

BRIAN LENNON

Akşamüstü

1

Why should I emphasize these words? If I say to her *kalbim sevgi dolu, seni seviyorum*—do you really want to know the extent of my passion, my awkwardness, do you want it to stand marked like one of the dead; do you want *me* to die, saying it? Why should I translate? If she writes to me, as she does more often than you may think, “That *ışıl ışıl parlaklık* of *Kızıltoprak* I always love and will love”—why should *ışıl ışıl* be yours, why should I gift it to you, like a fish spitting up gold. You will not be driven backward, backward to language. You would learn Turkish only in love, or on a military base somewhere, in a fig orchard bisected by runways. When the hostess asks me about *yanımdaki boş yer*, I think that the fluffy carpet of clouds in the blue sky of her uniform shirt is a friendly oblivion. And if I were to say, Turkey is, if I were to say, Turks are, I might be taking you there. I am not taking you there. You are already there.

2

Approaching by air: sound fading with the pain drilling my ears. The plane banks and a shadow turns over it, raining something down on one wing, with a rattle as of gravel or coins. A bump, down. We are avoiding a thunderstorm, on a shiny summer day. Istanbul’s red roofs, fanning out like cards in a deck. Pick a card, any card. And we come in low, over the sparkling sea.

The plane had left late, hot, something wrong with climate control. I perspired all night in the foam of the seat, spiders of water needling me. Over Newfoundland, my hand steadied the plastic cup of Scotch, raft of ice whirling over the napkin; the plane slipped into purple dark. We were tortured with a movie for children, and litter—rumpled pillow covers, torn magazine pages, bits of debris from meals—waged wars of attrition in the aisles. Every now and then the plane seemed to catch a wave, engines turning in a floating roar like a washer shifting cycle. I thought of where I had begun, mathematically distant.

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When I awoke in daylight, the plane had felt thinner, fragile, somehow, and used, as though it had sloughed or shed something in the crossing. Now it bounced onto the runway, and into drab runwayside, any airport, anywhere; monument to the international. Reversing the jets we shuddered to a stop. It had been a rough landing, and a few passengers applauded the pilot. *I thought it was because everyone was glad to be home*, you said once, laughing behind your hand. I remembered a windy winter landing at Cedar Rapids, the wings still yawing as the tires touched down . . .

I exited the plane, collected my bag, walked through the terminal to the duty-free. Would I know where I was going, when I got there? I stood dazed in front of the shelves, the boxed bottles promising worlds of dependable ritual. It was comforting; it saddened me.

Do you speak English, I asked in Turkish when the woman approached. She drew herself up, started over. I felt suddenly lost, looking at her, as though I had fallen part way out of my life, and were blurring, dragging. Something in her composure, an *I can't go on, I'll go on*, brought the world there. Somewhere there was always another life. No physical description: only a person, living a slice of time.

I let her show me along the shelving, brand names gnomic and familiar, gliding by on what seemed one continuous label, then I took the bottle of Teacher's, as I'd known I would. Might I pay with dollars? Of course, of course.

3
So many of my most vivid memories are views from a plane. At first, in earliest childhood, *of* planes—the bellies of the airliners floating over on approach to JFK International; later, in one of those inversions by which life keeps one moving along, seated up there, within the mirage myself. Vector graphics of Chicago at dawn, a matrix or a planet unto itself. New York on a western approach into LaGuardia, day or night, the city unrolling itself in the porthole, *right there*, O glorious vessel. The snook's face of the Bay Area, like a sad man. Rome at a forty-five degree angle, Italian style. The one leg of my life not passed in cities: Cedar Rapids, what seemed like the vacant plains at first, or at night, slamming darkness. İstanbul.

I can never sleep on a plane. I watched from under a helmet of fatigue as the white city leached by. Always, leaving Atatürk

International after landing, I am disoriented by the traffic circle that orbits a tall tree, and by the first burst of road and commercial signs. My mind hummed on about my belongings—did I remember everything, did I remember. The car nosed through traffic and exited, regaining me compass orientation. I asked fewer questions about the city than I used to. Now I asked and was asked: what's the news.

