

Of Alexandria

I

- to Lawrence Durrell

And as the God abandoned Antony, so have
You forsaken me - dust mauve, dust lemon -
Intoxicated by the vague ancestral imprint
Of shuttered balconies and camphor scented
Darkness. Once more fingering that narrow ridge, cupped
By those two great hands, You cleave me open,
You, hot nude pearl. Then that same sweet plunging
Headiness: a chalk-smudged apple, the silver canal,
Coffee, water ices, cheap *arak*, the arcades spilling
And spiraling with flies and quicklime. All the sulking
Electricity of the Old Canopic Way. And yet too soon,
Through the cicadas and doves, strikes the cry of a blind *muezzi*
Calling to flesh which is not mine, touching with the *Ebed* a
Soul which is not Yours, but which sees Your every colour in its own.

II

- to a young Gamal Abdul Nasser

One of five hundred raging, banner-carrying hearts,
You storm the streets reclaiming Your limbs, biting into
A tramcar and spitting out burning commuters. Steel-
Helmeted police withdraw like prostitutes until
There are hundreds of them too. Then the banners fall
And so do You, hands pushing You down and a head-wound
Which will shine brighter than any medal, a scar
Whiter than white. At school You played Julius on the stage
And I wonder how "*et tu brute?*" sounds in Arabic. Did
Vulnerability feel the same on that tongue? Was hate still
So hot? Yes. Yes, you felt it, change has always been so
Ugly, not clean like a thunder-clap. It is as thick and
As difficult as blood: "Who can remove this feeling?
Who can change it? Who is there that will cry halt?"

III

- to my grandfather (1917-1980)

Ali Sami El Nashar, they tell me that You smoked.
Of course, they say, as if ashtrays are an
Inevitability. As if packed neatly
Into Your first cigarette was the moment
Of Your last breath, all wheezing gauntness and blistered lungs.
I should be proud, they say, You were a Great Man,
One of a species of professor which no longer
Exists. Cairo born, Cambridge taught, master of
Islamic Thought. So they say. But You and I, we meet
In the stillness of black and white, and in all
The possibilities of grey. Oh that grey! That grey
Which is blue and green and lilac, which holds all
Warmth and flesh and knowledge. I brim with grey,
Possessive and triumphant, enriched and beyond their reach.