

Constantin P. Cavafy

DISPLACEMENT

GREEK EGYPTIANS - THE IDEA OF
HOME AND THE OTHER



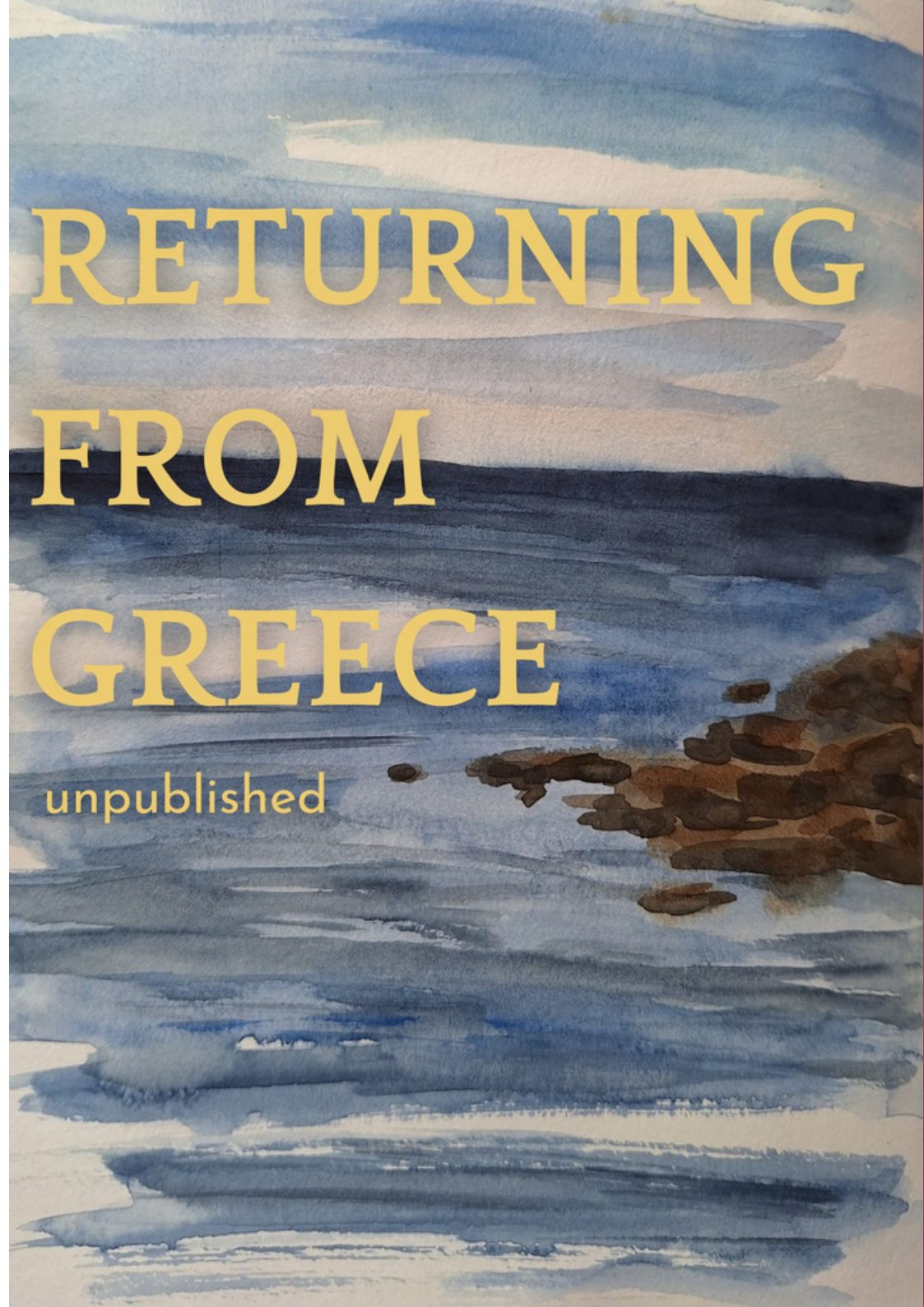
Returning From Greece

Well, we're nearly there, Hermippos.
Day after tomorrow, it seems - that's what the captain said.
At least we're sailing our seas,
the waters of our own countries - Cyprus, Syria, Egypt -
waters we know and love.
Why so silent? Ask your heart:
didn't you too feel happier
the further we got from Greece?
What's the point of fooling ourselves?
That wouldn't be properly Greek, would it?

It's time we admitted the truth:
we're Greeks also - what else are we? -
but with Asiatic tastes and feelings,
tastes and feelings
sometimes alien to Hellenism.

