My memory of Cairo as a child is an image of the pyramids in the distance, pointing to the sky. As we drove towards them on occasional family excursions along the Pyramids Road, the landscape unfolded, forever flat and green. This is a visual cliché of Egypt, an almost biblical one of its countryside. By contrast, urban Egypt is growing so fast today that some experts predict its original agricultural land is well on the way to disappearing.

In Cairo, forty percent of the city is now composed of *ashwa’iyat* (literally “haphazard things”), commonly translated in this context as “informal housing.” These illegally built slums expand relentlessly in and around Cairo like mushrooms after the rain, suffocating the fertile soil beneath them. This “Red City,” as some architects refer to it, consists of endless rows of almost identical brick and cement buildings, long stretches of often windowless towers, random, informal constructions lacking in all public amenities. These slums are generally regarded as frightening spaces, dangerous and crime-ridden. Politicians debate whether to upgrade or eradicate them, without much of either happening so far.

Watching Cairo expand and spread over the last decades has brought me to ask what lies in store for its people. It seems to me that these *ashwa’iyat* represent a false promise – the promise of a heavenly new way of life amidst green pastures, a vain hope for a better tomorrow. The stark reality is that none of these towers of Babel is ever finished and that the green fields in which they are planted are now urban sprawl and refuse. The following images of the *ashwa’iyat* were taken in 2009, a stone’s throw from the Cairo ring road. The *Da’iri*, as this highway is called, is the new road to the pyramids. Its flyovers soar above the ocean of red bricks and cement, beyond which the pyramids rise up in all their majesty.

Along with millions of *fellaheen*, “peasant farmers,” the donkey has made the transition from the cliché of a biblical landscape into this new reality of the *ashwa’iyat*. The sound of the donkey braying has always broken the silence of the Egyptian countryside, and now it breaks through the noise of the Red City in an agonising cry – is it in ecstasy or in despair? This fine line between heaven and hell resonates in all of my experiences of the *ashwa’iyat*. In popular belief, the donkey represents submission, stupidity, stubbornness and even evil. In urban Cairo it is the garbage collectors’ mode of transportation, the beast of burden that connects Egypt to its past – humble, patient and wise. All of these associations have inspired me to create a “Donkey Symphony,” a sort of requiem, a hymn to the beauty that lies in horror, a hymn to hope in the midst of misery.