

Where the Sea Meets the Desert

Clive James

Antony and Cleopatra swam at Mersa Matruh
 In the clear blue shallows.
 Imagine the clean sand, the absence of litter —
 No plastic bottles or scraps of styrofoam packing,
 No jetsam at all except the occasional corpse
 Of a used slave tossed off a galley —
 And the shrieks of the dancing Queen as the hero splashed her
 While her cheer-squad of ladies-in-waiting giggled on cue,
 The eunuchs holding the towels.
 With salt in her eyes did she wrinkle the perfect nose
 Of which Pascal would later venture the opinion
 That had it been shorter (he didn't say by how much)
 History would have been different?
 They were probably both naked. What a servant saw
 Did not count. They might even have boffed each other
 Right there at the water's edge like a pair of dolphins
 Washed up in the middle of a mad affair,
 With her unable to believe the big lunk would ever
 Walk away from this, and him in his soul
 Fighting to forget that this was R&R
 And there was still the war.

There is always the war. The Aussies in Tobruk
 Could hear the German bombers at El Adem
 Warming up on the airfield
 For the five-minute flight that is really the only distance
 Between bliss and blitz.
 Ears still ringing from kookaburras and whip-birds
 Were heckled by Heinkels.
 When Antony eyeballed her Coppertone tits and bum
 He was looking at Actium.

Shake it, lady.
 Shake it for the Afrika Korps.
 Where the sea meets the desert there is always,
 There is always the war.