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From *What’s Left of the Night* (New Vessel Press)

(fiction)

Translated from the Modern Greek by Karen Emmerich
Eyes closed, I turned toward you in bed. I stretched a hand through the half-light to touch your shoulder. That exquisite curve, the pale skin, paler against the dirty sheet. Nothing written on skin can be erased, I told myself. Five years ago, at a similar hour, you stirred in your sleep and your thigh brushed against me. I was still wearing my shirt. My hand slid over your chest, which was hairless and tawny with an undertone of ochre. I remember it strong, hairless, bright. The line of your mouth, that pink, open circle, and the gleam of a tooth, barely visible. A bit of dried saliva. I traced your lips with my fingers. Then my hand crept lower, lower still. You breathed, snoring slightly. In your sleep you rolled over and wrapped your arms around me. You murmured a word I didn’t know. Perhaps you were thirsty. My hand opened and closed . . .

A shudder swept over the empty bed. I’d left the window open and the curtains fluttered in the Parisian breeze. It was time I abandoned these rêveries. John would be waiting in the lobby.

The earth still seemed flat then, and night fell all at once until the end of the world, where someone hunched in the light of a lamp would be able to see, centuries later, a red sun setting over ruins, would be able to see, beyond seas and ruined harbors, countries lost in time living in the glow of triumph, in the slow agony of defeat. History repeats itself, he thought, though he wasn’t sure whether it really was repetition. His talent and persistence alone would allow him to see. Gripping his pen, he listened. Sounds, lights, smells, it all came flooding back. It was night once more on the flat earth. Voices reached his ears. A strain of cheap music from Attarin where the shops were open late, the sound of a barrel organ whose saccharine melody swelled and overflowed and climbed the muddy stairs. In the rooms upstairs limbs mingled on threadbare sheets. For half an hour of perfect pleasure, half an hour of absolute, sensual pleasure. Limbs, lips, eyelids on the squalid bed, kisses, gasping mouths. Then they would leave separately like fugitives, knowing this half an hour would haunt the rest of their lives, knowing they would return to seek it again. But now all they wanted was for the night to swallow them up, and as each hurried down the stairs that unbearable tinkle of music greeted him once more, a wobbly chime that mocked the oppressive thud of his heart. The street outside was always deserted, and the foot-steps of an invisible shadow would echo in the distance, then fade. He’d stand for a moment in the doorway, then button his coat and walk quickly away, hugging the wall, head bent,
collar raised. And sometimes it happened, it had in fact happened, that
his eyes would meet the eyes of another man skidding like a rat through
the darkness, some nervous, well-dressed man coming from the other
direction, heading hypnotized toward those same stairs, that same room,
to roll over those same stained sheets.

And if the lovers don’t respond to your touch? he thought. If they’re
warm, soft-skinned statues that receive all caresses with the indifference
of works of art? That Platonic idea enticed him, but only to a point. The
object of desire was so distant, so close. Lips, limbs, bodies. Lips, gasping
mouths. That was what he should write about. So close, so distant. That
was the purpose of art, to abolish distance.

He recalled the figure of a youth from years ago. Had it been in
Constantinople? Yeniköy? A beardless youth working as an ironmonger’s
apprentice, and as the boy bent half naked over the anvil, sparks
flying onto his glistening chest, he saw his face lit heroically, imagined
him crowned with vines and bay leaves. They hadn’t spoken, and he
never saw him again. Who would write about him? Who would heave
him up out of the oblivion of History?

Years later, someone hunched in the light of a lamp would be able
to see a red sun setting over mythical cities, would see burning grass
through rusted iron, where once a marble fountain spurted water and
the last droplets ran dry in the evening light. He would see the crimson
rays shining on the young body of the apprentice in Yeniköy, fleetingly
illuminating a possibility, yes, a possibility that assumed substance, an
almost material substance, as that same youth now weaved between the
columns of an ancient agora among the crowds of Antioch or Seleucia,
and many were they who praised his beauty.

That “years later” is now, he thought. He alone could see. Only he
wasn’t yet ready. His impatience chafed at him, and contrived miserable,
graceless poems, which he tore up in self-reproach. And then there
was that clunky pastiche . . . A heap of adjectives and too-fine turns of
phrase, the churning runoff of a lyricism he hated but didn’t know how
to leave behind. How can I shake free of that sentimental burden? he
wondered. Often during the day he felt useless, irresolute, a failure. The
problem was Alexandria, the city stifled him. His provincial life, his
circle of silly people with their unshakable self-confidence, the feluccas
and fellahin, the landscape like a cobwebbed stencil whose heavy
humidity sank into your bones—it all weakened his nerves. And often
he determined, without really believing it, that he needed to erase the Alexandria within him if he really wanted to write.

