and 'sacred Marathonian grove'),
a vivacious young man, mad about literature,
suddenly jumped up and said:
'I don't like that quatrain at all.
Sentiments of that kind seem somehow weak.
Give, I say, all your strength to your work,
make it your total concern. And don't forget your work
even in times of stress or when you begin to decline.
This is what I expect, what I demand of you
and not that you completely dismiss from your mind
the magnificent art of your tragedies
your Agamemnon, your marvellous Prometheus,
your representations of Orestes and Cassandra,
your Seven Against Thebes -merely to set down for your
memorial
that as an ordinary soldier, one of the herd,
you too fought against Datis and Artaphernis.'

Constantine P. Cavafy