

Cycle for Baritone  
To Justin Wright  
Poems by Constantine Cavafy  
Translated by Daniel Mendelsohn  
Music by James F. Rickley

## I

### **Old Men's Souls**

Inside their old bodies, so wasted away,  
the souls of old men sit around.  
How woebegone the poor things are, and  
how bored by the wretched life they live.  
How afraid they are of losing it and how they love it,  
these bewildered and contradictory  
souls, which sit around— tragicomic—  
inside their old hides, so worn away.

[1898; 1901]

Cavafy, C.P.. Complete Poems (p. 185). Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

## II

### **Waiting for the Barbarians**

—What is it that we are waiting for, gathered in the square?

The barbarians are supposed to arrive today.

—Why is there such great idleness inside the Senate house?  
Why are the Senators sitting there, without passing any laws?

Because the barbarians will arrive today.  
Why should the Senators still be making laws?  
The barbarians, when they come, will legislate.

—Why is it that our Emperor awoke so early today,  
and has taken his position at the greatest of the city's gates  
seated on his throne, in solemn state, wearing the crown?

Because the barbarians will arrive today.  
And the emperor is waiting to receive  
their leader. Indeed he is prepared  
to present him with a parchment scroll. In it  
he's conferred on him many titles and honorifics.

—Why have our consuls and our praetors come outside today  
wearing their scarlet togas with their rich embroidery,  
why have they donned their armlets with all their amethysts,

and rings with their magnificent, glistening emeralds;  
why should they be carrying such precious staves today,  
maces chased exquisitely with silver and with gold?

Because the barbarians will arrive today;  
and things like that bedazzle the barbarians.

—Why do our worthy orators not come today as usual  
to deliver their addresses, each to say his piece?

Because the barbarians will arrive today;  
and they're bored by eloquence and public speaking.

—Why has this uneasiness arisen all at once,  
and this confusion? (How serious the faces have become.)  
Why is it that the streets and squares are emptying so quickly,  
and everyone's returning home in such deep contemplation?

Because night has fallen and the barbarians haven't come.  
And some people have arrived from the borderlands,  
and said there are no barbarians anymore.

And now what's to become of us without barbarians.  
Those people were a solution of a sort.

[1898; 1904]

Cavafy, C.P.. Complete Poems (pp. 192-193). Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

### III

#### Prayer

The sea took into her depths a sailor's life.—  
Unaware, his mother goes and lights

a taper before the image of Our Lady  
that the weather might be fair, and his return speedy—

while at the wind she always strains her ears.  
But as she prays the ikon hears,

solemn and full of mourning,  
knowing that the son she awaits won't be returning.

[1896; 1898]

Cavafy, C.P.. Complete Poems (p. 184). Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

## IV

### Trojans

Our efforts, those of the ill-fortuned;  
our efforts are the efforts of the Trojans.  
We will make a bit of progress; we will start  
to pick ourselves up a bit; and we'll begin  
to be intrepid, and to have some hope.

But something always comes up, and stops us cold.  
In the trench in front of us Achilles  
emerges, and affrights us with his shouting.—

Our efforts are the efforts of the Trojans.  
We imagine that with resolve and daring  
we will reverse the animosity of fortune,  
and so we take our stand outside, to fight.

But whenever the crucial moment comes,  
our boldness and our daring disappear;  
our spirit is shattered, comes unstrung;  
and we scramble all around the walls  
seeking in our flight to save ourselves.

And yet our fall is certain. Up above,  
on the walls, already the lament has begun.  
They mourn the memory, the sensibility, of our days.  
Bitterly Priam and Hecuba mourn for us.

[1900; 1905]

Cavafy, C.P.. Complete Poems (p. 16). Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

## V

### An Old Man

An Old Man In the noisy café, right in the middle,  
an old man sits bent over the table;  
his newspaper in front of him, with no one for company.

And in his contempt for his wretched old age,  
he thinks how very little he enjoyed  
the years when he had strength, and wit, and beauty.

He knows he's aged a lot: he feels it, sees it.  
And even so, the moment when he was young seems  
like yesterday. How brief a span, how brief a span.

And he brooded on the way that Prudence had duped him:

and how he'd always trusted— so stupidly!—  
the lie she told: "Tomorrow. You have lots of time."

He remembers the impulses he bridled; and how  
much joy he sacrificed. His foolish caution, now,  
is mocked by each lost opportunity. ...

But all this thinking, all this remembering  
makes the old man dizzy. And leaning  
on the table in the café, he falls asleep.

[1894; 1897]

Cavafy, C.P.. Complete Poems (p. 183). Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.