

Water

*Astraddle on the dolphin's mire and blood,
Spirit after spirit! The smithies break the flood,
The golden smithies of the Emperor!
Marbles of the dancing floor
Break bitter furies of complexity,
Those images that yet
Fresh images beget,
That dolphin torn, that gong-tormented sea.
- W.B. Yeats, "Byzantium"*

I stick my foot through the ferry railing and let the water race beneath my shoe. Closer to the shore the water seems to barely move. I cup my hands around my eyes and aim the palmscope down at the waves, canceling out the coast. "Just one dolphin, God," I think. "I heard you put dolphins in the Bosphorus."

The Bosphorus (*Bogazici*: from the Turkish *boğaz*, "throat") winds through the city, trying very hard not to look like some great river. Two currents slide over one another, the surface heading north to refresh the Black Sea, the lower recoiling back toward the Sea of Marmara (and the Aegean, (and the Mediterranean, (and the Atlantic by extension))). Not a river at all. Peel back the main road of Bebek that sidles along the edge of the water. Curl the land up on either shore, until the Bosphorus Bridge snaps its suspension wires and sinks with its two massive posts peeking out over the waves. Widen the passage just a little more, and a satellite would show it plainly: not a river at all. Two seas connected by a nerve ending. One sea.

"How deep is it, I wonder?" I plunge my imagination beneath the waves, driving the

waters back to reveal an emerald canyon wall, smooth and transparent as glass. The first twenty yards or so sway sunnily in the wind and boat traffic. Deeper down it goes dark, a world alive and swimming in blackness.

Jessica suggests: "Let's swim to the bottom and see." I rock with laughter, drawing eyes from several of our fellow ferry-riders. *My laugh is embarrassing, whether or not it's culturally appropriate. It would be a good habit to get out of, in any case.* Over the railings we see jelly-fish roiling up in the engine-tormented water. Their legless bodies rise and sink again, powerless. All of them look dead, like dingy coffee filters tossed from the ship. A sad few flip all the way inside out and remain hovering on the surface.

We translated an essay for our reading class, a short document about the shore off from which we've just set out. For a brief time about eighty years ago, bathhouses clung to Istanbul's shores and enabled high class women to bathe in the sea without the disgrace of being seen doing so. These *hamams* hovered over the waves like feet testing the water: four walls and a ceiling pitched upon posts driven into the sea soil. I can just hear the tumult inside: splashes and ladies gossiping and children shrieking in delight at the sound of their voices echoing against water and walls. I see the liting corpses of that jelly fish generation, pooling together and collecting in one corner of the structure, confused at how they had come to be sucked under and enclosed.

The sea-side *hamams* have closed now. This generation of Istanbul's women swims in chlorinated pools sunk in man-made islands set in the middle of the Bosphorus. They wear bikinis. The ferry rolls past one of these under an assault of blaring techno music. I consider waving at the women, but blush at the thought of their seeing me seeing them. I look down at the waves. The dolphins, I gather, are also a bit shy today.

The Queen of Sheba and Other Anachronisms

“Your name is *Sabah*? Like ‘morning?’” I ask.

“No, many people think that at first. It is ‘Saba,’ like the woman in King Süleyman’s story. You know her? The Queen.”

* * *

Saba sees us enter the auditorium and rushes up the aisle to meet us. She leads us by the wrists to the very center of the front row. “I am so happy that you came! You must sit here. I want to be able to see your eyes.” After a few minutes the lights and murmuring in the room die down and someone in the back begins a slide show. Saba stands in the middle of the projection, so that photos of flowers and paintings center themselves on her torso and try to bend around her to the screen. They cannot. The result is a perfect Saba-shaped piece missing from each slide. She begins.

Her little hand waves at us like a conductor’s wand. It counts off the beats of Saba’s acapella as if she were performing for a mirror – *bir, iki, u ; bir, iki, u* . Her voice ebbs and surges with vibrato. It is nearly visible, like water sloshing from a shaky pitcher. I glance around the small auditorium and take in the faces taking in hers. She sings several songs in a row, and I suspect each one of being ancient, of bearing some improbable weight in the Turkish heart.

In truth these songs are only a little older than Saba herself. Sezen Aksu, Turkish music’s Madonna figure, dreamed them up some time in the last twenty years. I know this, really. And still I persist in breaking the rules of logic. I suspend my prudish anti-Orientalism and see the twenty-first century Saba instead as a character transcending the present as she sings, so that she becomes not just a Turk, but an Ottoman woman some

centuries removed. She is a wife perhaps, or a concubine. She performs this song for her man and his guests. He smiles.

I discovered this phenomenon soon after arriving in Istanbul, a peril of my naïve young nationality. Occasionally, just right in the middle of a conversation with a Turk, my grasp of generation expires. Her modernity will drop off, irrelevant as a costume when the masque has ended. I imagine with cringing indulgence an era when the most beautiful women of the empire were chosen for wealthy harems. Sexual politics would dictate the mastery of dance, or poetry, or song. Saba, stripped of the present, is one of the most bitterly envied concubines – is perhaps even a wife. Her hair falls to the waist, her eyebrows arch fierce and dark, and her song pulses through pretty lips. Can't I just see the husband smiling? Can't I just see the women scowling? The only force strong enough to jerk me back to this moment is the heart pattern silk screened on her tank top.

Anneliese looks over at me, and we nod in common admiration for this loveliness. I am grateful. Saba invited us into her life without warning. Jessica and I had been walking back to our dorm from the library, lamenting how removed we felt from the Turkish students studying there. I didn't think that much could be done about it, actually; they had their functional little social circles to chat in, and we had our foreignness to cower behind. An unfortunate and apparently binding arrangement, and one I saw no chance of breaching. Saba reached out and grabbed our collars from the other side of the boundary. "Excuse me," she had said catching up with us, "Are you studying Turkish?" We turned in shared surprise to see Saba smiling at us expectantly.

"Well, eh, yes." Jessica answered, and led into introductions.

“Wonderful! I’m studying English. Maybe, would you both like to practice together? My English and your Turkish?” I laughed. Saba looked concerned and I quickly amended my reaction.

“Saba, it was very good to meet you. We would love to practice with you.”

Saba, as we learned in the meetings that followed, studies philosophy at Boğaziçi University during the regular academic year but stayed for summer school this session as well. This performance is the final project for a mixed-media art class. “I want to use paintings and music to understand love,” she had explained to us beforehand. I had cooed in resonance.

As I sit here listening I am still somewhat surprised that this exploration can be a common interest for us, coming from such different starting points. Does it appeal to both Saba and me because we are both university students, or because we are both young women, or because we are both citizens of a Western (or Westernizing) paradigm? And maybe it’s not that complicated. Maybe we are both human, both subject to longing and curiosity. I worry that the breadth of this reality would evaporate me if it hit too suddenly; I have not learned humility enough to grasp it yet. For now I sit and listen in wonder to love songs that have nothing to do with English or America. Her performance ends and we beat her classmates to setting off a long applause. She smiles unabashed and dips her knees in curtsy. Saba grins at us as she slides back into her seat. We clap until our hands grow numb.

Just before Saba had unclasped our wrists to head for the stage, Jessica had asked if she was nervous. “Yes, I am very nervous,” she had confessed then. I wouldn’t have guessed it from her steady smile, but then I myself knew a thing or two about forging a composed exterior. Before I could check myself, my default response for troubled friends had streamlined with my Turkish.

“I’ll pray for you, Saba,” I whispered quickly, in what must have come out as a somewhat intelligible translation. As soon as the words were out I wondered how to pull them back in. Not that I know how to un-say awkward things in English, either. Saba’s face softened a bit and I held my breath, preparing to apologize for offending her.