It isn't correct, Hermippos, for us philosophers
to be like some of our petty kings
(remember how we laughed at them
when they used to come to our lectures?)
who through their showy Hellenified exteriors
(Macedonian exteriors, naturally)
let a bit of Arabia peep out now and then,
a bit of Media they can't keep back.
And to what laughable lengths the fools went
trying to cover it up!

No, that's not at all correct for us.
For Greeks like us that kind of pettiness won't do.
We simply can't be ashamed
of the Syrian and Egyptian blood in our veins;
we should really honour it, delight in it.

A watercolor illustration of a sea and a rocky shore. The sky is painted with soft, horizontal strokes of light blue and white. The sea is depicted with various shades of blue, from light to dark, with some white highlights suggesting waves or foam. On the right side, there is a rocky shore with dark brown and black stones. The overall style is soft and painterly.

RETURNING FROM GREECE

unpublished

Two people, who describe themselves as Greek, leaving the country by ship. The speaker realises that they were happier once they left Greece behind and with that states something seemingly contradictory. They say they should be properly Greek and therefore not fool themselves, while admitting they do not feel at home in what is supposed to be their home country.

They beautifully describe the feeling of displacement and in the end they confirm their feelings. Yes, they are Greek but they are Syrian and Egyptian as well. And instead of hiding this mix of heritage they should be proud of it. **It is their history and this is who they are. There is no need to be ashamed.**

It destroys the idea of homogeneous countries but shows how there has always been movement of people and exchange of culture. It is not one clear identity but a configuration of multiple, based on a long Mediterranean history.

With the focus on the Mediterranean, it is the water, the sea that makes the speaker feel at home. It cannot be constrained by constructed and ever-changing borders or the constraining idea of one nationality. It challenges the prominent idea of what countries truly border this same sea and who belongs to the Mediterranean.

