Forces

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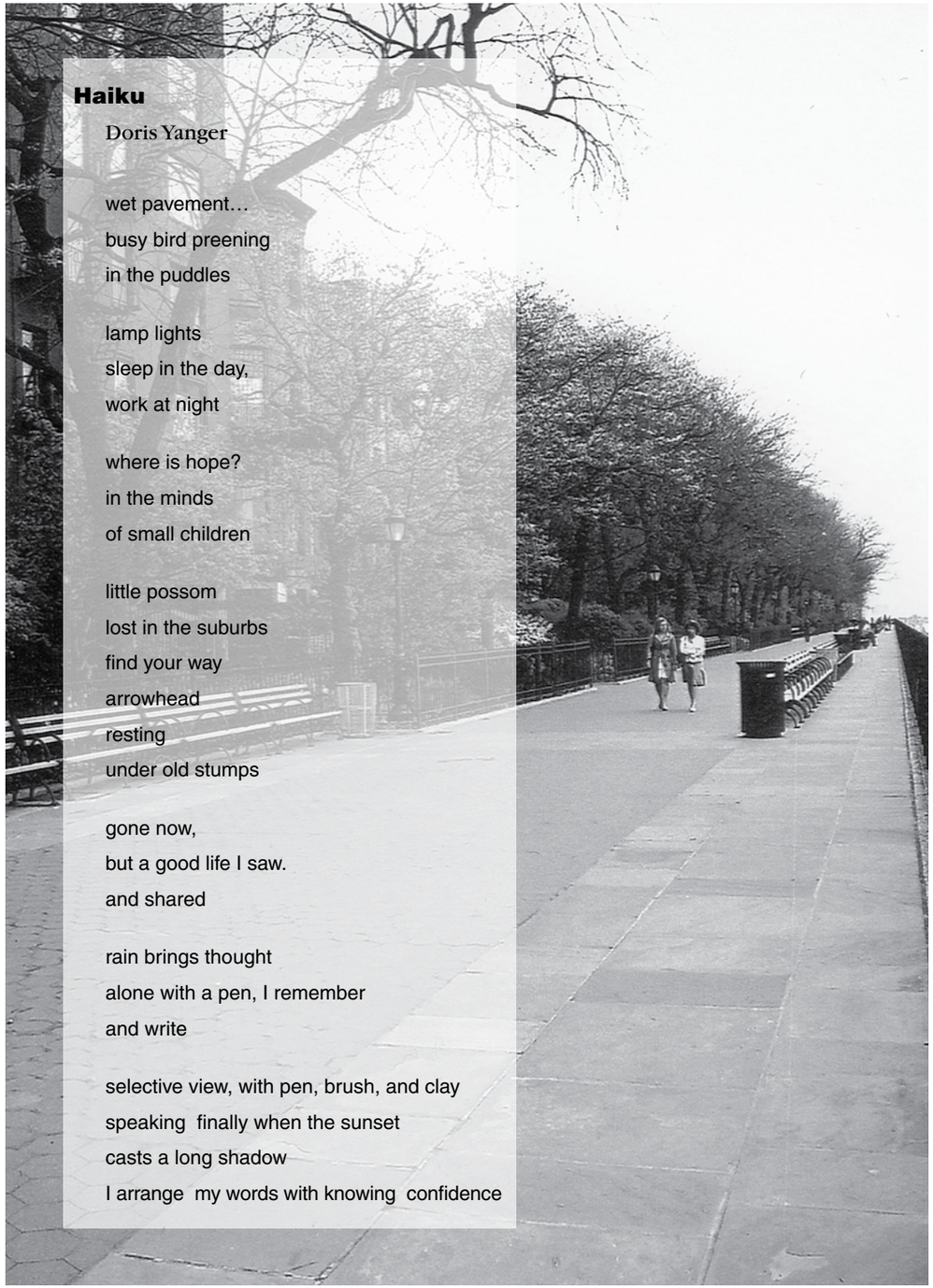
Encounters with Turkce

Jules Sears



Haiku

Doris Yanger

wet pavement…
busy bird preening
in the puddles

lamp lights
sleep in the day,
work at night

where is hope?
in the minds
of small children

little possom
lost in the suburbs
find your way
arrowhead
resting
under old stumps

gone now,
but a good life I saw.
and shared

rain brings thought
alone with a pen, I remember
and write

selective view, with pen, brush, and clay
speaking finally when the sunset
casts a long shadow
I arrange my words with knowing confidence

A Stroll Brian K. Williams

Encounters with Türkçe

Jules Sears

I was in the midst of the "in love" stage of our relationship, when I first heard Erdal, my boyfriend at the time, speak Turkish. It was a Saturday morning. Erdal told me he needed to call his parents, who live in Istanbul. I found it strange when he closed the door to his bedroom, leaving me alone in the hall. Like a dog that has separation anxiety, I wanted nothing more than to be in that room with him. But I could not scratch and paw at the door, whining to be let in. Instead, I put my ear against the door, straining to catch the meaning of his words.

The dark and heavy language mystified me. It sounded like a foreign tongue spoken backwards. Turkish had no relationship to any language I had heard; it is not even from the same family tree, the Indo-European language group, as English.

I crumpled up in the hallway and started to cry. I believed that the man I loved had been cut away from me by a voice I didn't recognize. I felt there would always be a part of him that I could not access because it belonged to a world I would never comprehend.

