

Classic Poetry Series

Constantine P Cavafy

- poems -

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According To The Formulas Of Ancient Greco-syrian Magi

"What distillate can be discovered from herbs of a witching brew," said an aesthete, "what distillate prepared according to the formulas of ancient Greco-syrian 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 Greco-syrian magi which, in bringing back these things, can also bring back our little room."

Constantine P Cavafy

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to the formulas of ancient Greco-syrian magi
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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

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

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

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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.

Constantine P Cavafy

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

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

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

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

Che Fece ... Il Gran Rifiuto

Hi There! I see you're enjoying the site, and just wanted to extend an invitation to register for our free site. The members of oldpoetry strive to make this a fun place to learn and share - hope you join us! - Kevin

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 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.

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

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

Finalities

Amid fear and suspicions,
with agitated mind and frightened eyes,
we melt and plan how to act
to avoid the certain
danger that so horribly threatens us.
And yet we err, this was not in our paths;
the messages were false
(or we did not hear, or fully understand them).
Another catastrophe, one we never imagined,
sudden, precipitous, falls upon us,
and unprepared -- there is no more time -- carries us off.

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

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

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 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 Swears

He swears from time to time to
Begin a better life
Whenever though the night comes
With its own counsellings,
With its own compromises
And its own undertakings;
But whenever the night comes
With its own domination,
Of the body that wills and wants, to that same
Fatal enjoyment, lost, he goes again.

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

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

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!

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 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 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

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

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

Ithaka

As you set out for Ithaka
hope your road is a long one,
full of adventure, full of discovery.
Laistrygonians, Cyclops,
angry Poseidon-don't be afraid of them:
you'll never find things like that on your way
as long as you keep your thoughts raised high,
as long as a rare excitement
stirs your spirit and your body.
Laistrygonians, Cyclops,
wild Poseidon-you won't encounter them
unless you bring them along inside your soul,
unless your soul sets them up in front of you.

Hope your road is a long one.
May there be many summer mornings when,
with what pleasure, what joy,
you enter harbors you're seeing for the first time;
may you stop at Phoenician trading stations
to buy fine things,
mother of pearl and coral, amber and ebony,
sensual perfume of every kind-
as many sensual perfumes as you can;
and may you visit many Egyptian cities
to learn and go on learning from their scholars.

Keep Ithaka always in your mind.
Arriving there is what you're destined for.
But don't hurry the journey at all.
Better if it lasts for years,
so you're old by the time you reach the island,
wealthy with all you've gained on the way,
not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.
Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey.
Without her you wouldn't have set out.
She has nothing left to give you now.

And if you find her poor, Ithaka won't have fooled you.
Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,
you'll have understood by then what these Ithakas mean.

Translated by Edmund Keeley & Philip Sherrard

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

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

Manuel Komninos

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Translated by E. Keeley and P. Sherrard

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

Nero's Term

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

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
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Now he will return to Rome slightly tired,
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at the theaters, the gardens, the gymnasias...
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 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 the shop

He wrapped them carefully, neatly
in costly green silk.

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

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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

Picture of a 23-year-old Youth Painted by His Friend of the Same Age, an Amateur

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 prefers 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

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

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

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

Since Nine O'Clock -

Half past twelve. The time has passed quickly
since nine o'clock when I lit the lamp,
and sat down here. I sat without reading,
and without speaking. With whom could I speak
all alone in this house.

Since nine o'clock when I lit the lamp,
the vision of my youthful body
has appeared and found me and reminded me
of closed heavily scented rooms,
and pleasure long past -- what audacious pleasure!
And it also brought before my eyes
streets that have now become unrecognizable,
centers full of movement that are ended,
and theaters and cafes that once used to be.

The vision of my youthful body
appeared and brought me also the sad memories;
family mournings, separations,
feelings of my dear ones, feelings
of the dead so little esteemed.

Half past twelve. How the time has passed.
Half past twelve. How the years have passed.

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

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

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 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 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 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 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 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 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 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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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