4

The classroom was in the basement of the Hagop Kevorkian Center at New York University, in a Philip Johnson building just off Washington Square. It was a scorching June day, my shirt clinging to me and itching under the arms. I swiped in and went down the stairs to the room, where we sat scattered in rows of seats tiered on a slight slope. I remember exiting the subway at Christopher Street, that morning, and thinking: How long since I have come downtown, so early. The sky was a brilliant clear blue; people were doing downtown's relaxed morning rush. The World Trade Center inched by in the distance, monstrous and extraterrestrial, as I crossed Sixth Avenue, heading east.

Looking back now, I can see that I was still living all over myself, with a kind of blindness or blank hope, but I do not know if it passed, that disorder, because *everything has changed*, or simply because I am of the age when one begins, in earnest, and simply, to change. It is a paradox of crossings, that you only know when you have crossed, when it stands behind you—and not when you will do it again.

5

First days of classes—that freshness which always hits me head-on. As student, as teacher, I have always relished that change—masses giving way to masses, spring cleaning. A chance to start life over again, each time, and to collide again with its vast waste, the consumption that includes all of us. Always, somehow, on the first day of class, the sky is empty, the air crisp and cool, and as you pass someone else going to work, the same work they went to yesterday, you can think: Not I. The ascetic summer has made you love life again.

6

There were eight of us. We started with vowels, one for each.

Learning a new language is like eating strange food. You learn to accept intrusion; you welcome it. A foreign word reminds you of a word in your mother tongue; you add them, bond them together, with a will entirely forced. Over time, this elective affinity becomes a growth, the way a tree will incorporate something stuck in its trunk. It's still not *you*, but it's attached to you.

Can Öztaylan was at once boyish and fatherly. *Ö... ü... e... i!* he bellowed at us, kindly. Shape your mouth this way. What was he doing here? One student harassed him with grammar questions. We were a nightmare class: graduate students and junior faculty, ambidextrous and overtrained, with the surgical drive of irrelevant occupations—every hypertrophied skill set focused on sharpest infinity. We took possession of the language: that's from Arabic, that's Persian, that's French, that's from Italian. Or: did you know we use this word in English? Yes, haha.

He regarded us with polite despair.

7

I'd never imagined myself as an older man before. When he tired of our antics (though he was stoical) he made jokes about Silvio Berlusconi and Pervez Musharraf. What do you think of Berlusconi, he asked the Italian student. What do you think of Musharraf, he asked the rest of us.

We learned the vowels, then the consonants. We took frequent breaks. Annoying myself, I asked about Nâzım Hikmet's poetry; he showed me his latest book review (in English). He liked music; I said I'd take him to the Knitting Factory. He took me aside, said, my daughter will be coming home alone on the subway past midnight tonight, to Astoria; should I meet her at the station? I said, my mother grew up there, but yes.

His son was bringing him Turkish coffee from İstanbul: he had no need for Turkophile native informants. I remember feeling vaguely disgusted by this, by our anxiety—or was it merely my own?—to show that yes, his culture was here in New York, too; that we had anything and everything in New York, melting pot, city that never sleeps, naked city, city of eight million stories, look, Turkish too. Her şey dahil. That that was why I loved New York . . .

8

I was running out of time—though I wasn't yet thinking it that way. I had chosen to remove myself from life, and from that which might otherwise have included me, and borne me along, automatically, until I had become old almost without knowing it. I had been willing to live without money. I still didn't know, really, what I was doing, and I thought I saw something of myself there, something resigned, cheerful only sometimes and after the fact.