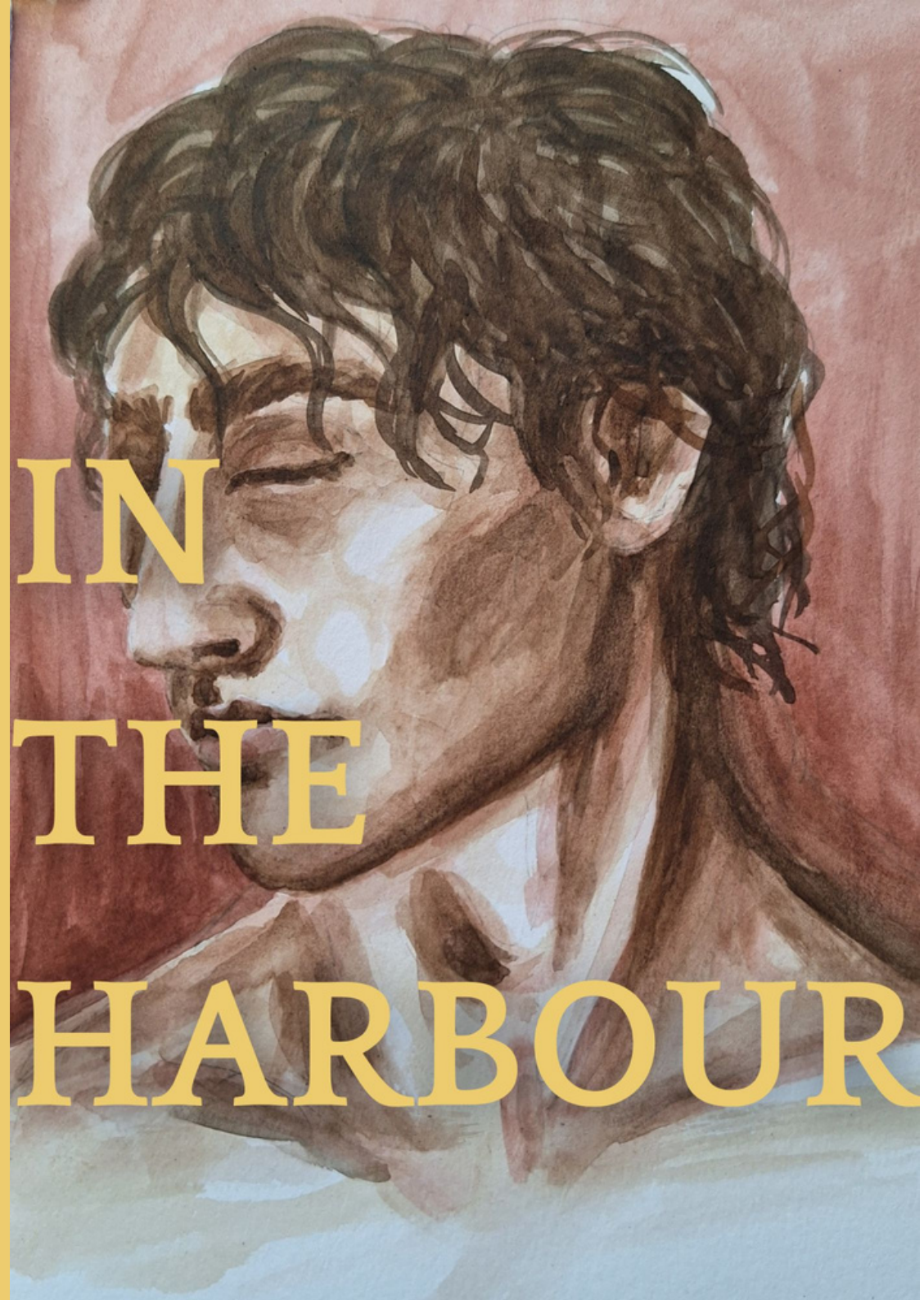
In The Harbour

Emis -young, twenty-eight-
reached this Syrian harbour 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 knew who they were,
or what country he called home
in the great panhellenic world.
Better that way; because as it is,
though he lies buried in this harbour,
his parents will always have the hope he's still alive.

1918



IN
THE
HARBOUR

The image of young people dying before it is their time on the way to fulfil their dreams. Dying right when he reached his destination. What it takes to look for a better life. His last words are his home and his parents. He is not understood, and the information dies with him. **He dies unknown.**

Home being something personal. You cannot tell just by looking at him where he is from, what he calls home and who his parents are. He is displaced, not where he started off but far away in a new land. Many die where they have not been born, where they at home? His parents will not know he died and can always imagine a better future for him. The boy in the painting could be alive for all we know.

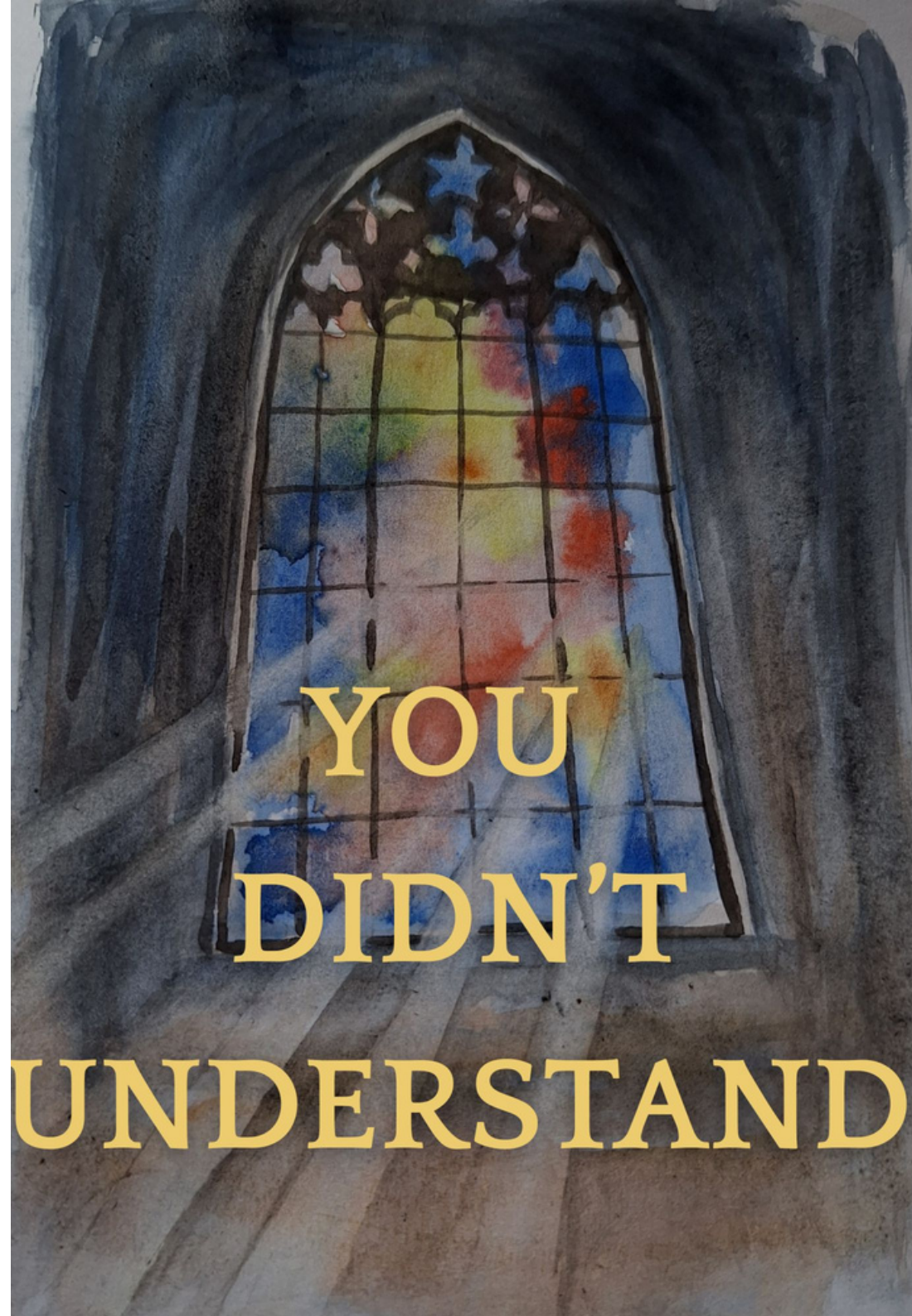
Cavafy's father had a British and Greek passport. How often did he ask where his home is? Constantine gave up his British passport, distancing himself from this possible identity and this future. He traveled and moved but decided to call Alexandria his home.