“Thank you.” She said. “I am so happy that you came. It is important to me to have my friends here.” She had hugged me, and the lights fell low.

Graven Images

“The men's tall tombstones topped with the turban of their rank have a floral quality because of the inscriptions: for calligraphy has been compared to flowers. The women's headstones, of course, were extensively carved with blooms, and the miniature stones of the children have all the charmed melancholy of lives cut off in the bud.”

– Godfrey Goodwin, *“Gardens of the Dead in Ottoman Times”*

“Over here, you can see the tomb of Hürrem.” Forty or fifty of us meander in the shade between structures as the tour guide lectures for us. The scholarly little man points toward the stone building closing in the configuration to the south. A few of the students glance toward it, but most are more interested in toeing the dirt with their shoes, or pressing their hot palms against the marble surfaces on which they perch. We have walked through three colossal mosques and innumerable hilly streets this morning. Through the heat and the distance this man tries to urge us on with his explanations and histories. He is wickedly intelligent, which only worsens the shame I feel for barely being able to stay awake through the tedium of his talking.

In this instance, however, I am paying keen attention. Anneliese even hears me gasp a little at the name “Hürrem.” She looks hopefully at me, assuming perhaps that I have remembered something funny to tell her, or that I’ve spotted an ice cream cart. How disappointing that I’ve perked up only to point at the dead stone to our right. The guide drones on, and Anneliese grins curtly and returns to half-listening. To my left the height of the Süleymaniye Cami (the mosque of Süleyman the Magnificent) rises nobly into the midsection of a city skyline it must once have dwarfed. Behind me, the great sultan himself lies as dust within a coffin, within a tomb, within the shadow of his great mosque. But here to my right – this is the now-dust body that captivates me.

Hürrem's name vibrates insistently in my memory, though it takes me a moment to draw it out and stitch it together with its story. Hürrem – a slave girl in the harem – the favored one of Süleyman - the bewitcher of his heart. The pieces come floating back haphazard and coagulate into a dubious *mélange* of fact and myth. Her memory has sifted down through history as a remarkable paradox of multiple stereotypes; she is somehow both the Orientalist's ideal archetype of sexualized harem *décor* and undeniable evidence of female agency within the Ottoman Empire. And whatever the full truth of her was, I have total confidence of one fact: I stand here in the heat so many hundreds of summers later and am shaded by the proof of her mortality.

I ruminate on the dead woman as I follow the others in and out of Süleyman's tomb. We take off our shoes inside, and the women among us cover our heads. A green cloth with Ottoman script embroidered in gold thread drapes over the casket perched in the round room's center. The floor feels hot under my feet, and the carpet has the texture of something too fine to walk on. Süleyman...the Magnificent, the Lawgiver, once the great fear of Europe and now the silent and still in a box in a room. Somewhere among the ruin of his body lie the hands that signed edicts, the lips that spoke incontrovertibly, and the heart that leapt and whirred at the thought of the woman one tomb over. I learned that he wrote poetry for her, and that she agonized over her language barrier until she could do the same for him. Because Hürrem, known in European sources as Roxelana, was not Turkish, nor even Muslim to start with.

Hürrem came from a conquered region of eastern Europe. She played lover to her sultan and mother to his successor. The Ottoman take on the idea of noble birth must have confounded aristocratic counterparts in Europe. The blood line from the first sultan

(Osman, from which the term “Ottoman” derives) remained unbroken as the centuries elapsed, but not because of elite marriage bonds. While early sultans had sometimes married the daughters of Christian kingdoms for the sake of diplomatic buttressing, the practice proved not worth the trouble within a few generations.

A system of one son from one woman developed in the dynamics of the ruling family. When one of the sultan’s concubines became pregnant, she retired as his sexual partner and adopted instead the role of mother to a possible sultan. The Ottoman sultans were therefore not only the sons of potentates, but of slave women taken in from the new provinces; they were children of the supreme protectors of their faith though mothered by infidels. I can only imagine how much it galled the proud royalty of his enemies to know that Süleyman, as he battered against the very borders of Western Europe, was not only a Muslim, but one scant generation removed from slavery.

Our tour group filters out of the mausoleum lot and moves toward the strip of garden at the rear of the mosque. A forest of tombstones as tall as men sprouts at the end of the path. Hürrem watches us trudge away from her with our necks bowed and eyes squinting under the glare, looking as if she’d just sent us off to execution. Hürrem had a not-so-passive role in the deaths of men who, in one way or another, impinged on her sons’ chances of taking power. These included Süleyman’s advisor and closest friend Ibrahim, as well as the sultan’s own son by another woman. In her book on the Ottomans, Caroline Finkel suggests that “during the early part of his reign Sultan Süleyman relied for counsel solely on Ibrahim Pasha and Hürrem Sultan.” After maneuvering her son-in-law into Ibrahim’s post as grand vezir, Hürrem “continued to be her husband’s intimate confidante...” Finkel’s is one of many histories which alternate between vilifying and

praising Hürrem's fierceness; for better or worse, she was a woman to take seriously. I reach the tombstone grove and tarry a bit while the others shuffle toward the gardens. I wonder dispassionately if Hürrem put any of these dead men in their place.

These grave markers are as tall as men – specifically, as tall as the men they commemorate. The suggestively anatomic dimensions of the tombstones harken back to the pre-Islamic Turkic tradition of placing a statue of the deceased over their grave. This practice was, of course, banned by the Islamic injunction against images of man and animals. Thus these tombstones are arguably just that, stones, and nothing more. The religious leadership must have been satisfied that there were at least no faces carved on the man-size stones. The fact that almost all of them are crowned with elaborately carved hats and turbans was, it seems, quietly overlooked.

Tree limbs have burst out of a few of the graves. Mourners laid slabs of solid rock over the bodies centuries ago, sealing them with justifiable confidence that they were secured in the ground. If the taboos and laws against grave robbing wouldn't deter would-be thieves, this block of granite would go a long way toward doing so. But year by year, season after season, a sapling planted between graves grew into a sturdy tree needing to put down roots. Over time, I imagine, the thread like shoots searching for water wove through the rotting wood of the coffins, twining into the fertile softness of decay therein. The threads fattened as they plunged deeper, until they formed the thick ligaments a mature tree could stand on. These muscular arms spread as they saw fit, and no stone slab could resist this steady persuasion lifting it over a century or so. The result as I see it now is life bursting out of death – fortified by it.

Ruins

“To God’s holy people in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ...”

The dead have listened closely while Jessica read the letter to us in the baked air. Though originally sent to these dust-ghosts, the words have always been for me, too. Today I have been converted into the directly addressed, like a stranger sliding coolly into the back row of a family portrait. Jessica delivers the rest of the first chapter of St. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians and Anneliese and I look west at what remains of their city.

We came to the site by foot from our hotel in rural Selçuk, three miles to the north. A series of gaudy posters by the Turkish department of tourism hang in our hotel, imploring: “Let us meet in the place where the religions have met.” Four or five combinations of sacred artifacts have been air-brushed together over an aerial view of the ruins. The posters imply that the Isabey Mosque, a statue of the Blessed Virgin, and the temple of Artemis are rationally compatible because they have shared the same dirt. Perhaps because they have become the same dirt.

Jessica has finished reading and is skipping down and away from us. Her path levels out as she reaches the stage. Anneliese takes photos in rapid bursts and snaps the shutter closed after each to conserve her dying battery. Jessica turns to me from a hundred feet below, smiles, and starts to sing.

