

Goin' down to Egypt

Fellaheen camel rider now drives a Cairo hack.
This nut-brown taxi master of no-such lanes
swears by Allah
that the Arabs discovered the wheel.
His cigarette baton twirls up and down,
and he grins like an imp with teeth of flint.
I watch his eyes smolder
and glint in the mirror.
“You pay *baksheesh*.
The meter—heehchee—never work.”

Cairo wears her dirt like an ill-fitted khafiya.
Barefeet trod on red clay and grime
dodging spittle, beggars, and dung.
Throng of resigned faces blend
into the cacophony of the streets.
From the heavens the *imams* growl.
A calligraphy blur from the Koran
ascends from minarets,
high above pyramids of ragged people.
Prayers dissolve into an orange-peel sky
and clouds of smoke blow
through a sphinx schnazola.
“Look at pyramids Jews make!
One dollah bhleeze!”

Oh life-giving Nile river of death!
Oh Pharaoh, garlic-crusher of slave flesh.
You have blood in your river,
frogs in your bed,
vermin in your head, wild beasts in your heart,
cattle disease in your liver, boils on your flesh,
hail on your scalp, locusts in your teeth,
darkness in your soul, death at your door.
Oh Pharaoh, what's left?
Oh Pharaoh, what remains untouched?



Only the hardness,
only the violence,
only the cruelty
of the irrational rational sinful heart.

The ancient Nile constantly flows
like the primitive turbid forces
coursing through our slavish bodies.
I keep hustling back to Egypt's fleshpots
to barter away my life for garlic and leeks.
Maybe I'll swap my birth rite
for Esau's pottage.
Maybe I'll just take the wholesaler's
lousy two *zuzim*.

** *zuzim*—the pittance price a farmer used to buy a goat, according
to a traditional Passover song called *Chad Gadya*—"an only kid."

Copyright © 1991 aka xallie saperstein



2002 Broderbund /
Riverdeep Interactive Learning Limited
Graphic used with permission