This poem speaks to the contemporary Mediterranean, with young people leaving their families on a dangerous journey for a safer shore. So many have died in their attempt to reach Europe which created a new understanding of the Mediterranean. Not only a place for holiday but also of dying hope and cruelty.

You Didn't Understand

Vacuous Julian had the following to say about our religious beliefs: "I read, I understood, I condemned". He thought we'd be devastated by that "condemned", the silly ass. Witticisms like that don't get by with us Christians. Our quick reply: "You read but didn't understand; had you understood, you wouldn't have condemned."

1928



YOU
DIDN'T
UNDERSTAND

Several religions living together, often without understanding the other, and loudly disagreeing with it. The similarities of religions, condemning them only shows your own ignorance. You will only be fighting against someone else's religion if you do not understand it. Maybe you do not even understand your own if you condemn someone else's.

Orthodox Christian Greek and the emperor Julian who was persecuting Christians.

We do not care if you do not approve of us as you do not understand us. We do not care if you hate us because you hate someone who is not us but your wrong interpretation of who we are supposed to be. Not solely concerning religion but also heritage.

Why should we take you seriously if you do not even know what you are hating? You are vacuous. Empty in your heart but also your mind as you do not understand. And you do not try to understand.

Stained glass windows of the orthodox Christians surrounded by the dangerous, dark ignorance.

The poem addresses that there are many religions and identities represented in the region, instead of only one and how it defines society rather than hurt it. It is a diverse region and with that cannot be defined with one understanding of Mediterranean but needs to be looked at as plural. As Mediterraneans.

The City

You said: "I'll go to another country, go to another shore,
find another city better than this one.

Whatever I try to do is fated to turn out wrong
and my heart -like something dead- lies buried.

How long can I let my mind moulder in this place?

Wherever I turn, wherever I look,

I see the black ruins of my life, here,

where I've spent so many years, wasted them, destroyed them totally."

You won't find a new country, won't find another shore.

This city will always pursue you.

