

THE BALLAD OF SKANDAR (II)

PHILIP METRES

أغنية اسكندر¹
دير القمر، لبنان²

لم يتأطر في أي صورة، أنقصه
التاريخ،
لم تجر عليه تدريبات في أغنية³،
حُطَّ بذاكرة شفوية/ يا أيها الجد الأكبر
إلى أين ذهبت؟⁵

تحت القمر المنحسر، في وادي
دير القم⁶ ر
اسكندر بن ميتري — عربي،
مسيحي، من جنود المحتل.

1. See “The Ballad of Skandar,” *To See the Earth* (Cleveland State University, 2008). Translation by Samuel Shimon, for *Banipal* (2011).
2. The village of Deir al-Qamar is in the Shouf Mountain region of Lebanon. Its name means “Monastery of the Moon.” According to local lore, the Druze Emir had ordered his soldiers to dig into the rocky earth. If they found an Islamic symbol, they were to build a mosque. If they found a Christian one, a church. They stabbed the stony land until their muscles ached and their spades were dull. A man called out, waving the others over. On an uncovered rock, they could make out both a cross and a moon.
3. Was it Nabokov who said, “I want translations with copious footnotes, footnotes reaching like skyscrapers to this or that page, so as to leave only a gleam of one textual line between commentary and eternity?”
4. When I return to Deir al-Qamar, I see in the distance the gleam of snow on nearby mountains. *Lebanon*, it’s said, derives from the word meaning “white,” because of its snowy peaks.
5. *Once upon a time*, in Arabic fairy tales, translates as *there was and there was not*. Maybe it happened, maybe it didn’t. There was and there was not, in the moon’s monastery, a boy born. They named him Iskandar ibn Mitri Abourjaili.

في أقصى أطراف الامبراطورية العثمانية^{7 8 9}،
فوق بلدة صغيرة،
غير مسلم مجرى الحياة،
تداول القصة،

لتروي المحاصيل. المسيحيون في الأسفل
أرسلوا جنديا وراء جنديا.
لم يستطيعوا القبض على عديم الاسم
المسلم المكار. إلى أن أحضر^{10 11 12 13}

اسكندر المقاتل الشجاع
المسلم مقيداً.

في القرية في الأسفل، طلقات رصاص. سقط اسكندر¹⁴

7. Footnotes demand attention. Some maintain the presence of footnotes disrupts the narrative that their existence distracts. Don’t you think it’s time to get to the point?

8. *Iskandar ibn Mitri Abourjaili* translates as Alexander, son of Mitri Abourjaili. Alexander means “defender of men.” Abourjaili translates as “Father of Men.” According to family history, in the seventeenth century, after our ancestor Atallah’s sons showed courage in their defense of Beirut, the Amir bestowed the last name as an honorific.

9. One could translate, if one is a literalist, Iskandar’s full name as Defender of Men of the Father of Men. Warrior of Warriors. I’m descended from men whose love language was protection, a protection so fierce it sometimes felt like terror.

10. He was and he is not. Of Iskandar, I have no photographs. I could not find any public record of his birth in Lebanon, nor of his untimely death in Mexico. I could not find him listed in any cemetery in Salina Cruz. It was as if he didn’t exist. He was worth less than a single footnote in the history of the Ottoman Empire.

11. But surely he must have existed, as I exist. I carry his father’s name, tucked inside my last. I am given to be Lover of horses, Earth-lover.

12. Iskandar could bend a dime between his thumb and forefinger. He would tie his shoe while standing up, like an ibis on one leg. He could catch a fly with his eyes closed. When he leapt, he hovered in the air like a hawk. He was as tall as the sky. This is what my grandfather told me.

13. Nabokov himself treated footnotes as a shadow text. In his 1941 edition of Lermontov’s *Hero of Our Time*, Nabokov, according to scholar Nicolas Warner, is already “competing with . . . Lermontov by retitling one of the poet’s most striking poems” (“The Footnote as Literary Genre,” 168). In particular, Nabokov criticizes the poet’s “singularly inept . . . descriptions of women” (169).

14. Poet Dana Cheaib notes, “the translator uses the term *بلدة* for ‘little town.’ What’s the difference between a village and a little town?”

المسلم المقيّد سحبه
 سالما خلف شجرة أرز.
 اعطى اسكندر الرجل مفتاحه،

ماذا يختار اسكندر:

20. Bullet: body :: footnote: text? Or body: footnote :: bullet: text?

21. My father told me that Skandar was shot in the leg, but not precisely where. I imagined it was his calf. The notes at the bottom of the page are called footnotes because they appear as footers. Once, while playing basketball, I pulled a muscle in my calf and it felt like I was shot. Sprained ankles, plantar fasciitis, bruised metatarsals, and Achilles tendonitis: each injury reminds me how much I rely on my feet, which largely are hidden from me.