“Stri-
i- the
ike, vi-
ole...”

The song rises prettily from the high-school chorus section of her memory. Timid, it

floats into the late afternoon air. The empty half-moon amphitheatre has higher standards than I had expected – her voice does not echo ethereally up to me after all. It leaves her small. I mask my disappointment by clapping. This sound too falls mutely down the rows to the stage, where she laughs once and feigns a curtsy.

“*Devam et!*”

Our eyes cut across the arc. Opposite me on the same ring of stone a Turkish girl and her family look expectantly at Jessica. Little currents ripple in my stomach – I *understood!* Jessica looks at them and then at me, and I echo the request in the same language: “Go on, please!”

Jessica sings again, her song somehow more alive for the new audience. One or two notes seem to please the stones, and I hear them reverberate. We all applaud: the Turkish tourists, the American students, and the ancient carved seats. The amphitheatre opens itself to this noise, and I understand that a tumult of clapping hands and shouting applause is what it responds to best; the performance is secondary to the reaction.

The vision is weak, but I pull it along like sleepy child: a throng of Roman citizens – Ephesians packed in around the place where I stand. I imagine side conversations, shouting vendors, and crumbs on the ground. A mother stands up and scans the crowd for the child she lost on the teeming staircase. The man behind her grumbles about his blocked view – the fight is just taking off. She spots the boy and sits after flagging him down. Below, the stage is getting messy as the opponents knock sweat and blood and each other to the ground. Blunt *thumps* and grunts imbue the arena with a low, lumbering cruelty, but for as much as anyone can hear them, the men battle in silence. The drone of shouts redoubles around the struggling bodies and gives the blows a context. The roar provides a soundtrack that the men themselves could scarcely improve upon if they tried. My speculation gets cut

short as Jessica climbs up to join me. The crowds condense into the single family now picking its way over stones. "You have fans," I say.

"Yeah. It feels pretty good." Jessica is a small girl with black curls. Of the three of us who came to spend the summer in Istanbul, she is the only one who occasionally gets taken for a local. Not that my blonde hair and American girth help my situation - and Anneliese fares little better with her long pale face and matching tresses. I kiss Jessica's head and we move toward Anneliese waiting at the amphitheatre exit. Anneliese's tall frame stands up between the broken yellow columns, a living stone.

Foreignness

We reach one the airbrushed posters' favorite splicing images: The Library of Celsus. "This is what I remember best from before, when I came with my Dad." Anneliese guides us up mat marble steps. We follow avidly after this similitude of familiarity. In the weeks spent living together, being foreign together, we have taken up a rotation for filling each other's needed roles: Anneliese is today our mother, the waving hand we'll look for should we get lost in this newness.

The library's facade is the front of nothing. It is a fossil sea shell, delicate and dry white and empty – the live thing it housed long dead now. The architect designed it with shameless illusions to appear larger than it really was: columns fatter near the top, entrance much wider than the whole. Two millennia later, I am taken in just as easily by the tricks. I am grateful for them. I pass through two sets of columns to enter the main reading room. The warm air settles over the space with purpose. Distant blue haired women with date stamps have conditioned me to stay silent here. I conceal a look of shock at two children playing too loudly for a library.

My fingers trace a tall shelf running the perimeter of the room. They dodge in and over imperfections in the heavy blocks, imagining a chisel. I wonder how that chisel came to disappear. When did it become disposable? Who decided the day, the moment, when it could fall to the floor forever and become just another found/unfound artifact? My hand reaches the end of the shelf and I am back at the entrance. One last look at the empty shelf...an ephemeral desire to stumble across some document, somehow unnoticed by generations of archeologists and groundskeepers...

I find nothing in the three seconds I consider this. I pull out my own book, because

now it's my turn to read and Jessica and Anneliese are waiting for me on the steps. I drop down between them, conscious of reserving enough space for other tourists to pass through. Anneliese unfolds her long legs into this space and sighs softly into the heat. She looks far away at nothing in particular. The smallish leather book lies warm in my palm like a naked animal. I glance at three or four tourists scaling into the library. They speak in a language I may or may not understand. I look down and hunch my shoulders and leaf through the onionskin pages to the place where Jessica left off in the amphitheatre. My eyes slide until they hook onto the bold **2** near the bottom. I whisper: "As for you..."

I do not listen to what I read; I am a vessel for the words. My voice means no more than three seconds of a song heard while scanning the radio. Anneliese says to read louder - she can't really hear. I hesitate and feel Jessica's face convex into awareness. She leans imperceptibly nearer to me. Quietly: "Chelsea, are you embarrassed to be reading?"

"No!" My head shakes emphatically but my voice stays low. I peek behind Jessica at the tourists saying something I may or may not have understood. "I'm just a quiet reader." We are one sixth of the way through a letter written both to us and to the dead whose dust sits, unstirred, around us. I feel their dust eyes waiting. I squeeze more of the chapter out, still not listening. I feel the shapes of the English words forming in my mouth, feel my lips push them out like balloons. The tourists and their language trickle down the steps beside us. I imagine the English balloons floating stupidly into their faces, see the tourists duck around them in irritation. One of their own word balloons lands on my ear; it is Turkish shaped.

"Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone." (2:19).

I blush powerfully as I release the words. *No longer foreigners*. My generation came

along long after Gentiles like these dust-ghosts had become the “in-crowd.” My non-Jewish family never had to wrangle with the early church fathers over whether to circumcise my brothers – not an issue. I had never felt the acute pinch of foreignness for which Paul had soothed the Ephesians. And while the concept had always theoretically appealed to me, I knew nothing about the type of estrangement that necessarily preceded their joy. They were strangers, and then they were family. Internally, I think: “I don’t want to mix metaphors, or metaphysical planes for that matter, but we *are* in fact still foreigners here.”

The planes and the metaphors ignore my request to behave and go bounding about freely in my heated head, colliding and spilling into one another to paint wildly simplistic theories and comparisons. I look around and am reminded of ruins I’ve visited in Arizona – walking over the bones of a crippled and fading people. Yet here I see Turks, visiting these ruins within their homeland – walking over the bones of my spiritual ancestors. Then to deal with my forerunners – who would eventually so devastate theirs, and vice versa, and vice versa, and vice versa, until my head spins and I land back in the moment, and finish reading chapter two.

Lying: Part I - English

This is what I said to Jessica, moments after she had asked whether I was embarrassed:

“Jess, I lied. I am embarrassed to be reading.

I was afraid for a while that that meant that I was embarrassed to be reading the Bible, but that’s not it. Well, that complicates it, but that’s not it. I think I’m awkward about...English.” I huff and eye the family who had joined us in the amphitheatre. They take photos standing in front of statues of Wisdom and Justice in the library breezeway behind us.

“See, that Turkish family claims this place, because it’s in Turkey; it’s their history by default of location, even if these aren’t their ancestors. And we come in this afternoon, and we claim it – because this is a place where something started, and it trickled down through time in a network so persistent that the something expresses itself in me all this time later like a genetic trait. I feel like it’s a pretty balanced match, really. Equal claims up to that point.

But then, I come in here and I read about the something that started here, but I do it in a language that’s three times removed from the place. And see, their edition of the *Efes* guide book is written in Turkish, and even if Greek was the language spoken in these ruins, they speak Turkish in Selçuk down the road, and Turkish in the gift shop. That family holds the trump card.

But for them the place is just pretty, just interesting decay. The spirits in the dust don’t breathe into their skin the way they’re haunting me. That family doesn’t wonder what

went *wrong* – why the spirit of the Living Lord vacated, evacuated. Is it just that the town died when the shore pulled out to far, when the dead shipping business meant it was time to pack up? To pull out?