You'll walk the same streets, grow old

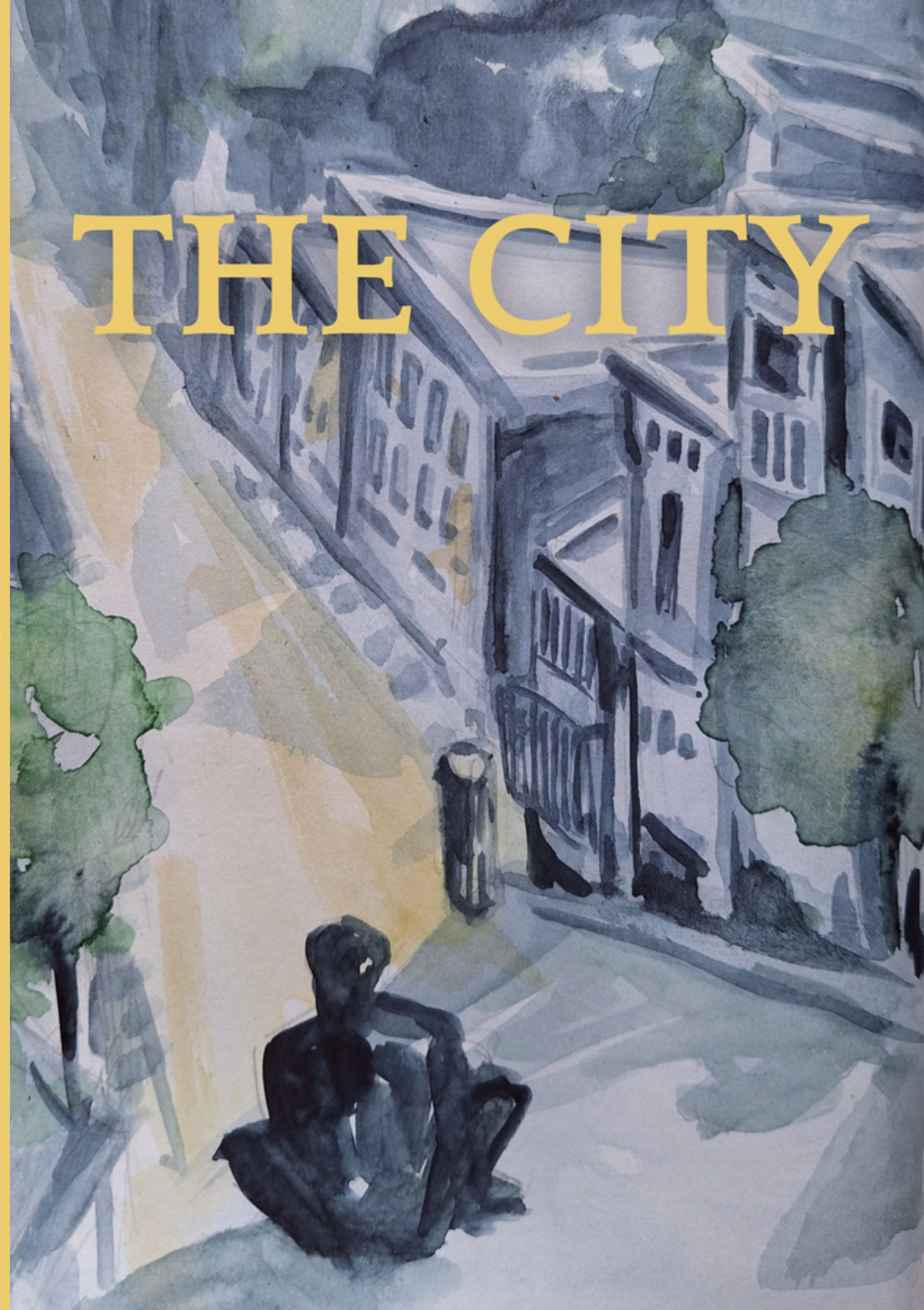
in the same neighbourhoods, turn grey in these same houses.

You'll always end up in this city. Don't hope for things elsewhere:

there's no ship for you, there's no road.

Now that you've wasted your life here, in this small corner,
you've destroyed it everywhere in the world.

1910



You will always be haunted by the city you call home. Even though you might run away and set foot somewhere else, home will always stay. You can't outrun your heritage. Even though you live somewhere else, you have history and there is no use getting rid of it. Home sickness, always longing for the city you left behind and you cannot outrun the memories and the longing to return.

The interconnectedness of everything. How Britain affects Egypt, with that Sudan and all the people that live there, and then how it affects their home countries. This world is so connected that one act has far reaching consequences. And life is life, no matter where. Countries and cultures are different but deep down people are the same and cities are the same and you will end up somewhere. And it will be the same.

You always take yourself when you move somewhere else, you take your culture and and life with you and it will stay wherever you are.

It represents the identity of Cavafy as a Egyptian Greek, who even though he lived in Egypt was still shaped by his culture and remained Greek in heritage and language. The Mediterranean are not just each their own countries but interconnected through history and movement of people. When people move, they take part of their city with them and place it somewhere else.

Waiting For The Barbarians

-What are we waiting for, assembled in the forum?
The barbarians are due here today.

