



## The North Meridian Review

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### Constantine

David Milley

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## “CONSTANTINE”

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### DAVID MILLEY

“Your poem is like Cavafy,” she said. I looked up.  
“Do you know his work?” she asked. I shook my head.  
I’d written of the first of my loves, how he’d kissed me  
in the street, a bold move on a sunlit autumn day.  
Embarrassed by my ignorance, but grateful for the cue,  
I found a book by Cavafy and began to read his verse.

Teachers have words to warn us all away:  
Ginsburg is “undisciplined,” Whitman’s “immature.”  
Bishop? “Too fastidious,” Baldwin? “Full of rage.”  
We’re shunted early off, to travel safer roads.  
Sandburg and Frost, Wordsworth and Pope –  
safer, straighter voices fill supplanted shelves.

The minders of history pick out every particle of pink,  
so voids mark scars where our forebears’ work was torn.  
Our stories die behind iron gates. We grow, bent,  
our brains encased by gay-shaped blanks.  
Dark triangles remain, stains on faded prison garb.  
Cold ash bears witness where faggots have been burned.

So, late in life, learning of Cavafy, I come to his book,  
hearing what my hearer heard: a man loving men.  
Tattered linen suits, patched to seem respectable again,  
worn by hungry, timid men to wild, illicit trysts.  
Moonlight pulling love, like water drawn from sand.  
Trade routes stretching back to Ithaca of old.

Fully immersed in his volume now, I remember  
places I have never been, hands I’ve never held.  
I feel again the heated breath of men I’ve never met.  
Eyes closed, I breathe the steam of crowded baths,  
luxuriate in Constantine Cavafy’s verse,  
bold, erotic memories of an Alexandrian god