The point is, I know my claim loses out in the end, and so reading “Ephesians” too loud in English feel presumptuous, I guess. Like I’m a sore loser demanding a recount, a new ref, another chance.”

As I am a liar, you might note that this explanation did not actually reach Jessica. It coalesced harmlessly in the quiet place where my brain and the inside of my mouth meet, making my throat buzz occasionally when I (didn’t) pronounce voiced consonants. No more unnecessary English emissions tainted the silence of the depleted library. I could see Anneliese fumbling with her camera shutter and urging me onward from a great distance. Jessica was already half-way between us, walking fast, looking at her shoes in the dirt.

Lying: Part II - Culturesick

Betül thinks that Jessica, who shares her rings of dark hair, looks like her own Turkish mother. As a result Jessica can joke about being Betül's little sister, Anneliese and I can ride on the coattails of this intimacy, and the rest of our class can speculate over how much our being the teacher's pets affects them. But she is not one of our instructors, technically.

Betül is completing her master's degree at Boğazici Üniversitesi in a strand of linguistics so complex that I can barely make sense of it in English, let alone Turkish. She works as a teaching assistant for the language program in the summers. Betül meets with our class in halves on Monday and Thursday afternoons for conversation group. I find that I speak more Turkish during these hours than in the combination of my in-class times. Maybe that's because Betül makes up games for us. Maybe it's because the language barrier isn't as poignant without a generational gap to complicate it. Maybe I've just gotten comfortable with my friend.

My conversation group had gathered as usual one afternoon, waiting for Betül to arrive with the day's activities. We set up our chairs near the ledge of the patio, so that all of us could see the ships passing at the base of the steep hill, or count the red dots where Turkish flags fluttered on the opposite side of the channel. I counted 19. We enjoyed the company of our not-in-class classmates, discussing how each of us had come to be sitting together. Forty-five minutes passed before Betül came rushing down the steps to join us. Her glasses slid a bit on her nose, and I guessed that her skirt and flats were hard to run in. Despite her impeccable style, Betül looked frazzled.

“*Arkadaşlar,*” she panted desperately, “I had a medical appointment, and I thought that our group was meeting tomorrow!” My classmate offered her a chair and she resisted the kindness. She had jumped into a cab when one of the girls from class called to ask if we should leave. “And I am so sorry, *arkadaşlar!* I wished the taxi would drive faster.” She was laughing nervously between heaving breaths and inching toward the precipice. “I think,” she breathed, throwing her hands up and bringing her arms into a point over her head, “that I should just throw myself in!”

Two of us leapt up and pulled her into a chair, away from the rim. She regained composure as we assured her we weren’t upset, though she continued to feign moves toward the edge throughout the session. This would become one of my favorite memories of Betül, and also one of my first encounters with the surprising power of guilt in Turkey. Although, worry like this had more to do with Betül’s personality than her nationality. Anneliese, Jessica and I had made her a card that night with stick-figure versions of the three of us pulling her own stick-figure away from a blue highlighter Bosphorus.

Unfortunately, as much as I love our conversation groups, Betül also administers one of the most tedious aspects of the program: listening lab. Here questions gush rapidly from large Japanese headphones, and I try to finish scrawling unintelligible explanations for why Pelin Hanım had left work early, and which character on the tape was the first to inquire after her. Today the headphones conquer me. I concede defeat by laying down my pen, ostensibly excusing myself to the restroom, and leaving the building to weep on the staircase outside. Betül gathers her eyebrows as I stride past her desk at the front of the room. When I turn around to shut the door behind me I see her concentrating again on the multitude of switches and buttons that feed the class’s headphones.

Back in the regular classroom for our next session, Betül sits next to me and whispers: “*Canım, nasilsin? İyimsin?*” Her care transcends my grasp of the language. It slides seamlessly from her genuine concern over the arc of translation and arrives with stabbing precision in the pit of my stomach: a duty-free human transaction.

“*Evet, teşekkür ederim. Sadece bir küçük ev hastayım.*” I answer pathetically. This is not a total lie; I am in fact “a little homesick.” Still, even my atrocious syntax comes across as more accurate than my sentiment. Telling Betül that I ditched her class because I miss home is a good example of the many lies I find myself employing in Turkish. A lazy beginner student could easily understand the empathy communicated by her hand on my shoulder, by her soft-spoken “my dear, are alright?” Maybe even an ambitious tourist with a Turkish phrase book or dictionary would have the capacity. The challenge is not in hearing the question, but in responding. The inadequacy of my Turkish leaves me almost laughing. So I lie.

My instructors receive most of this dishonesty. In speaking class they ask: “What did you think of the film?” If I think the film was wonderful, I say so: “*Bu film çok güzel!*” And if I think it was funny? I say “*Bu film çok güzel!*” Melodramatic? Graphic? Compelling, artistic, ridiculous? “*Bu film çok güzel!*” Typically people accept the lies without flinching. “How are you liking Istanbul?” Every time: “*Istanbul çok güzel.*” I do in fact think of real answers. I begin to plot out their skeletal shapes in my head even while I listen to the question. Still, I usually abort these statements before their fragile forms escape my mouth, leaving my tongue feeling slightly ajar at the end of a conversation.

Betül nods and cooes, and soon we each return to the respite of our personal thoughts in our personal languages. The grammar and writing session instructors cycle in and out of the classroom and I leave for my dorm. Anneliese and Jessica talk with the other

pilgrims as we shuffle back up the hill towards home. At the steepest point the buildings drop back and only two or three scrubby trees obscure our view of the Bosphorus. Sometimes I use this vantage point as an excuse to catch my breath after the ascent – my lungs pump hot air out and in, and I swallow hard against the dry patch in my throat, all the while squinting at the water and making sure to look awed.

Betül sometimes walks with us as far as the fork that sends her to her apartment. When I paused at my resting point a few days ago she held up too, nodding at the expansive *manzara*, teaching me that this is the word for “view.” I nodded too, inwardly annoyed that my pathetic level of fitness now had an audience, or at least company. Between heaving breaths I adjusted my voice to sound as normal as possible, achieving a husky monotone which Betül either did not notice or politely overlooked.

“Betül, you should come over to our dorm soon. We’ll cook dinner for you.”

“Yes,” she had said, “I would be glad to come over.”

Now I look down on the scene unaccompanied as the others trudge on against the sun and their own gravity. A rusty chain link fence about fifteen feet down the slope acts mostly as a suggestion: a wise person should mind the incline and keep to the sidewalk. Expensive houses cling to the hillside in a row about halfway down. A water-side street winds along the very bottom tier, though I can only see portions of it where its path bends away from the tree line obstructing my view. “A little homesick,” I think. “More like a little sick of not feeling at home. Of feeling like I roll my suitcase around with me everywhere I go.” I cut out of Betül’s class this morning because it was suddenly urgent to shed the weight of it. The stairs that I went to cry on, as it turned out, were still in Turkey.

* * *

I am just about to give in to a nap (*şekerleme*: “nap,” or, “candied fruit”) when I see Jessica hanging up the phone. “Huh,” she says, “I think Betül is going to come over.” I look at our table, at the remains of rice clinging to the walls of the pot, at the two unclaimed cucumber slices, at the plate where meat, onions, and tomatoes are now conspicuously lacking.