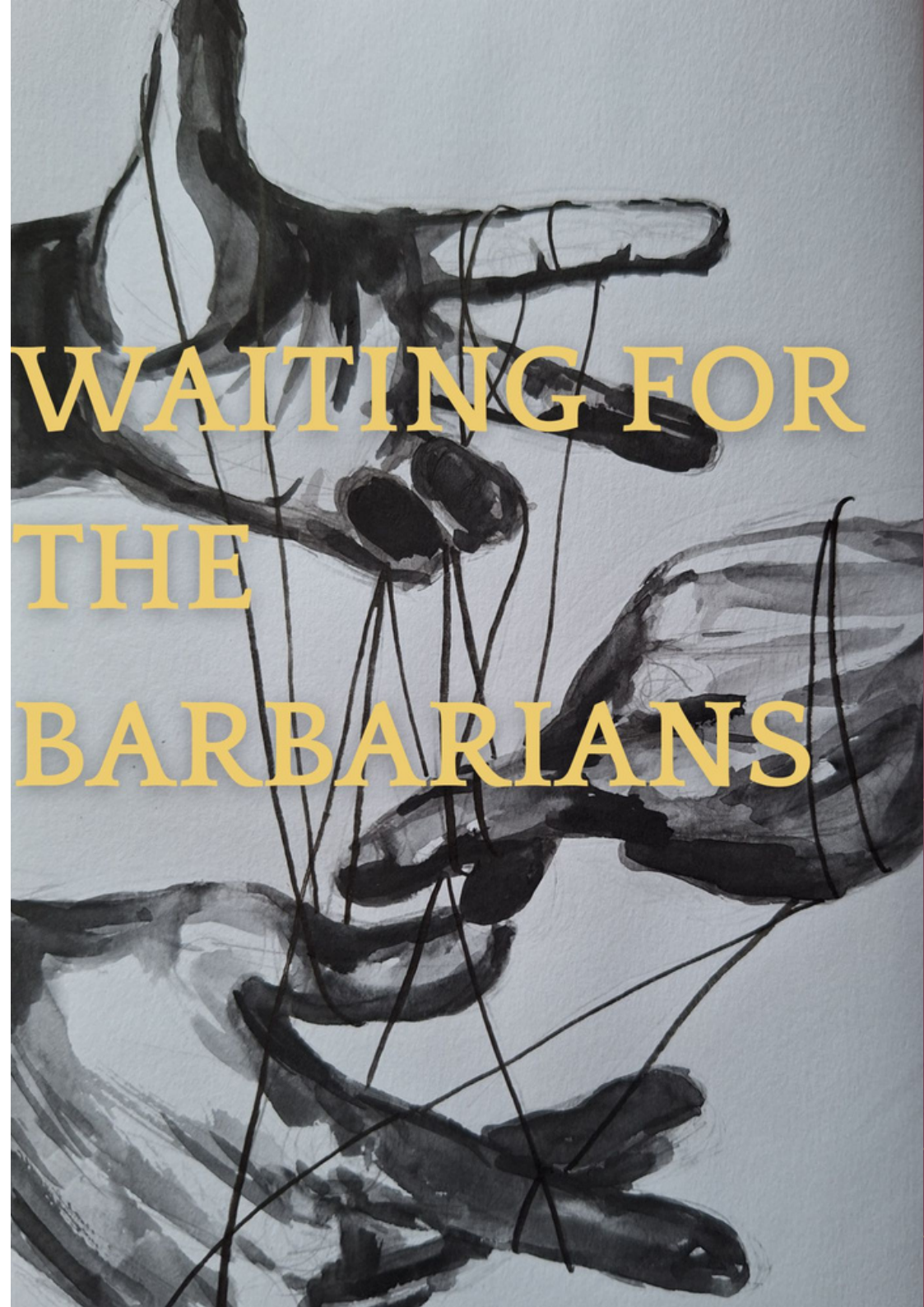
-Why isn't anything going on in the senate?
Why are the senators sitting there without legislating?
Because the barbarians are coming today.
What's the point of senators making laws now?
Once the barbarians are here, they'll do the legislating.

-Why did our emperor get up so early,
and why is he sitting enthroned at the city's main gate,
in state, wearing the crown?
Because the barbarians are coming today
and the emperor's waiting to receive their leader.
He's even got a scroll to give him,
loaded 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,
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 turn up 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 bewilderment, this confusion?
(How serious people's faces have become.)
Why are the streets and squares emptying so rapidly,
everyone going home lost in thought?
Because night has fallen and the barbarians haven't come.
And some of our men who have just returned from the border say
there are no barbarians any longer.
Now what's going to happen to us without barbarians?
Those people were a kind of solution.

An abstract painting in shades of grey and black on a light blue background. It depicts several hands and fingers, some reaching out, with thin black lines (strings) crisscrossing between them, suggesting a puppet show or a complex web of control. The title 'WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS' is written in large, bold, yellow capital letters across the middle of the image.

WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS

Needing someone to put blame on. Excess because of others. Not working because of others. The other is the thing that keeps society going but because it is presented as an easy solution, there will not be put proper work in. Because the other might ruin it.

People do not get proper explanations because the easy one is enough. It seems it is clear who the Barbarians are. But are really the Barbarians the problem? Is it not the ones who are already in the forum. They are exactly what they present the Barbarians to be. With excess, and laziness and violence. It is not the Ottomans who will come and ruin Egypt. There is already someone there who ruins it, there is no need to wait for the Barbarians.

The concept of the Other as a simple enemy.

