

The Mini Monks

Yilmaaaaaz! take the child to the barber, will you? tomorrow is Sugar Feast
this is how our Cleopatra kept the house in line
and quick as that, Papa and I were sitting with other fathers&sons
at the barber shop tucked between the mountains of Anatolia
I want a Jackie Chan cut I tell the uncle barber
a finger-long ash hangs from his cigarette
you got it, coming right up, he wheezes
grabs his hand-powered clippers and zips
back and forth across my scalp for a few minutes
that's not what Jackie Chan looks like
a mighty river flows down my cheeks
son, real men don't cry. this here is a 1989 cut
Jackie is an old-fashioned German dog
Papa consoles me with a coke
talks about heaven and earth for half an hour with the other papas
together they pull the world out of the mud, get up
and bring their mini monks back to the mothers

Button Schmutton

among 20 other terraces, water boils on our terrace
in a tin kettle on the cook stove
our own Cleopatra grabs a tub from the pantry
mixes boiling water with water from the fountain
takes off my clothes and guides my kicking legs into the tub
on the other terraces, women use darning needles
to pull strings through hollowed eggplants
my hands are crossed over my button
look at that, the German child bathes in mild and honey
one giggles, then they all giggle, then the whole world
later that evening, strings of eggplants
and my shame hang fastened
with clothespins on the fence

The Walnut Tree

on April 11, 2008, the day after you were born, I planted a walnut tree in the garden. on April 10th 2018 we wanted to celebrate your birthday with the family. folks gathered in the garden. aunt no. 1 called out in panic, *the tree is infested with pests, c'mon girls no time to waste*, aunt no. 2 grabbed a bottle of bleach from the bathroom, aunt no. 1 retrieved rags from the kitchen, aunt no. 3 poured a pail of water from the rain barrel. the bleach was added to the water, *antibiotics for the tree*, aunt no. 2 called the mixture, the three of them disinfected the walnut tree. after the intervention, candles were blown out, plates licked clean. as she departed, aunt no. 1 declared with pride, *the walnut will now be left in peace, like a sleeping newborn*. it did not survive the next two weeks. my beautiful daughter, today is the 10th of April 2020, I think back on the walnut tree and the words of an ancient

we will never understand why humans distinguish themselves from animals and plants

The Poem

an Aegean village, in a courtyard a man on a keyboard plays dance tunes, fancies himself James Brown, colored lights are strung from house to house, guests drink lemonade, nibble sunflower seeds, my mother sits next to the newlyweds, presses her purse into her lap, borrowed gold bangles stashed away safely, worn as amends for a bumpy childhood. *and now I call the new Mr. and Mrs. to the dance floor*, James cheers into the microphone. I am watching me, Poem, in the middle of the courtyard, arms outstretched like a searching falcon, swinging to exploding keyboard rhythms. I am watching you, Poem. you stand behind the one-man orchestra, cigarette in your mouth, leaning against a terracotta wall. I see your fears shining bright as northern lights between my outstretched arms. in your halting glances I see my unborn children, the imposing burden of the nuclear family, the divided bed, apprehension for the future, the way words are demoted when betrayed by loneliness. *and now would all guests please join the couple on the dance floor*, James calls. the space between us fills with embroidered fabric, cheap perfume, the smell of sweat, with teased hair, ear-splitting laughter, spiteful congratulations. as the evening came to a close, I saw your expression shift, your leather jacket clenched under your arm, your quick step down the lane. *Poem, will we see each other again?* I called out to you, did you hear me? toward midnight James packed the keyboard into the trunk of his rusty Jetta. the photographer posed and regrouped us to capture the beautiful memories. he spoke and we exchanged places, our bursting smiles identical in each shot. we retreated to the houses, in the courtyard the plastic chairs remained scattered, the sunflower shells and lemonade cans lay strewn. during the night I knocked up a girl, in the early hours I rose and washed my body with water from the fountain, henna still marking my fist. I grabbed coffee and a cigarette and sat down at the window. 6 women were gathered on the street below, complaining in high-pitched tones. a weasel had crept into the chicken stall during the night, the poor birds lay with burst hearts across the damp ground