“Ugh. I wish she would come tomorrow,” I grunt in my very most ungracious dialect of American. I love Betül, but I am just not ready. This little arrangement of rooms is the closest thing to a sanctuary I have, and I don’t have time to manufacture the illusion that I have it all together. I had wanted to plan out her visit, to arrange the food just so on the plates, to pull taut the white sheets on each bed, to carefully stack my workbooks so that she’d think I had been studying just before she arrived.

“I guess I can make some *çay*.” But I don’t want to offer just tea. I want to offer some kind of proof that I can certainly manage just fine here, desperate to show that I know what I am doing even if this is not my country. When she arrives I scramble with tea glasses and the hotplate in the kitchen while Jessica and Anneliese offer her a chair and their company. I catch glances of this exchange while disappearing and returning, escaping and revisiting the room where they chat.

Turkish has a beautiful term for what I feel myself doing as I stare vacantly at the bubbles forming in the water. To gaze off into oblivion, to check-out of the moment and retreat into the space behind the stare: *dalmak*: to dive, as in “Your eyes are diving.” If she would ever pay attention, I know that English would be quite jealous of the Turkish flare for succinct description. As my eyes dive I still hear the muffled sounds of conversation from the next room.

Without warning my dive takes me to the image of my mother on holidays: cutting everyone seconds on pie before she'll sit down for her first, then leaving her first piece half-eaten in order to attend to the dishes shouting across the room that they need washing and cannot wait. My eyes dive, and I hear my memory softly paraphrasing, "Mary has chosen the better of these, and it will not be taken from her." At whose feet am I neglecting to sit? The end of some laugh from the other room trails after Jessica and into the kitchen, where she sets a pink box in the fridge. She secures it on the shelf and stays looking a moment after the door vacuums shut again. She turns to me.

"Chelsea, Betül brought us a cake. She came over to make sure you were okay." The tea glasses shrug in their porcelain dishes, and the water finally arrives at an accusing boil. She brought a cake? I sigh, embarrassed. I lie a lot in Turkish. I lie a lot, it seems, even when not required to speak. I fish out the tea bags and carry the pot in to Betül and Anneliese while Jessica balances the glasses. Betül hugs me, graciously allowing this to stand in for a legitimate and timely welcome.

"Betül, thank you so much. You really shouldn't have gone out of your way. I'm sorry if I worried you." She considers this a few seconds longer than I can comfortably endure. Betül has the twice unfair advantage of being bilingual enough not to need to lie, and being Turkish enough for lying about her feelings to be ludicrous.

"But I understand why you are sad, Chelsea. I miss my family badly, too." Her hand lands, birdlike, on my shoulder again and leaves quickly. "I sometimes cry when I think about not seeing my father for such a long time." The edge of a sugar cube dissolves at the bottom of my *ay*. Betül sees her family once a year, if that. She uses a postcard of Turkey to show us where they live in the central east. "My little sister is studying so hard right now, to get into a university. I wish I was there to help."

Betül shows us a picture of her younger sister. Yes, we agree, she is very pretty. I guess that she must not take after their mother, because no one would say Jessica looks like this girl. Betül watches the back of our hands holding the picture, as tenderly as if they were the girl herself. I imagine that Betül wishes she could rest a hand on her sister's shoulder and nod and coo "*Canım, nasilsin? İyimsin?*" I wonder how badly she wishes someone would return this kindness. Later, when the cake is a memory of crumbs in cherry sauce, Jessica picks up the picture once more, and reminds Betül that the pretty girl looks a lot like her older sister.

The Process of Recalling It

Morning –

I float supine in the hostel pool, pinioned
Between the sun and the earth,
Between conversation and isolation.

Above,
Telephone wires stretch into
Silhouetted perches for silhouetted birds.
Against the brightness of the morning sky
These swallows are an ink drawing on cardstock.
They grip the wires fast in their sinewy toes –
Sentinels guarding the Turkish conversations
 zipping...
 ...back
 and forth...
 ...between
 their claws...

Water laps against and away from me in
Knee and face shaped rings.
Close and submerge my eyes.
I raise my face just as one of the guardians swoops down over the water.
It makes contact with the surface just near my head,
 Drinks, veers up again.
It takes its perch on the wire once more,
Not exactly in the same place –
 Fresh ink in a new drawing.

Midday –

Time has trodden the dust here so fine,
My feet look cleaner wearing a coat of it.
The midday heat condenses all summer sound
Into a low buzz.
Bright sun squeezes every inch of my exposed skin.
It laps at even the bottoms of my feet
As they roll forward off their rubber sandals.

I look up when the light turns to shadow.
Our path now cuts between twin rows of shade trees.
This place is not ancient,
Yet my stomach clenches here
With the same feeling of smallness I get
When ambling over antiquity.

Left: A short mountain blocks the view
Of the Ephesian ruins to which we walk.
Right: A vineyard tries to blocks my vision
With its many brown appendages
Somehow both dense and desolate,
But there is no view to obstruct on that side.

Straight ahead our way continues:
A broken line of concrete sidewalk
Fitted between these walls of thirty-foot trees,
Stretching on so far that my eyes cannot tell our path from eternity.
Every ten minutes or so a truck shuttles by on the highway, but
We do not encounter another pedestrian for two miles.

When we do,
He looks at us without curiosity –
Just continues walking slowly down
The infinite opposite direction.

Nightfall –

The last diluted traces of sunset dissolve over the sea
Some miles away.
I lean on one of the pillars
Of the restaurant's long, covered patio and
Listen to metal clattering on porcelain
In the kitchen behind me.

I rejoin my party of day-long friends.

Cem and Beslan line up glasses.
All down the row people arrange
Thin tubes in a ritual of drink:
 Two glasses per person –
 One empty,
 One filled halfway with frosty water.
Two or three large bottles of *raki* (water-clear and tasting of black licorice)
Circulate down the length of the table.
Cem tenders water to one of my glasses
And an equal amount of *raki* to its counterpart,
Leaving both glasses half-full
 (Or half-empty)
And indistinguishable from one another.

As a group we grasp our waters and
Tip the glass edges over their twins.
Raki's nickname is "lion's milk."
I understand why now as the water
Slides into the liquor and mingles,
Creating a hazy white opacity with a debatably blue tinge.

All around the table the married liquids
Begin to settle in their new, single glasses.
Cem officiates the first taste:
He raises his glass and we follow suit.
 "Hoş geldin!" he intones.
 "Hoş geldin!" we echo in unison.
This is the Turkish equivalent of "bottom's up!"

It translates as "welcome."

Midnight -

We sluice down the gravel road - navigating through the
Inconsistent cold and incomplete darkness
Of a rural Anatolian night.

Strong winds over Ephesus ruled out skydiving this morning.
Now would-be jumpers try supplementing their thrills at
Forty miles an hour down a slight incline, *sans* parachute.
Layers of darkened bodies attach to the exterior of our vehicle –
 Clinging to windshield wipers,
 The hood,
 The thin track of rail along the side.

Jessica hangs on next to me –
Exploding in laughter over every bump.
I've lost track of Anneliese in the heaps of grasping figures.
I twine my calves tightly around my seat in the car
And clutch the edge of the sunroof I climbed out through.
Turkish rock billows loudly out of the many spaces
Where windows would usually muffle it.

After dark here,
The dirt and rock exhale their day-heat and
Cool down. Istanbul's asphalt locks in the
Heat it spends its days absorbing. The air is
Cool now, but my bare arms and windswept face are
Impervious. My lips buzz with the
Electric numbness of just enough alcohol –
 I bite down hard as I hang on.

In the blue, gray-green night
I persuade myself into thinking that I am
Back home in Arizona desert, but then second guess myself –
 Ridiculous.
Far more likely, I reason,
That I have collapsed into a dream.
Or maybe a play.
Or perhaps a bucket of blue paint,
Churning with dust and dry brush plants.