They would give the Barbarians a list of names to sacrifice. They have already decided who to put responsibilities on and who to betray. The traitors are already here and it does not matter if the Barbarians will show up or not. They are pulling the strings and the plan is already made.

It is about imperial powers that ruled the Mediterranean throughout the centuries and the othering to create a scapegoat with different identity, culture or religion. This is not only an idea of the past but still happening all over the world, where people are othered to have someone to blame for problems. Most prominently this can be seen with refugees who are trying to make the journey crossing the Mediterraneans.

Days of 1909, '10, and '11

He was the son of a misused, poverty-stricken sailor
(from an island in the Aegean Sea).

He worked for an ironmonger: his clothes shabby,
his workshoes miserably torn,
his hands filthy with rust and oil.

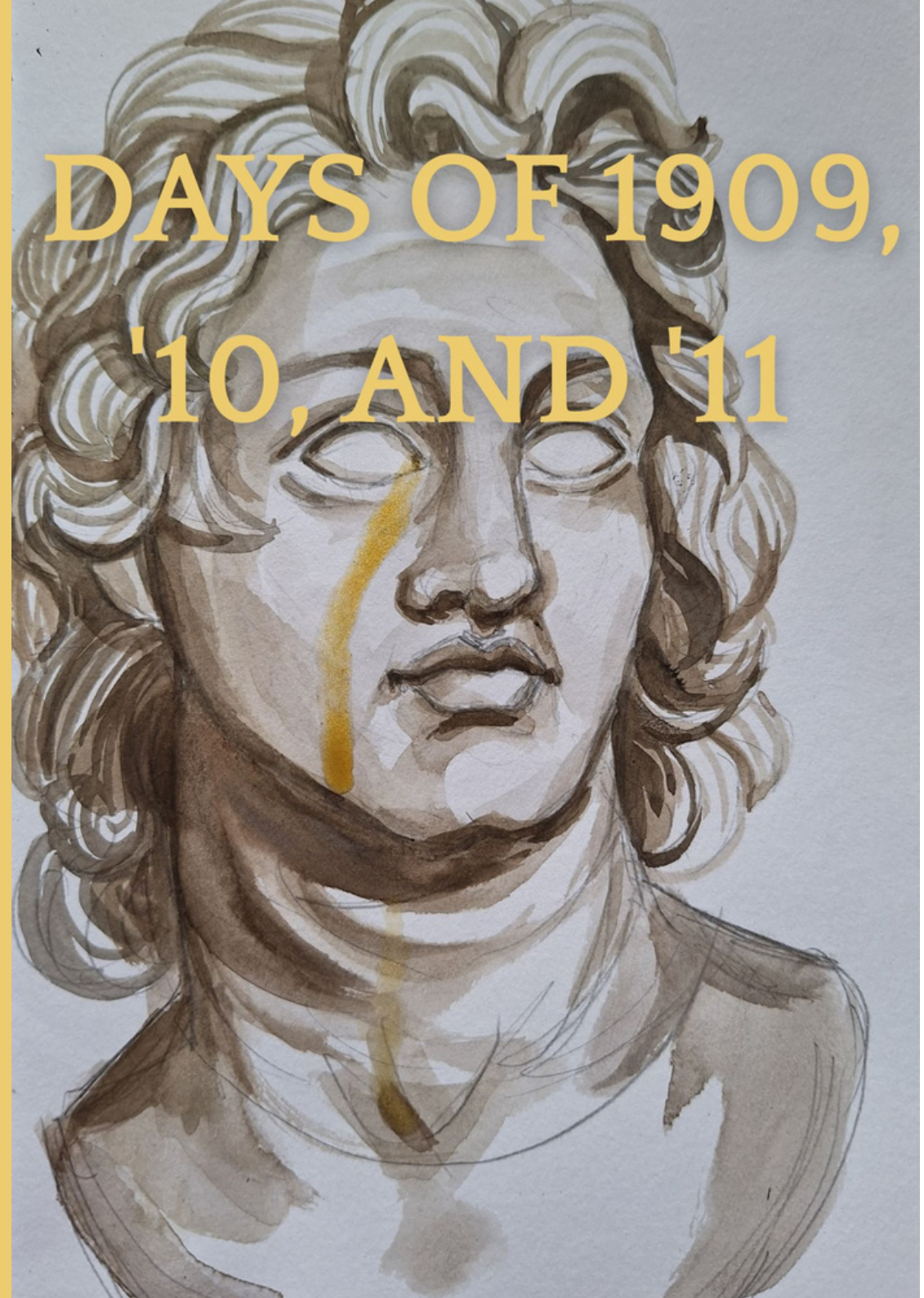
In the evenings, after the shop closed,
if there was something he longed for especially,
a more or less expensive tie,

a tie for Sunday,
or if he saw and coveted
a beautiful blue shirt in some store window,
he'd sell his body for a half-crown or two.

