

P. J. Kavanagh

Wherever You Are

Dropped fully grown, conceived by autogenesis,
My smiling devils are gaolers who simulate friendliness
The better to break me. They thrive in the semi-awake
Of the utterly dark of their birth place. One, arm around my neck,
Explaining why he keeps my curtains drawn:
“Why bother to open them? When you look down
I am all the faces of the town!
Be honest now, when did you last see a different one?”
His birth and chatter exhausts me. For peace I lie down and confess
My god is theirs; his name is Nothingness.

But in our darkness the warm-lipped angels also have their places,
More terrible by far,
Whose wings are wands of anamnesis,
More than flesh and blood and brain can bear.
O my devils are easier, teaching forgetfulness!
But if I turn away
From these insupportable angels of memory,
I pull a blind of horror between me
And the natural world: pig-snout and bird-claw instead of hands and faces.

You must save me angels! Give me your instruction!
“The only love that now you can know is love-in-action.
So lift up your back from your bed,
Strain till the sweat is running down your head
To repeat like a parrot what we tell you to say:
I believe in you, angels. Devils, you lie.”

And now on the screen of myself, in the dark, I can see
Each face, divided, hurt like all ours are,
That opened like a child's face, like a flower,
While it was turned towards her.

These than hers are easier to remember.

NOTES & TOPICS

Letter from Alexandria

A SANDSTORM threw a golden pall over Alexandria when I was there again the other day. A vicious, unseasonal storm, three months earlier than the usual *khamsin*, it stiffened the hair with a dung-like crust and smothered even the sight and sound of the sea. Palm trees waved overhead like wraiths and men vanished behind yellow veils as they crossed the street.

Next morning the wind had backed to the north-west and under a clearing sky the Mediterranean was lashing the corniche with the cold fury of a northern sea. Spray cascaded off the tiers of bathing huts beneath the sea wall; the cafés on the rocky promontories were awash and the tall flats that straggle for miles between Ramleh and Montazah Bay were shuttered tight against the wind.

This was Alexandria out of season, when the city turns its back upon the sea, as a sheep puts its rump to a blizzard. Behind the wave-drenched promenades the narrow streets of Alexandria's dockland were pullulating with the introverted life of peasant Egypt, but upon the boulevards and gardens of the European city a great desolation had descended. The ornate villas of the *quartier Grec* were almost visibly brown at the edges, withdrawn and wilting, their gardens ragged with wind-blown paper and creepers too long untrimmed. Behind the rattling doors of the cafés in the Place Zaghoul a few old men crouched over silent games of *tric-trac*. In the bar of the Cecil Hotel, where the potted palms once danced in the hearty fug of British officers on leave from the Western desert, the barman nodded on his stool in solitary boredom.

Since I first knew it a few years ago, Alexandria out of season has always been a little chilly and forlorn, like a pensioner waiting for the warmth of summer to bring back the blood to her cheeks. But this time the chill seemed to strike deeper, to smell less of winter than of death. The peasants in the back streets were the teeming maggots in the corpse.

There is a paradox here, of course. Like every other town in Egypt, Alexandria is growing in numbers. One-and-a-half-million people find a home somewhere within its boundaries now and more are coming every year, thrust off the land of the Nile valley by the pressure of their own

fecundity. In summer, when the heat in Cairo is oppressive, half-a-million more arrive for a breath of Mediterranean air. The promenades then are thick with holiday-makers, the public gardens loud with the wail of transistor radios, the beach huts and cafés bursting with young Egypt—dark, shapely and emancipated, with not a veil or a tarboosh to be seen. All this is not dead. It is frighteningly alive—a resurgent Egypt, flooding down the Nile to the Mediterranean shore, as Europe so recently poured its energies the other way. With the turn of the tide the city of Cavafy, Forster, and Durrell has not yet physically disappeared like the city of Alexander when the Arabs arrived, but it has just as effectively ceased to be. In the 10 years since Farouk stepped into exile aboard his yacht, from the terrace of the palace at Ras el Tin, European Alexandria has been washed into history.

THIS IS NOT SOMETHING for which Gamal Abdul Nasser must take all the blame. Like Algiers and Tunis—or Leptis Magna and Cyrene—Alexandria was one of those grappling hooks that Europe cast upon Africa in a time of imperial expansion. With the decline of her power, the hooks were cut away again. As soon as World War II was over the writing was on the wall for Alexandria's European community, and the far-sighted were already getting out. In their heyday, Europeans and Jews together may have numbered 200,000. By 1945 there were less than 150,000. If there are more than 30,000 now I should be surprised. Since 1952 at least 70,000 must have gone. The British and French have almost totally disappeared, cleared out in the aftermath of Suez. So have the Jews, who alone numbered scores of thousands. The Italians, the Maltese, and some indeterminate Levantines hang on in handfuls here and there, and the Greeks, who formed the biggest of all the European colonies and gave the city much of its distinctive Mediterranean flavour, may muster as many as 20,000 still. But 10 years ago there were 50,000 Greeks in Alexandria, and even after Suez, when the Greek pilots stayed to help the Egyptians in the canal and *enosis* in Cyprus was still a lively possibility uniting Athens to Cairo in opposition to the British, many of them believed that the European exodus would never include them. "That was our mistake," said one of them this time. "The others got out when they still could. The British and French even got paid for leaving, thanks to Anthony Eden. But we must pay for staying." And pay they do, as the government in Cairo snatches up the economic reins that used to lie so profitably in Alexandrian hands, and firmly asserts that Egypt is for the Egyptians now.