Over a year later, I took my first trip to Turkey to meet Erdal's mother, Belgi, and father, Kâzım, and his grandmother. He wanted them to get to know me and to see how I felt about his family and home country before proposing to me. We flew into Istanbul, an ancient, yet very modern city—one of the most populous in the world. I learned as we took a bridge crossing the Bosporus Strait that Istanbul straddles Europe and Asia. Once we were on the Anatolian side of Istanbul, we drove a circuitous route to Suadiye, a fashionable neighborhood. His parents' flat on the top floor of an apartment building looked out on the Sea of Marmara. Here I met Erdal's grandmother, whom I attempted to greet in the manner appropriate for a respected elder—kissing her hand and touching her hand to my forehead—only I accidently put her hand to her forehead, causing me some embarrassment.

Soon Kâzım showed us the famous sites of old Istanbul. The Grand Bazaar, dating from the 15th century, is one of the largest covered bazaars in the world and site of many sellers of rugs, leather goods, pottery, and trinkets. These persistent salesmen called out to me in English, "Yes, please, where are you from?" because they could sense I was a foreigner, just as a dog can smell fear. Hagia Sophia, topped by a massive dome, was once a Byzantine cathedral, then an Islamic mosque, and now a museum which, according to our overweight and slovenly guide, has a handprint of the Virgin Mary on one of its columns. We also saw the Sultanahmet Camii or Blue Mosque, the unofficial symbol of Istanbul, called "blue" because of the blue tiles bedecking its interior.

All the time I was absorbing this new experience, I heard voices speaking Turkish with bewildering fluidity.

What I lacked in words I tried to make up for with friendly gestures and signs of appreciation. I won points with Erdal's family because of my enthusiasm for all of the sights and sounds of Istanbul, not simply those of cultural or historic value: the iconic ferry boats that seem to date from the 1930s; the muezzin's plaintive calls to prayer five times daily (these in Arabic); the equally plaintive, yet much harsher cries in Turkish of the man selling "Semit!"— savory pastries shaped like donuts with sesame seeds on them that hung from a stick as he walked through the neighborhood; the street dogs traveling in packs, apparently harmless; tea servers going from shop to shop delivering small glasses of tea; and the waiters dressed in white and black who changed our plates every time they got too "messy"— each of these I embraced.

My future family especially appreciated my desire and ability to eat large quantities of Turkish food, like cigara borek (flakey cigar-shaped filo pastries stuffed with white cheese and parsley and then fried), wrinkly black olives (eaten at breakfast with slices of fresh bread, cucumber, and tomato and rose petal and sour cherry jams) all manner of eggplant dishes, whole fish grilled and served simply with lemon, baklava, Turkish coffee with its sludgy coffee grounds at the bottom, and the cool yogurt and salt drink called ayran. I never really took to the Turkish national alcoholic beverage, called rakı, which is translucent, anise-tasting liquor that turns white when combined with water and ice. Aptly nicknamed "lion's milk," it is very potent. Luckily, my lack of enthusiasm for rakı wasn't held against me.

I was also fortunate that my future mother-in-law is fluent in English, and my future father-in-law can speak it fairly well. Even so, it seemed to me that things would quickly "degenerate" into Turkish, for example, as soon as I left a room. During meetings with friends and family who did not know English, if I asked Erdal to translate a question for me, he would, but he might get lost in a conversation about the answer and forget to translate it back. I often felt left out as everyone laughed at something very funny that I couldn't grasp.

I tried to learn some polite phrases before arriving and I picked up a few words, names of food items and useless things like pembe araba (pink car), but mostly I didn't know what was being said. Whenever I spoke Turkish, I received praise and encouragement. I felt proud, yet I had the lurking suspicion that this was not going to be an easy language to learn, and I wondered how long I would be granted permission to remain in this state of relative ignorance. Once I became a gelin (or bride), this concern weighed heavily on me.

Language is not only the quality of sound and the particulars of a grammar; it is also the mentality that one inhabits when one speaks it. I witnessed how Erdal became a different, seemingly angrier person in Turkish. He read Turkish newspapers with a scowl on his face. When he and his parents had a discussion, I assumed they were fighting over some very important matter; in fact these were usually minor squabbles about paying for this or that (in Turkey it is a disgrace not to let one's elders pay for things). But without knowledge of the words, how could I know? I had to sense things. At times I'd get paranoid; if Belgi growled when she said something, I feared it was about me.

As the years passed, I felt more like a willfully-ignorant American, so I made an attempt to learn Turkish. I got a grammar book, an English-Turkish dictionary, tapes, and Rosetta Stone language-learning software. Erdal put labels on items around the house. He was adamant about the importance of knowing Turkish grammar, which has peculiarities like vowel harmony, agglutination through suffixes, and subject/object/verb order. He said there were lots of rules but few exceptions. He made timed tests for me. I did well on the tests, but then I'd forget what I had learned. I felt overwhelmed, and I gave up.

Failing to learn the language, I decided to find out more about Turkish culture. Like many Americans I was unfamiliar with the long, complex history of Turkey, once center of an empire founded by Turkic tribes from central Asia and now a secular nation-state. So I read. I read novels, short stories, and poems by Turkish authors (in translation of course). I watched Turkish films. I tried to find out more about Turkish politics. I became a fairly attentive fan of Turkish football. I took belly dancing lessons.

In Turkey I still have moments when it seems I am a child visiting "boring" relatives who talk about grown up things. To be polite, I nod my head during discussions I can't understand. Like a dog, I wait for something to happen; my ears perk up when I hear certain words—those related to food and my name. If someone says "Jules," I wonder, What are they saying about me?

Still, I believe I have received much more than I thought I would lose that morning I first heard Erdal speak Turkish. The once alien language now has a familiar sound to it; I can recognize it when people are speaking Turkish even if I don't know what they are saying. Most importantly, I have grasped some of the spirit of the culture.

Nevertheless, I admit I felt a sense of triumph when my husband recently told me that his English is now better than his Turkish.