I ask myself if the great Alexandria
of ancient times could boast of a boy
more exquisite, more perfect -thoroughly neglected though
he was:

that is, we don't have a statue or painting of him;
thrust into that poor ironmonger's shop,
overworked, harassed, given to cheap debauchery,
he was soon used up.

1928



DAYS OF 1909, '10, AND '11

Misused sailor from the Aegean Sea with his misused son in Alexandria who had to sell his body after his full day of work. All this just to fulfil his little dreams. How unfair the world is, that someone who was born poor will stay poor.

Beautiful boy but that's not enough.

Another time in the past, he would have been appreciated for his beauty, they would have built statues for him, painted him, but because he is in Alexandria of 1909, 10, 11 he is lost to try to get money in any way possible.

Displacement of time but also - did his father come to Alexandria to get him a better life? How did he feel when his son had the same shabby clothes as him. How did he feel when he had a nice blue shirt and knew what he had to do for it. Did he regret leaving his home sometimes? It is going on for 3 years and that is all it takes to 'use him up'. How did the father feel, seeing his son?

Bust of Alexander the Great, the founder of Alexandria with Macedonian heritage. If everything was different, the misused son could have been him in another life. Is he grieving the other life he did not have? Is his father?

It discusses the treatment of marginalised groups in Egypt but the story of the boy is one that is seen everywhere, especially with refugees who crossed the Mediterranean Sea for a better life and end up exploited and abused.

Hidden Things

From all I did and all I said
let no one try to find out who I was.

An obstacle was there distorting
the actions and the manner of my life.

An obstacle was often there
to stop me when I'd begin to speak.

From my most unnoticed actions,
my most veiled writing -

from these alone will I be understood.

But maybe it isn't worth so much concern,
so much effort to discover who I really am.

Later, in a more perfect society,
someone else made just like me
is certain to appear and act freely.

1908



HIDDEN THINGS

unpublished

A reoccurring theme in his poetry is queer desire and this poem expresses the feeling of not fitting in because of his queer identity. It is not because of heritage, ethnic background or religion but still discusses the feeling of displacement. Not in space but in time.

Cavafy hopes for a later, more perfect society where he can appear freely, where he can be fully himself and does not have to hide his entire identity.

Instead of language that would set him apart and reveal that he does not belong it is the content, what he wants to say, which he cannot express. He knows, that everything that he is writing shows his queer identity and there is no use hiding it as it would be less honest. But he is sure that if placed in a different time he would not need to. He just has to overcome the obstacle of time.

He does not need to say it because he knows others like him will understand, a connection that goes beyond national identity. All the eyes of different people in the same circumstances, looking up, expressing hope for an easier, more perfect future.

There is a reason why this poem was not published by him.

Further Reading

Chambers, Iain. *Mediterranean Crossings : The Politics of an Interrupted Modernity*, Duke University Press, 2008. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/kentuk/detail.action?docID=1169891>.

‘Constantine P. Cavafy’ | Greek Poet, Historian & Journalist | *Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Constantine-P-Cavafy>. Accessed 20 Mar. 2026.

Giuffrida, Angela. ‘More than 600 People Have Died Trying to Cross Mediterranean in 2026, UN Says’. *The Guardian*, 23 Feb. 2026. World News. The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/feb/23/migrants-die-trying-to-cross-mediterranean-2026>.

Terranova, Tiziana. ‘Technology, Postcoloniality, and the Mediterranean’ - *Journal #123*. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/123/436918/technology-postcoloniality-and-the-mediterranean>. Accessed 20 Mar. 2026.

Sakkas, John. “Greece and the Mass Exodus of the Egyptian Greeks, 1956-66.” *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2009, pp. 101-17.

Watson, J. L. ‘Bodies Out of Time: Sculpting Queer Poetics and Queering Classical Sculpture in the Poetry of C. P. Cavafy.’ *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2022, pp. 190-213. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48706186>. Accessed 20 Mar. 2026.

Poems: Constantine P. Cavafy
Watercolours: Valerie Heilig 2026
Texts: Valerie Heilig 2026

Cavafy's inclusion of a feeling of displacement in many of his poems is often subtle and questions the idea of home, belonging and the concept of the other.

This collection shows an interplay between poetry, watercolour paintings and how one can amplify the other.

A personal zine about what the poems of Cavafy reveal to me about the Mediterranean and its connection with displacement and how they can be interpreted through watercolour and text.