But now he was in a foreign city that charmed and repelled him in equal measure, a cosmopolitan capital that glittered with refinement, whose smallest corner seemed large and important. He needed to resist his bad mood and find a way to enjoy these final few days of the trip. No more wavering, he thought, I’ll make a daily schedule and stick to it. He reflexively straightened his tie and descended the three steps into the hotel lobby.

“Monsieur Cavafy!” he heard someone call.

The large hall was empty, its central chandelier lit above a marble floor that shone like the surface of a lake. The aged concierge was moving slowly in his direction.

“Monsieur Cavafy, your brother was waiting for you. He left just a few moments ago for Café de la Paix.”

It was a warm summer evening, the temperature around eighty degrees Fahrenheit. Mild weather with a salutary wind. Perfect for the light redingote he was wearing. A good thing he hadn’t decided on his heavy linen jacket, he thought, a good thing indeed, and quickened his pace. But as he walked swiftly, following the flow along the boulevard, where coachmen trundled toward the Opéra brandishing their whips, he felt the moroseness that plagued him coming back and knew that sooner or later the familiar unease would descend upon him again.

“Costis, I finished it,” John called as soon as he caught sight of him.

He appeared to be in a magnificent mood. He was holding the manuscript in his hand and waving it in the air like a trophy.

The waiter set two steaming cups of chocolate on the table.

“Thank you for thinking of me,” he said, though he would have preferred a cold tea.

“Well?” John asked with a wide smile.

“I’m late. I must have fallen asleep.”

“I’m sure it’s done you good.”

He noticed an old woman coming toward them, hand outstretched, dragging one leg. Her hair was matted and every so often she stumbled.

“Give her something. I can’t bear to look at her.”

The old woman came over to their table, casting a gluttonous glance at the plate of petit fours.

“Give her something,” he said again. He glanced at the manuscript,
now rolled into a tube in his brother’s hand. He could make out a few letters, slightly slanted with the tails of the p’s and the y’s curving elaborately upward.

John stood and dropped a few coins into the woman’s hand.

“Dieu vous bénisse,” she said. Some of her teeth were missing.

“Dieu doesn’t seem to have blessed you, poor thing.”

She dragged herself like a bundle of rags to the neighboring table and stretched out her hand beseeching.

“But why?” John wondered. “Why should we accept squalor when it’s depicted in a painting, even praise its aesthetic value? Whereas in real life we reject it. That woman could be beautiful. Everything can be beautiful. It depends on one’s point of view—or, to be more precise, on the mental disposition of the viewer—”

“We can’t call just anything beautiful,” he said, cutting his brother off.

“Of course, anything that makes us feel, why not?”

“Even an animal? That old woman has the beauty of a sow in mud.”

“There isn’t just one kind of beauty,” John began, then fell silent. As always when he tried to find the precise words to express an idea, he got tangled up in his own train of thought. He sipped his chocolate, then stirred it slowly with the little spoon. “Why must you be so absolute,” he said, as if it weren’t a question. “Sometimes I wonder . . . It’s quite unfair, in the last analysis.” He wasn’t looking at him, as if he might be addressing some random passerby in the street, or all of Paris.

“Let me read it,” he said, and reached out a hand to take the manuscript.

This was their free afternoon. They had agreed over lunch at Le Procope to take this chance to rest and reflect, to recall certain moments from the month and a half they’d been traveling, to dust off forgotten details. They both enjoyed comparing their accounts of things and they did so often, savoring that moment when the simplest incident took on a strange quality, an almost unexpected turn as the words to describe it were shaped and rounded in the other’s mouth. At this point there was a whole host of events for them to remember and laugh over, getting a foretaste of the responses their stories would evoke when they were back in Alexandria, laughing at the fiascoes of their trip, like their aunt’s flatulence at dinner in Holland Park, not one, not two, but three superb, resounding farts in quick succession; the others at the table had coughed
to cover the sound, but even that didn’t solve the problem since an un-
bearable stench began to spread, and one by one they rose from the

table as their aunt in her black, collared pelerine kept protesting. But

where are you going, my dears, I hope the perch hasn’t upset you, it

must have been the perch—and ever since, whenever anything odd or

untoward happened, they would say to each other, “It must have been

the perch.”