Repairs

Jessica and I are in a gallery. It could be in New York, if I squint my eyes hard enough. Clean, hardwood floor boards. Exquisite, imported tapestries hung on every wall. However, not being New York, the imported tapestries are actually just local carpets that the gallery owner now showing us around has restored. Exquisite, nonetheless. I pace the room once.

Twenty minutes ago we were in a mosque garden; I was pretending to talk to a little girl on the phone. Fifteen minutes ago we were offered tea and Turkish practice by two ambiguously aged young men (30 and 12? 24 and 17? *Allah bilir*, God knows). Jessica and I agreed that we had absolutely nothing else in this country to do. After about 30 seconds more we decided that between the two of us we could handle any risks that might arise in going off to tea with strangers; strange men, at that. Of course, until 10 minutes ago we thought that tea would be in a restaurant rather than the third-story office/gallery of their friend, up a winding staircase and through two too many doors to make a potential escape easy. As usual, I was perhaps too paranoid but not careful enough to do anything about it. Now our two guides prepare tea, tomatoes and cucumbers on the patio outside. The gallery owner, Jessica, myself, and an old piece of fabric huddle together on the floor.

"I think," he says softly, "that there were two sisters, and one carpet, when their parents died." His hand moves slowly in the air above the old fibers, caressing it long-distance. "So they took it in the middle - right here," he points at the fraying end, "and cut it apart."

I would not have noticed the abrupt halt in the patterns without his showing me. The floral chains twisting back in and over each other, the red idea of a rose cupped in a

black circle, gated by a blue square, pressing into its place in a winding row of more flowers in circles in squares - all looked untroubled in their infinite complexity. The intricacy had masked the carpet's rending, its violation. But now it shows up plainly enough: the violent edge bisecting a large circle in the center and leaving an interrupted half-moon.

Where is the other half, I wonder? Which carpet sister is the worse for wear?

He unrolls another ancient carpet with startling nonchalance. The fabric slaps down over the sister's truncated carpet and instantly stills. The new mat stretches out a few feet farther than the first, though narrower and more thinly-worn. It is green silk, richly darkened by a century of feet turning on their bare heels, or of baby hands exploring texture, or of forgetful shoes crushing a bit of grime forever into the weave - just imperceptibly more with each mistaken tread. I know what to expect this time and scan for a flaw. His finger beats me to it: a subtle and absolute change in the fabric. A different race of carpet, the size of a largish book, has been sewn into the original.

"This one, I think," he grins at some humor not yet revealed, "was mended by a sad woman. The carpet was a wedding gift, maybe. *Çok pahalı*, very expensive. Her treasure." Stooping down to feel the old silk, I think it would have been my treasure, too. "One day she had a little fire; maybe a coal dropped by accident. She stopped the fire, but the carpet was ruined." He kneels and touches the seams where his character had stitched in the graft.

"This carpet is very expensive," he says, leveling us. "She cried very much." I strain my eyes to find water marks near the sutures. "So she cut a little out of another and put it here," tracing the air again, "and she could some days forget the burn." He clucks quietly. "Which is better? A burn, or this joke?" I touch the mutilation tenderly; I conclude: "*Allah bilir*."

Three Scoops, Please

“*Birinci Top: Çilek*” (First Scoop: Strawberry)

Istanbul’s night-life begins on Istiklal Caddesi, a vivacious pedestrian haunt that reminds me, regrettably, of Main Street in Disneyland. Two steel tracks cut through the cobblestone in the center, and a cable car struggles every half-hour or so to pinch through the masses. I am only theoretically aware of the tracks and stones as I bob along. Palms out as soft brakes against full impact, I ricochet off the people around me to stay afloat. I hold my chin up as though this human current might actually drown me. My body dangles lamely below my eyes, an incommensurable weight tied to two buoys. Given the choice my eyes would snap the chain enslaving them to my faculties and leave me to be swept on, blind, down the avenue. Then they could fully enjoy the three stories of dazzling window-light on either side of the store-canyon. They could drift leisurely below the arcs of plump white bulbs that sag over the crowds.

Jessica’s hand closes on my wrist and jerks me out of the stream. Istiklal focuses into a single store-front where a counter links interior and exterior. Anneliese locks onto my rebellious eyes and brings me into the moment, saying meaningfully: “*Dondurma.*” Ice cream. Jessica releases her grip after giving me an excited squeeze. The three of us press a little closer to the entrance to avoid the jostling. We do not enter the restaurant, because that counter with the man smiling over it at us is where the performance takes place. “*Buyrun!*”¹

1(Other than “*dondurma*,” this is the most important term one can learn. Restaurant managers standing in doorways and little boys selling wooden tops shout “*buyrun*” in a boisterous cross-fire in shopping districts. I have yet to hear a satisfactory English translation. The restaurant managers have decided to shout “here you are” when “*buyrun*” fails to entice. Street vendors will substitute “*buyrun*” with “yes, please!” This is my favorite, charmingly defective attempt.)

he suggests vigorously.

I like the man at the counter already, because he has not yet tried to speak English with us. We all mumble our stock phrases and he smiles, appreciative. “*Dondurma istermisiniz?*” We nod fervently; of course we would like ice cream. *Dondurma* resembles taffy more than anything else. I normally have to use my front teeth to sever each bite from the whole. But it melts as fast as normal ice cream, tastes as sweet. More than the food, which actually I do not care for, I want to watch this man at his craft: the entertainment of indulgence. He draws a long, thin aluminum bar from a hook above the counter. At its end the pole flattens out into a plate about three inches wide. He plunges this into a vat before him, and pulls out a wad of something visibly sweet and sticky. He scrapes the *dondurma* onto a cake cone to offer Jessica. She stretches out a hand and takes it.

By now we have created a little dam in the Istiklal river, and more people are stopping up the flow by gathering around the spectacle. Jessica thanks him, with emphasis placed somewhat awkwardly at the beginning of “*teşekkür ederim.*” But the aluminum pole flies back over the counter and smacks the top of her cone, abruptly whipping it back out of her palm. The man laughs and speaks quickly, lively as any physical comedian. She pretends to be shocked, and Anneliese and I laugh. With one hand he removes the cake cone and *çilek dondurma* from the plate and dips the bar into a second vat, pulling out another bright, gooey scoop. He adds this to the first and extends the bar to Jessica. As her fingers close around the suspended cone, it leaps away to perform a bizarre spinning dance above our heads.

The human dam cheers and Jessica blushes despite her smile. One last time the man removes the cone and the *dondurma* from the pole and dips the plate into a third vat, which produces the last flavor. The lump is yellow: *limon*. The man persuades the lemon onto the

top of the chocolate, which has glued itself to the strawberry. I ask for the same, and pay the same price for it, entertaining the new audience which has washed up behind us.

* * *

“*İkinci Top: Kakao* ” (Second Scoop: Chocolate)

Someday, if you would like, find a postcard of Istanbul. I promise that any such photo you find will land you within ten blocks of the garden where I am sitting. I'm under that little trellace - one of the green inches in the space between the Sultan Ahmet Mosque and the Aya Sofya.

A toddler and her older sister stare at me on the opposite bench. They are curious, agonizingly so. The littlest one licks her wrist where airy bubbles of melting ice cream bar have dripped. I eat dried apricots from a large clear bag and stare back at them. The older sister, eyes on mine, bends her head toward the toddler's ice cream and cracks off a slab of frozen chocolate. The little one scrunches her mouth in anger when another gooey trickle spills down her arm. Their father speaks to another man on the bench next to theirs. He might be aware of the American woman sharing the mosque garden with him and his daughters, but if so, he is not concerned. The men speak in quick, deep Turkish voices and the girls converse in the wordless interchange of children. I have no trouble translating this silence: “Who are you?”