It went like that—freezing in the air conditioning, underground, while the heat blazed outside. I was not used to commuting, and drank three cups of coffee to make it to noon without going totally blank. During breaks, while everyone smoked, I walked down to the store on the corner of West Third Street, passing the new university building going up, workers sitting in the dust. I had been a student, of one kind or another, for so long. The summers were so hot. The neighborhood was so different during the day. It seemed to me that everything was moving faster than it should.

9

We worked through the textbook, one unit per day. It was a bound photocopy illustrated with stick figures. The pages fell out with a crack as you turned them. We followed as Kathy (pronounced *Kettee*), the American student, went to İstanbul, encountered many friendly Turks, conducted herself in the Turkish manner, and practiced the language.

I walked along West Fourth Street, in the morning and the afternoon, thinking to myself, *Çok güzel!*

10

Le Corbusier wrote that New York is a cataclysm, İstanbul an earthly paradise. New York is upsetting, he says. *So are the Alps; so is a tempest; so is a battle.* Every day for lunch, amid dive-bombing flies, I ate a boiling slice of sausage pizza at the corner of Sullivan and Bleecker, feeling it deserved—the heat, the desperation in the classroom, the wheel of the world turning in its purposelessness. Pizza grease ran down the heel of my hand, and I let it.

And every morning, my spirits renewed by sleep, I bought a flaky croissant at a bakery with a friendly French name. *We struggle against chance, against disorder, against a policy of drift and against the*

idleness which brings only death. For Le Corbusier, writing in 1926, the Turkish city was gentle, immutable. The İstanbul I knew—or more precisely, that which I *did not* know, for I know İstanbul, city by proxy, no better than I know my city by birth—is a riot, spirited, dirty, and teeming, a savage arena *just like* New York. Or is it? On one interleaf of *Urbanisme* we read: *A Turkish proverb: Where one builds one plants trees. We root them up.* But I never see the trees in İstanbul, and I can never answer when an exiled friend asks in spring: And the magnolias on Broadway, are they in bloom?

11

Words built up in my mouth. Day after day I pressed them into my palate, like a wine. The vocabulary was utterly foreign to me; I had to attach each new word to a phonetic joke, the stretch of which would make me laugh later, reviewing. I thought, it is learning to think backwards: first the object, then the position, then the action, then the subject, a mere letter or two added to the end of a verb stem, which I never noticed at first. Question formation at the end of a sentence, not the beginning: thus we didn't know at first if we were being asked or told, *This is the case.* I began to feel, when I spoke Turkish, that I was moving in reverse.

An American who had been living in İstanbul for thirty years told me that the city had few street signs when she'd moved there. Just to test my Orientalism, I thought. Directions involving landmarks, and a kind of tunnelling rather than surface travel, with access to air; you'll turn left there, right there. Yes, it was romantic to step off the grid thus. But I relished New York because outside of the little old cities of downtown, one could and did direct one's guest mostly mathematically: Eighth and Broadway, on the northwest corner; if you board the N train at Times Square in mid-platform next to the newsstand, your car will stop directly in front of the turnstile. Walk in the direction of the train, if not, and take the northernmost stairs . . .

Our homework, completed in solitude, came back with *Çok güzel!* written all over it.

Would an air conditioner falling from a street window get me? Would the terrorists? I walked the streets to and from class, a point in a matrix of risk. Early turned to midsummer. The language program administrator entered the classroom one morning and told us in English: Can Öztaylan had a heart attack last night and died.

We sat for a while in silence, got up, went out and smoked, standing in a circle on the sidewalk. To the south, the tips of the towers poked up over the rooftops into a pure blue sky. We went into the Café Reggio on Macdougall and reminisced weakly for a while, each offering his or her own shocked affirmation, and then we sat in silence and then we all got up and went out and went home to our separate homes following our separate ways. Are you all right, said a woman on the subway, looking at me sideways. I thought, it's crazy, I pass hundreds of people every day on the street, hardly anyone ever cries. How does one move in public, going to or from someone dying or dead; where are all the people taking trains, planes, after getting that call. How one can contain oneself.

