

ABDEL-MENEIM
RAMADAN

Translated from Arabic
by Ferial J. Ghazoul

ALEXANDRIA

Guard shift

*Infatuated with Alexandria
Cavafy fluttered like a leaf
And disappeared in its quivering alleys.
Called by the seagull
He knelt
With garments ablaze
He leaned toward a woman he knew
Said she: "O Cavafy, what has tempted you?"
Said he: "Two white forearms"
Said she: "Have you filled your reckless body?
Will it become an urn
And I a tulip?"
Said he: "In the running water lies its course."
There they are
Sipping wine
Filling the belly with tavern's dishes
Remembering God.
When isolation convened them
It seated them on the chair
And complained to them about the seabound road
Complained about the boats
Not resembling the smoke.
Here they are
Outwitting the sea
Tempting it to embrace the desert
They kneel down on its surface
They wash in it
They become an urn
And a tulip.
When people are dazed in the tavern
They call them: Two doves
When the waiter yawns
And declares closing time
When people want nothing but a tent
And two guards
They call them: Two puppies in love*

*The man who is called Cavafy
And the woman who is called Alexandria.*

The Tale

*When I washed in its waters
I did not remember Alexander
The strong as history books inform us
The handsome as women presume
He was the only one commanding
The only one confessing
The only one flirting with the sea
When all alone with it
But when I washed in Alexandria's waters
I remembered that it was he who loosened
Her sand garments
Giving her body to the sea
It became foam
Flapping on the shores' feet
Bent on devotion.
When she got ready to sleep
That strong man as history books inform us
That handsome man as woman presume
Was afraid
Dreaming in his wanderings of a woman
Lulling him to sleep
Taking him as a trust
He surprised her
She said: "Who are you?"
...(no answer)
She said to him: "I am Alexandria"
Do you want to be part of me
And become Alexander?"
He cried.
She rested him against her trunk
He cried
She went to bed with him
When she got ready to sleep
She blessed him with her name
And preserved her body
She washed in the night*

*The sea water was awake
Swaggering in darkness' tents
Great Alexander did not stop from gazing
To see Alexandria.
She worries about the sea water slumbering
She worries that darkness' stallions
Will steal the sea
She worries lest sea's voice will
become hoarse
From talking with the desert
If she did not wash at night
O soldiers
Construct a lighthouse so he may see at all times
Alexandria's figure*

The Complaints of the Eloquent Peasant

*The Romans tried to hold Alexandria
They brought her ancient books
They brought her scientists, mathematicians and astrologers
She said to them: "I have what I care for."
The Romans tried to hold Alexandria
They brought her refined ceramics
Statues of bronze
And of stone
She said to them: "I have what I care for."
The Romans tried to hold Alexandria
They brought her slippers
Garments without the scent of linen
Stockings
And soutien-gorges
Transparent
And delicate
They brought her ankle-bracelets, not the likes of papyrus
She did not respond.
The Romans tried to hold Alexandria
They brought skillful masons
Who constructed on land next to the sea
An amphitheatre
To which actors and clowns headed
She was invited*

*So that she will be lured by the gala night
She was in rapt
Before the end of the spectacle
She surprised them
By chanting the peasant's complaint.
So the Romans gathered
She is the beautiful one
Who is self-sufficient.*

Hell

-1-

*Qaitbey was a child
A Mamluke
Charming
With green eyes
Women desired him
Gazed at him in the palace hall
And went toward him smiling
They gazed at him when he was fast asleep
Or when dreams hung on his wrists
His buttocks
His testicles
And what follows them on masculine leaves were swollen
The grandmother said O my daughter
Hide him until he becomes a king
And a lover
Wishing to see but not to be seen
Wash him
And give him his cotton garment*

-2-

*Qaitbey was on the balcony
When youth's feather
Touched his temples
Then bloomed mangoes
Dining loaves
And throning
He became the one
Sneaking into the harem's rooms
Bending behind curtains*

*To glance armpits, necks and breasts
Content to see thigh's firmness
Round a flower.
Qaitbey never doubted
That he will pick all the flowers
That he will accept royalty
In order to be the garden's lord.*

-3-

*Qaitbey said secretly
Perhaps the one who is calling me
Is Alexandria
When he was next to her
He felt lust and gloom
He filled his hands with two breasts
But he could not discern her
He leaned to her other side
And was content to have the soldiers build a room
To seal him from her eyes
He was content to glance
How she braids her hair
How her thighs relax every night
Turning the flower
Into a bird
With many wings
The bird turning
Into a cloud with eyelids.
Qaitbey was frightened
He ordered the soldiers to construct a building
That allows the lover to see
And the beloved to be.
Yet it was Alexandria
Who cried for him when he died.*

The Berbers

*The bedouins
The curious
The metropolis
The armies
The distant provinces*

*The cranes
And all the people
Were at Alexandria
Glancing at its soft sand
When she lifts her legs from the sea
Touching her hair
When she shakes off the fumes
Seating her on a sofa
Resembling her waistline
They eat like her:
Sardines, bitter oranges and rice
Like her, they enjoy wine
That is unlike the sea
They take her to the harbour's swing
They deflower her
Abashed
She asks the conquerors:
"Are the horses still like palm trees?"
They look
Horses have become willow-like
She asks the conquerors:
"Are the swords still daily resorts!"
They look
Swords have become tear-like
Alexandria knows
She is saved
She orients the bedouins
She orients the curious
The metropolis
The armies
And the distant provinces
Her sand is bitten by the shores
Their sand wanders in open space
Her hair sleeps on the waves
Their hair sleeps under desert's moon
Thus the curious are worried
That she will surround them with water
That she will enchant them like the statues on land
That she will shake them
So they hurry to the horses*

*Order the soldiers
To leave to the wastelands
To call on the encampment's sand for help
Not to stop
Except when their eyelashes are one
With the sand
And their senses guided
To tents' sites
There will be the first town
And possibly the great mosque.
The Alexandrians knew
They have been saved
They embraced Alexandria
Bathed her
Washed her limbs, hips and groins
They declared their passion for her
When the bedouins came asking for her
She suffered
And became a dirty city
And since then
Alexandria
Has been bathing.*

Abdel-Meneim Ramadan, born in 1951 in Cairo, is considered to be an "*enfant terrible*" due to his satiric poems; his love poetry is just as remarkable. He belongs to a literary generation which, in the face of a breakdown in traditional values and also in nationalist certainties, has thrown itself into experimentation. **Ferial J. Ghazoul** teaches Comparative Literature at the American University of Cairo.