I look hard at her, the elder child. A smear of chocolate deepens her brown cheek, just out of reach of her smacking lips. She arches a tiny eyebrow to reiterate that disembodied question – the question still unwoven on vocal chords, thus far unblemished by childhood ineloquence, not yet abashed by its duty to enlist in one nation or another's arbitrary tongue. We both know it by heart without these trivialities. But she does not, could

not know, that I am concealing the same question of her while I hold her gaze.

Should she trust me? Not as a white woman, not as a foreigner, but as the one adult paying attention to her now while the men talk. Her sister has given herself up to the task of the ice cream. The older girl – slowly – stretches her feet down and slides off the bench. She eases her toy purse out from behind her and unclasps the top while I chew another apricot patiently. The toy purse conceals a toy phone. She flips it open gingerly with deft little fingers painted pink at each end. Pressing the phone against her head, she makes three distinct chiming noises. Her call bypasses the operator, it hoodwinks the Turkcell Corporation charging a 1YTL per minute for service. And of course, she knows my number without needing to ask.

"P-liiing! P-liiing! P-liiing!"

My own cell phone rings urgently, noiselessly, inside my bag. She watches my hand find it and bring it to my ear. "Merhaba? Efendim?" I answer. Her eyes leave mine for the first time as she squints them, giggling.

* * *

“*Uçuncu Top: Limon*” (Third Scoop: Lemon)

Today is the International Day of Peace. Activists have pitted themselves against each other on opposite corners of the intersection outside the ice cream shop where I work in Athens, Georgia. Incidentally, opponents on both sides of the war debate love Cherry Garcia© equally, and protestors of all persuasions seem to make good tippers. The last activist I served (Mint Chocolate Chunk, single dip, cake cone) came in with a double-sided poster belted over his shoulders:

“It’s OK,”

<<Black-crayon drawing of a father crying over a bomb-leveld wife and child>>

“They’re Not Americans.”

The couple standing in front of me now probably walked past the poster – they certainly heard the honking and shouting as they came in. The man looks expectant while I finish scooping his chocolate-chunk coffee ice cream onto a sugar cone. They have lingered at the counter. These are that occasional sort of customer who manages to transform a dialogue on flavor preferences into a discussion of my life plans and pursuits. Free of charge, I top their selection with nuts, sprinkles, my major, my hometown, a story from my summer in Turkey, or whipped cream. (Hot fudge is \$.50 extra). He takes the cone, and in that moment of connection asks me: “Did you feel safe there?” The woman cocks her head a little, concerned.

“Well,” I move over to the register and read the sticky touch-screen monitor like it might reveal an articulate response instead of their purchase total. I have about 25 seconds to encapsulate eight weeks of cross-cultural collision before serving the next in line. “In some ways,” I begin, trying the window for an answer when the screen leaves me dry. No help out there, either. Just the man wearing his poster sandwich: "HONK IF YOU SUPPORT PEACE!" Just a jumble of redwhiteandblue: "HONK TWICE IF YOU SUPPORT OUT TROOPS!" The volatile Middle East, if nothing else, must be a very loud, honking sort of place. Or at least perhaps that is the impression this couple has gotten of it.

I imagine the lineage of the man’s question, unfolding it so I can see all the creases: Did I feel safe there? Where is “there?” The Middle East. Turkey? Yes, the Middle East. Where the conflict is. Where the danger is. Danger?

Tonight, after I count out my till and lock up the patio chairs, I will walk home by myself in the dark. I will wind my way through the shouting match on the corner and the vulgar voices of men stumbling out of bars at last call. I will jog a little as I pass two particularly dark side-streets, and pathetically avoid eye contact with the man who asks nightly for "just 35 cents, please." In Turkey, a bus driver pulled over next to me two blocks short of his next stop, just to check whether I wanted to get on early.

As a matter of fact, Istanbul *is* a very loud, honking sort of city. But I doubt that it very much resembles any image conjured by the posters and the news feeds. There are not two but three worlds in question here: a poster on a man's chest, an over-priced ice cream shop, and a metropolis that would make even the most sophisticated urbanites of Athens, Georgia blush with inadequacy.

"In some ways," I begin, handing him his change and indicating the napkin dispenser, "I felt safer there than here."

Variables

Ships dot the bay, looking sleepy and small to me from my place on the rooftop. I curl my ankles over the rung in my bar stool and relish these extra few inches of detachment from the ground four stories off. This is a gray light evening. Intermittent breezes off the water lift the burden of heat from our skin, peeling humidity away one thin layer at a time. To my left I hear the very first syllable of the seven o'clock call to prayer. It comes from a tiny mosque hidden in the neighborhood below.

“The *winner*,” I think with a smirk, and an instant later more voices chase after this first, rising as an upward tremble of such elegant variance in pitch and inflection that synchronization seems unrefined. The call saturates the atmosphere. Within moments, its syncopated strands begin to shatter against tiled surfaces and winding alleys, casting little mirror-like echoes back into eddying original sound. I gaze down over the variegated structures below as if I might catch sight of this haunting cacophony, might see some incandescent ripple of it dodge around a corner. When the last call to begin has become the last call to fade away, the sun exhales and sets, content.

At this time of night I should be staring at a workbook, stringing together shaky grammar concepts into sentences. The lack of ligature in this homework-free evening leaves me feeling pleasantly exposed, like driving without a seat belt. Certain lessons infuriated me over the last few weeks, demanding somersaults from my stubborn mind when it was barely learning to stand without wobbling. Still, I never grew weary of the “matching game,” in which I learned to equate *kadin* with “woman,” or *gül* with rose. I love the clean, mathematical certainty of lining up the terms. “Car” = *Araba*. “City” = *Şehir*. “Happy” = *Mutlu*. Certainly there are other words that could fit on either side of the equations, but these do not disrupt the predictable harmony of the definitions. Both *lise* and *okul* =

“school,” in the same way that both $3+2$ and $1+4 = 5$. I remember being astounded when I first really grasped that anything I can think or feel in English can be thought or felt in Turkish.

I realize that this evening, this finale to a summer of seductive, era-transcending scenes – this is the romantic veneer of Turkey stretched to its highest tension. Just a pin’s prick of conflict would tear the gauzy skin and reveal a less appetizing reality. We could then no longer avoid the frustrated businessmen with blisters breaking in their shoes, or the children warring with each other in viscous self interest, or the youths chatting lazily over water pipes while inwardly despairing that no, there is no greater purpose. Here at the end I am tired and worn just as thin myself. Just a bit of strain catching me off guard, and I too would split apart and bear my ugliness to all. This is the tipping point between visiting and staying; I have exhausted my spiritual tourist visa.

Jessica and I return our attention to each other after these minutes of communal solitude. We sigh. This is a habit she has imparted to me passively over the last four years. Deep, airy, womanly sighs - they are a healing skill, a palatable transition from reflection back to the business of relating. We talk about ordering coffee without making a move to actually do it. I revel in the smallness of this decision, stretching out into the openness of options: 1. Sit in silence, or 2. Crawl up into my bunk and rest, hours before the 29 other hostel beds will receive their sleepers, or 3. Walk with Jessica through the city’s old quarter, flowing with the will of the foot traffic, understanding little, saying less, spending nothing.