Mother will love the story about the fart, she’ll make us tell it over

and over, he thought. It must have been the perch, he repeated inwardly

and almost laughed aloud. Out the corner of his eye he saw John watch-
ing him and waiting.

“I like it,” he said and gave a dry cough. “It’s a very solid poem. I’d

like to read it again.”

His tone of voice struck him as false. And why the devil had he

coughed? They were always perfectly frank with each other, or at least

so he believed, only today he had a feeling he should watch his words. It

was no small thing, what he’d let slip yesterday. In the middle of dinner

as they bent over their crispy squab with peas, chatting lightly about

some literary subject that he could no longer remember, he’d men-

tioned en passant: “There isn’t room for two poets in one family.” He’d

regretted it immediately. At first John pretended not to hear, didn’t re-

spond. But a few moments later he raised his glass, saying: “In that case

I suppose I’ll have to make way. Cheers . . . à ta santé!”

His efforts to mend the breach kept them talking late into the night,

and he’d been the one to suggest that his brother rewrite an old poem

and change its setting to the fire at the Bazar de la Charité, from which

Paris was still reeling. The occasion for the earlier version had been a

snippet of conversation a friend of John’s overheard at an art opening in

Alexandria. A Greek society lady, the wife of a successful merchant—

the friend hadn’t given her name—was gazing at a painting of a setting

sun smeared with purples and reds, and leaned on the shoulder of the

man beside her, a well-known figure in the Greek community, likewise

married—the friend hadn’t given his name, either—and whispered with

a heavy sigh: “I’d prefer to set in your arms.” He had found it insipid,

the metaphor or allegory, whatever it was, but John laughed and jotted

it down. He later wrote a poem about the bombing of Alexandria in

1882 and the conflagration that followed. In the poem, the genteel la-

dy’s words served as an ironic counterpoint to the catastrophe and the
vandalism that subsequently swept the city. The composition was weak and unnecessarily overblown, he’d observed to his brother. The phrase in question was absent from the present version of the poem, but an equally distasteful “sunset of friendship and feelings” had crept in. Just listen to that, sunset of friendship and feelings!

“Did you notice the second stanza?” John asked. “I’ll read it to you in Greek, I translated it and the rhyme works better.” He twirled his mustache before beginning the recitation:

Charred are the corsets and crinolines  
ashes the silken sash,  
burned are the skirts of which to now  
lavender freshened the stash.

“I wanted,” he continued, “to emphasize the fact that the fire at the Bazar concerns only the aristocracy. What does it matter that a few dozen servant women died in the fire? The Countess Mimmerel burned, and the Marquise of Isle. The empress’s sister burned, too. That’s what counts. A whole village in Brittany could have burned and there wouldn’t be the same outpouring of national mourning. Do you see?”

“I agree, though I don’t quite see the difference. Drama is drama.”

“That doesn’t mean, of course, that I was trying to write a social poem.”

A failed poem, he thought. He remembered the first few days after they arrived in Paris from Marseille, when the region still smelled of sulfur and all the hotels were passing out damp towels to the ladies. And in fact the Bazar continued to burn for days, all the lace and fine linen piled inside crackling in a slow death. It had become the most popular tourist site in Paris, people came in from all the faubourgs to gape at the charred carcass.

“It was May 4, am I right?”

“I think so. We heard about it on the train, remember?”

At the corner of Boulevard des Capucines there was a cloud of white smoke and a crowd of coachmen, shouting. Apparently a pipe had burst. A black figure emerged from the smoke and came toward them.

“Look,” he said. “Your ethereal Aphrodite is headed our way again, looking even less steady than before.”

John turned to see. The beggar woman walked past on the sidewalk, staggering and bumping against the tables. A waiter came rushing out of Café de la Paix and tried to usher her away, first shouting, then shoving.
The old woman fell in a heap into the street, rolled onto her back, and started talking to the sky.

“You degrade your art,” John said, his tone polite but unyielding. He unrolled the paper with the poem on it and leaned back in his chair, pretending to read.

It must have been the perch, that’s what he’d like to say to Johnny now. Their aunt’s words suited him perfectly today. Only he didn’t know how his brother would take it. He could be quite sensitive. Then again it might make him laugh. He was about to utter the phrase when a large head with sheep-like curls and wide-open, perfectly blue eyes appeared before him.