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ON THE DECK OF A SHIP

--*Cavafy*

It's *him*, this little drawing done in pencil--
At least as far as its faint gray outline goes.

Just a quick sketch. I made it on the deck
Of a moving ship in the middle of the day,

That shimmering day on the blue Ionian Sea.
It looks a lot like him. But just the same,

It's not the face I draw from memory now.
His mood at any moment might turn dark,

Back when the waves of noon were all around us.
He was more beautiful than my sketch of him.

And there, in my mind's eye, I picture him
Without a trace of time, the time gone by.

All of these things took place in the distant past:
The pencil sketch, the ship, and the afternoon.

In an early poem, "Horace in Athens", Cavafy praises the great Roman poet whose beautiful and intricate lyrics were the first to deploy Greek meters in Latin verse. The same Horace who boasted that his poems would stand the test of time as well as sculpted bronze, or even the pyramids. In the Greek of the poem that I have chosen to translate here, Cavafy's lines are as simple and delicate as the pencil drawing he describes, and yet as enduring, perhaps, as the love poems of Horace.