We will eventually choose the last of these options. But before we reach any decisions, before our conversation extends beyond whether or not to order coffee, a new face joins us. “Hello,” the face greets us. When a Turk addresses us in English, we have two choices. We can either concede to the likelihood that communication will proceed more

efficiently if we respond in kind, or parry back toward the initiator with a swipe of unexpected Turkish. This stranger had leaned forward on the tail of his “hello,” inclining his head slightly as if curious, as if the greeting were a question. Our answer, accordingly, is “*merhaba.*”

His eyes remain mild and distant while a large smile refigures his mouth. We brace ourselves and tune our ears as he unleashes a string of standard Turkish introductory phrases and questions. He is a young man, probably within five years of our age from either direction. His hair is several inches long and dirty blond. The shortest locks of it frame hazel eyes in a fairer skinned face. A little fuse of embarrassment flashes brightly in my head as I realize that I would have assumed that this young man was just as foreign here as I, and that I might even know more Turkish. I smile and flush slightly, grateful that I do not always publicize my assumptions.

“*Kabve istermisiniz?*” he asks. I look at Jessica and my face wrinkles a bit with surprise. Do we want coffee? For a moment I see the situation in terms of flattered suspicion, guessing that “hello ladies, can I buy you a drink?” is, possibly, not just an American concept. My slight blush deepens into a happy, self-deprecating red as I correct yet another assumption about this man’s identity: he is not just a flirty youth, but our waiter. I shake my head and chuckle once in my throat. I give some noncommittal answer about the coffee when I remember that we’re broke. Jessica declines flat out, though I know she wants *çay* (= tea).

Fortunately for my pride, just because I mistook his motivation for coming to our table does not negate my other impressions. Our childlike responses amuse him, and for the sake of indulging two giggling girls he can afford to keep the one or two other customers waiting a bit longer. His name is Ali. After a few minutes of banter he excuses himself to

check on the others. Jessica and I hone back in on each other to fill the vacuum, bubbling about our surprising new friend, reflecting on our statements and conferring about mistakes. More suddenly than I expected, Ali returns. I realize that he has slid a cup of coffee under my nose without my knowing. He does not charge me.

Despite the frustrations engendered by having only a faint grasp of a language, there is also freedom in the obligatory simplicity. In English I can give nuanced, subtle explanations of all that goes into defining this terribly fragile thing I know as my *self*. Just try that nonsense in a second language. It took about one hour in Turkey before my manifold, delicate identifiers coalesced into “I am a student. I am American. I am Chelsea.”

It works the other way around as well. I can only offer brief, blunt truths about myself, and I can only ask for the same of others. If I’d met Ali in America, and had we both been American, it would have taken two or three meetings before I knew as much as I do now after five minutes. I know how long he’s worked here at the hostel, that he’s lived in Istanbul for the last couple of years, that his sense of humor is ribbing. We talk about his favorite music, the soccer team he favors, and whether or not our accents are ridiculous. It does not really seem like too much of a stretch at this point to ask something simple, in terms of both grammar and content. “Ali,” we ask in Turkish, “where does your family live?” A veil falls between his face and ours.

“I have no family,” he says flatly in English.

A moment passes in which no one speaks, and in which Jessica and I barely breathe. Ali shows so little expression that I wonder if he means this as a joke, as sarcasm. Everything I am learning about language points me away from this conclusion, however; non-native speakers have enough on their plates trying to make their real meanings known, let alone ironic ones. In the aftershock I fish for Jessica’s take on the situation – maybe she

knows what to do with this shift. But her face mirrors the tumult which I assume shows on mine. A few moments pass and custom dictates that we respond. I decide to throw in my lot with polite disbelief. “I don’t understand what you mean, Ali. Did they...are they-” the word snags, so I flip it over, “alive?”

“My father is dead.” His expression is as detached as a sleeper’s. He tells us that his mother died around the same time. Ali has not lived any longer than I have and already he is an orphan. The veneer scratches and ruptures, and in an instant I understand it. Ali is not the quintessential, sunset-on-the-roof, tourist-friendly source of infallible hospitality. He is a young man, and he has no family. A friend of mine once said of Turkey that there is no such thing as privacy. In this place where no hour is off-limits to guests, and where the city crowds press in constantly, I wonder how acute real loneliness must be.

“Ali, are you an only child, or did you lose your brothers and sisters, too?” Having trespassed against sensitivity already, I figure that I might as well have the full story.

“My brothers and sisters?” Some expression dawns on his blank canvas: surprise. “My sister lives just there in Tünel,” he points over the bay, “and two of my brothers work over on the *Asya Yakasi*, the Asian side of the city.” He is smiling a little, as if this question is, while amusing, totally irrelevant. I look at Jessica befuddled.

“Ali, I thought you said you had no family?” His smile falters a little as he also reveals his confusion.

“Yes,” he tries again a little unsure of himself, like maybe his English is not right, “my father is dead.” He looks at us for confirmation of his pronunciation and word order. Jessica and I deliberate quickly across the table by means of a concerned nod and a slight widening of our eyes. My hands flutter away from the coffee mug they’ve been enclosing and I declare “*Ah, şimdi anladım.*” Oh, yes, now I understand.

But I do not understand. The three of us fall into a quiet truce and occupy our eyes with individual buildings or people below. I glance in the direction where Ali's sister lives. Jessica watches the water. She sighs. Ali and I catch each others' eyes and smirk pleasantly. Of course I cannot be sure, but I think that each of us is recalculating the other in this silence. We try, each approaching the equation from the opposite side, to line up the terms and redefine the variables. What piece can we not find? Some factor of translation has gone overlooked, rendering "family" = *aila*, and "father" = *baba* unforeseeably invalid in the context of our conversation.

We shrug and look away from each other back out on the blackening vista. Yellow and white spots on the water indicate where we had seen the ships not long before. More people have started to filter into the chairs and cushions about us on the roof, clustering together in circles of one language or another. Ali excuses himself with another shrug and resumes his circuit with the customers. All around us window lights perforate the city darkness, and my eyes attempt to digest what they can of it all. I siphon off the last cold sip of my coffee and wonder how many of the terms around me I have been misreading all along, and which ones I'll never know to correct.

Glossary of Turkish Terms Used in Project

Aile: family

Allah bilir: “God knows”

Anladım: “Now I’ve understood.”

Araba: car

Arkadaş(lar): friend(s)

Asya yakası: Asian side (of Istanbul)

Baba: “Dad”

Boğaz: The Bosphorus, the channel
connecting the Black Sea and the
Mediterranean

Boğazıcı: “Bosphorus” used as adjective

Bir(inci): one, (first)

Bu: this

Canım: term of endearment

ay: tea

ilek: strawberry

ok: very, much

Dalmak: to dive

Devam Et: “Continue.”

Ev: home, house

Evet: yes

Gül: rose

Güzel: lovely, beautiful

Hanım: miss, or ma’am

Hastayım: “I am sick.”

Hoş geldin: welcome

İki(inci): two, (second)

Istermisiniz?: “Would you like...?”

Iyimisin?: “Are you alright?”

Kadın: woman

Kahve: coffee

Küçük: small, little

Lise: school (high school)

Manzara: view

Merhaba: hello

Mutlu: happy

Nasılsın: “How are you?”

Okul: school (general)

Rakı: a type of Turkish liquor

Sabah: morning

Sadece: only, just

Şehir: city

Şekerleme: nap, candied fruit

Şimdi: now

Suleymaniye Cami: Solomon’s Mosque

Teşekkür ederim: “Thank you.”

Top: Scoop, ball

Üç(üncü): three, (third)