5:45 a.m., Galata Tower

We walk with the hustler down the cobblestoned way to the Golden Horn
sit on a half-pint bench
a crone comes by, asks for cigarettes
I give her 3 without meeting her eyes
the man from the tea bar asks if we're thirsty
2 glasses, dark as rabbit blood, I call to him
the client wanted me to bite his nipples and lick the blood
the tip was decent, the tea is on me, Dinçer
I say nothing
your silence, Dinçer, says a lot, but you know I never hold anything against my clients
what we call reason is just the devil's get out of jail free
and often the gaze of angels is more deadly than any act of submission
our art is found in understanding, not fucking
after all, the human is a temple of mystery
ten minutes ago it was quitting time
time for the city's whores to count how much they've saved
I light a cigarette and place it in his mouth
the man from the tea house brings the glasses
the sun spreads across the water in deep rabbit hues
a hoisted flag chugs between continents
two dolphins dance in pirouettes
we order another round of tea
the fairy tale finds its heroes

The Planks of Asylum

sometimes a railroad car is louder than the greater world
isolation more dense than a conifer wood
can the birth pangs of a mother be cradled by ice cold rails
can the tip of a toe be wider than the open plains
and the dream more headstrong than a crowbar of steel

the gaze can hold more fear than the tongue, scrutiny more pain than any wound and
this longing for elsewhere, this silenced waiting for an unmarked stone, the unspeaking
wind at the doorstep, the bitterness of mare's milk on the tongue, can they probe the
future more truly than all the maps of the world

*here boy, here lies the sleeveless top, here the dance belt
dance, boy, dance, spill your sweat into the thirsty earth*

sometimes the stage is tighter than a partitioned room
applause more cunning than a fox's eye
can the planks of this world be cradled by ice cold rails
here light can be darker than the wings of a stage
with every curtain call you can wipe the thorn away

the road sometimes feels closer than home, spasms more enduring than the pauses
between, kissing more obscene than fucking, the lifelong price of freedom more stinging
than cayenne, the search to shelter your heavy load, the padding of your pillow for a
night's sound sleep, the poison of reproach, can these outlast the metamorphosis of a
caterpillar

*here, boy, lies the unrolled mattress and here the latecomer's panic
dance, boy, dance, escape is the choreography of a ruptured umbilical chord*

sometimes escape is a betrayal to the father, the empty chair in the family room a
hissing insult, the return with bowed head, the groan of tired bones, the overture after
the curtain close, the billboards plastered over, the deep orchestra pit, the missing
piano key, a geranium in a marble vase ...

dance, boy, dance, the womb of lust is greater than this locked and bolted world

A letter, after 35 years

wir haben der Unendlichkeit mehr geglaubt
 als der befristesten Zeit. Vielleicht waren
 mich richtig so, wen weis. Der Wahrheit
 ins gerichte ~~zu~~ schallen, ist schwieriger als
 den salzsack ~~den~~ ~~g~~ ~~del~~ ~~des~~ ~~Berges~~
 zu tragen. Vielleicht ~~deswegen~~ sah ich
 unser Leben wie ein ~~ein~~ ~~er~~ ~~undenes~~ ~~Märchen~~,
 nicht um die Wahrheit zu ~~pasaportu~~
 fänden; ~~gerade~~ ~~zu~~ ~~pasaportu~~
 nein ~~Car~~ ~~das~~ ~~haben~~ ~~er~~ ~~dradlichen~~ ~~!~~
 zu ~~Bild~~ ~~ben~~ ~~gelie~~
 machen
 Anemi götürce.
 M. Ali PASAPORTU
 Cıkardi verecek. 0 bilyon
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 Selamlar