22. Why did the Muslim man save Skandar's life? After all, he was a Christian, a foot soldier for the empire.

23. "On closer inspection, Grafton informs us, appearances of uniformity are deceptive. To those of us who are not experts on the footnote, they seem to be 'solid and fixed'" (Grafton, *The Art of the Footnote*, 1997).

24. My father, however, was also a deeply tender man. He'd always greet us with hugs, and asked for hugs in return. He'd call me "honey" in front of my teenage friends. I was so embarrassed. At night, driving me home from high school, he'd play classical music, place his arm over my shoulder, touch the back of my head. When I made him proud, he never hid his tears, even in public. I'm the age he was now, unable to hold back tears.

25. One day in the 1980s, in the dim living room in Brooklyn, my grandfather lounged in his easy chair, and I was sitting on the couch. The Mets, his favorite team, flared on the screen. The ball hurtling and cracking against the mitt. We listened to the play-by-play, a remnant of radio days, a running footnote to the game, offering narrative description, statistics, and stories. One of the players kneeled down to tie his shoelace. *My father*, he said in the dark, *could tie his shoelace standing up*. After he lost his shirt in the 1960s in a failed business deal in Argentina, Grandpa sank into a dark depression. He'd invested all his money and then the government was overthrown, and all his contacts were lost. It was like he went underwater. His wife Lily would get up every day and make him his coffee, before heading off to work at the school cafeteria. The rest of the family went about their days, pretending the house wasn't sinking. He didn't get out of bed for the better part of a year.

26. Why did Skandar let him go? Why did the Ottomans not believe Skandar that he failed to catch the man? When I return to Deir al-Qamar, I search the eyes of everyone I meet, looking for answers. For what it would have meant to stay. Did the descendants of the Muslim look back?

27. The cause of our exile:
 :source of our survival.

28. Most people know little or nothing about their great-grandparents, and nothing at all about the generation older than that. We will disappear from human memory.

15. *Send Agha Skandar*, it was said, after other Ottoman soldiers failed to capture the Muslim stealing the town's water. In the 1860s, clashes between Muslims and Christians led to the burning of the town, and now this man had diverted the river for his fields!

16. *Agha*, in Turkish, is an honorific. *Send Boss Skandar*. The story flows down to me from my father.

17. This is not the only bullet Skandar would suffer. Somehow, Skandar survived the shooting, though he was not the intended target. The man he captured was the target.

18. When we were young, and my father was in a dark mood at dinner, he'd sometimes bark at our mother, I hid in quietness. If I could be silent enough. Still enough.

19. But my sister stood up and barked back. My father would fire back, a fury rising in him. Somehow, every time, she survived the bullets.

السجن أو المنفى؟^{29 30} المنفى^{31 32 33}،
على الأقل، حرية. لكن أين تكون الحرية³⁴؟
خلف الأسوار البعيدة

للإمبراطورية العثمانية، بيت بلا
قضبان حديدية في النوافذ،
حيث الماء يسيل من كل صنوبر—
أو هكذا تقول الحكاية^{35 36 37 38}.

29. In the original poem, I'd forgotten that Iskandar's wife, my great-grandmother Elena, appealed to the jailers to let him go. She pleaded to save his life. How had I forgotten?

30. I phone my oldest relative, Great-aunt Helen, named after her grandmother Elena (Helen). She's ninety-one. When she was a small child, she tells me, her grandmother gave her a bath, swishing the water around her with her hands. Elena died before my father was born, and because of my grandfather's silence, we never heard a word about her. I cup this single image of Elena like cool water poured into palms, afraid to let a single drop spill.

31. The jailers agreed, on one condition: he could never be seen here again. What is hunger but the softness of palms, hidden beneath the hardness of the fist. Cue: door opening. Cue: the bustle in the house, one last time. Elena bundled my grandfather and carried him out, minding two other children as they prepared to leave the house forever.

32. What if the most important thing is concealed in the footnotes? My grandfather's hands grew soft with the years, the skin almost like silk. I remember how, in his last years, my father would hold his father's hand, like a mother holding a child's hand.

33. According to public records, Elena died of cervical carcinoma in 1935 at the age of forty-eight. She is buried in St. John's Cemetery in the Bronx. She was and she was not. What does her tombstone say?

34. Is exile freedom? Is the sea the death of rivers? Is the tongue language's home, or it is the ear? What is wind without a sail? Is loneliness the fire under our skin when words fail?

35. Elena, you have not been forgotten. Your voice launched a single ship. When my daughters ask where we come from, I begin with mountains and a voice of light. A woman bargaining with empire, minding a thousand details unnamed in any epic. Fugitive from injustice, refuge to your brood.

36. When I spoke to her, Great-aunt Helen said that she had never heard the story of what caused the family's exile. It was and it was not.

37. And when it was time to descend the mountain, no one followed them.

38.. كان ياما كان