I couldn't remember the word for death. We hadn't yet learned it. I wanted to look it up in my bright yellow vinyl-covered pocket Langenscheidt, but the woman was watching me.

When you first pass through an exchange in a new language, without the native speaker taking notice, or without that notice being obstruction—I mean when it happens fast, when it is efficient, a genuine social event, over the horizon of deliberation—there is an eerie sensation of lost identity, as though you had dissolved there, and a new self were beckoning from where you can't see. The native speaker may think, A foreigner. A spy. One of our lost ones. There is a kind of sacred confusion there, as transfer into one system for saying the world upsets another: a minor wreck, everything thrown momentarily into slow motion. All our motifs of doubling—my twin, my better half, my completion—turn into language. We are haunted not by the dead, but by the unmet living.

It wouldn't happen for much longer. But I anticipated, I awaited it.

14

At JFK, waiting to board my flight to İstanbul, I'd sat in the burger bar with the wall of glass facing the queue for the gates, on the other side only the hulks of the planes, spectral in the mist. It was here that when I left you, twice a year, we talked one last time, on the phone, through the glass—I to the subway and back to Morningside Heights, you to your portal, that tube through the night to the red-roofed city.

I gave my table to three Turks who came in as the place was filling up, and moved into the muzak jazz at the cheap lacquered bar. My phone pipped with a message from you.

Preparatory fussing. Engines whining up. Seatbelts. Hostesses miming emergency routines. A few, the impossibly eager, giving attention; the rest of us pretending acclimation to death.

Is anyone sitting in that seat, the hostess asked me. Her uniform shirt was the color of a beautiful day.

Empty, I said. Empty.

She looked at me. My watch ticked audibly. I could hear the beverage carts being locked into place in the back. The in-flight magazine flopped from its pouch in the seatback before me.

Empty. Empty, I said.

I don't understand, I said.

15

Did I sleep? Did I dream? In the heat, the stress, and the dark—*empty*. Having worked my way through the newspapers while still at the bar, and loath to carry things with me, I'd looked for a book I could read and dispose of on landing.

At Heathrow, with three hours on to İstanbul, and still covered in cold perspiration, I showered in a pay stall adjoining the smoker's lounge, already choking with the fearless.

16

As soon as they became conquerors, Europeans wanted to go native, to disappear into the exotic lives of their subjects. Americans are less susceptible to this fantasy, because we got into the game late, or because we are less burdened by wanting to know things. But we too desire that which we disavow, that which is not of us, which we hold under us. I watched the red roofs of İstanbul rush in an arc

beneath us, seeming to bow under the plane, and the Marmara Sea glittering with epic glee, so that I thought in my stomach: We're too low.

The sky would darken, I knew, as we left the airport, turned into the traffic circle, that first welter of symbols.

17

Akşamüstü was my first favorite Turkish word. Like our “twilight,” it bears a whiff of the archaic or merely ornate, a formality that suits it better to literature than to everyday conversation. I liked it not only for that, and for its metaphysics, the grafting of space onto time—a literal translation might be “top of the evening”—and for its constructedness, the agglutinative and inflected nature of Turkish that reminds me, a native speaker of English, of the tension in my language between German and Latin. I liked akşamüstü for the way it looked on the page, the cedilla and the pair of umlauts suggesting a kind of mechanical device, a rifle perhaps, pointing to the next page or waiting to go off in the last act. It was akşamüstü that I thought over Newfoundland, when the last color of the sun left the sky and the plane blipped into inky space: it happened while I was blinking my eyes, I thought, like the end of childhood. It was akşamüstü that I thought when I first looked at you. It was akşamüstü that I thought, now, in a car exiting the traffic circle outside Atatürk International, in this easy talk over the news, the warmth of you in the rear seat, a glimpse of your hair in the mirror, and of your father driving, the two of you passing with me over another line, into another life. Almost evening.