wait until I've darned your socks, your little piggies will get wet!
no, grandma, no, my pen pal the dragon of the lake is waiting for me
he promised to tell me his secret today
please, please I can't miss this wonder
who cares if frost is falling on the fields
if the world is spinning west
or wait, was it the sun? no, not her
she waits in the elevator and whenever she fancies
hits the button, rides up and down
up and down, like mama scolds, all cuckoo!
when she goes down, we're to meet at the castle
of the elephant prince, he's crazy about your
hand pies, grandma, I'll put 3 in my pants pocket
your heart is soft as lamb's wool, it's okay, right?
no? well, I'll only take 3 then
you always say that food in the mouth belongs to all eyes
yes you do, with hand to heart or on the Koran
it wasn't me after all who made up your faith
see you later, sweet Medea, see you later

*soak the dried figs in lukewarm milk
on your left breast the Orient blossoms
this flood, this whirlwind is yours, the day is coming
when the most distant cliffs will hear your voice*

the camel on the cigarette pack told me the way
my mind is sharper than any map, it said, and I believe it
or at least pretend, so the desert lily isn't aroused
our talks, it says, are forever ours, are not for other ears
and even if I laugh again along the way
with dinosaurs fishing in knee-highs and droopy drawers
am detoured from my sacred path
the wind chime on the handle bars listened all the while
may your path always be illuminated, an uncle prayed for me
the prayers of unbelievers are always answered more quickly
and it's true, I fly with crystal breath, the gaze of rabbits everywhere
they stand to my left and right, like a military parade
I come to a halt, drop my bike on the dewy meadow
take a deep breath and utter the magic words the dragon
revealed to me in his last letter, the draw bridge lowers
in the center of the courtyard the picnic blanket of the 40 thieves
and a watermelon carved into tiny boats
I hear the vines grow, the song of the nightingale
and the words of the uncle, every nightingale is half Turkish
don't be afraid, Dinçer, you've arrived in your ghetto

*as cutting as the wind may be
never lower your eyelashes over the shine of your eyes
there were days when you quartered the melon
and munched on the fruit with a child's abandon*

hey kid! there's a key lying here, a knotty-tailed
donkey calls after me, is it yours?
not mine, friend
I leave the courtyard of the elephant prince, slumped
drunken bees in knockoff Ray Bans and aloha shirts
welcome me back to the meadow
I follow their hum to a pear tree
climb to the highest branch and write a letter to Mama
that will take 35 years to arrive at its truth

this fairy tale never ends, Mother. the same runaway stories have been floating across the sky for three thousand years. all identical, each one unique. all ground in the mortar of time, and still, they persist. we have believed more in the endless nature of time than in its finiteness. and maybe it was true, who knows? to stare into the face of truth is harder than carrying that sack of salt up the highest mountain. maybe I saw our lives in make believe, not to deny the truth, just to make it easier to abide. that was my way, Mother, but now I weave a new fairy tale. my seed has found a nest, has taken root, has budded and thrived before your eyes. with my daughter's voice, I will tell you a new fairy tale, Mother, please hear me ...

*your smile fluttered like silk at the shore
through the evening hours, your pen sang like the nightingale
yet, just as a heavy grinding wheel can fly from its axle
every fire leaves a cold pile of ashes behind*

Papa's home, my brother shouts from below
a carousel turns in his voice
I pack away the scratches and scrapes, the frozen piggies
the broken word, this naïve waiting
the shiny marbles, an irrevocable view, all in my pants pocket
climb down from the pear tree, run that godless stretch back home
my limping donkey trailing behind, we run through broad puddles
through oceans, between gypsy tents, between continents
over sand dunes, over mountains, the apron of my mother
is our parachute, we land at the equator, in the ruined garden
we stand at the house without a door, without a voice, a house in outline

*never let your face sag like a bell on the door
of an abandoned home, you're not the only one
who must warm his soup in small pans
the rooms of language stand just as well in a piercing draft*

After 35 years, Mama replied to my letter
*Dinçer, in the night I struck the names of the dead from my phone book
now it looks like a harvested field; when you go into town
buy me a new one, no need anymore for it to be large or dear*