

## Shunning Ramazan

Anne Germanacos

I look forward to those rose-water-doused puddings, the layered baklava, minarets against cloudy skies, the language – both glimpsed and heard.

Last time we were there, we were offered glasses of dark tea as the throats of mature lambs were slit in rapid succession.

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Istanbul' da.

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### Day One

At two in the morning we heard the drum alert: it was the fasters' last chance to eat before the first call to prayer. After that, nothing passes the lips until after sunset. The day of our arrival, the fast ended at 7:41pm.

This holiday organises masses of people in Sultanahmet Square drinking tea from glasses, eating from china plates, food brought in pots wrapped in cloth, laid out on tablecloths spread on the grass.

They walk along with children, scarved women (very few smoking women), fat or thin men carrying babies, men and women of all ages holding hands. A nice religion to get old in? Some of the scarves are strikingly bright.

The grass, the next day, is spotless. Is this the result of its being almost a police state or simple (homely) tidiness?

We walked inside the multitudes, our expectations hazy like the weather.

### Gorging

At Hamdi, we sat down just as the Turks, breaking the fast, were nibbling on dessert. Their high-pitched conversations created a gentle wave of sound as we gorged – too quickly – on stuffed peppers, eggplant, *lakmacun*.

### Civic Water

I fell apart in Justinian's cisterns, deep in the underground darkness, the occasional drop of wetness from above like the building's tears.

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Presented with grandness, I thought of the grandeur that once graced our lives: C. He was grand, though not exactly along the lines of Justinian's cistern. Still, greatness invites other images of greatness, no matter its genesis or form.

I had a breakdown in Justinian's cisterns, the underground cavern once filled with water that slaked the thirst of the inhabitants of the city of Constantinople.

### **Escape**

The dervishes launch into their whirling as if they are simply lifting a foot to take a step. I can understand their eagerness – anything to escape the mundane and be launched into the beyond.

Our son said he could've fast-forwarded on the music but I would posit that it's the music that takes us, still seated, to another place and time. Through the music, we fall back in time, as the dervishes fall into another relation to the old railway station with its round rose-like stained glass windows and the many people on plastic chairs who've come to gawk and stare.

The dervishes' breath changes, their body temperature too, most likely, and they know themselves differently, or maybe they do not know themselves at all.

### **Efforts**

I can hear them speaking Turkish all day, window-to-window and door-to-door across this back alley of a street. This is the ideal setup for someone trying to learn a new language.

They brought glasses of tea and a plate of round, dry cookies. In response to their hospitality, I was able to muster in Turkish: The napkins at this hotel are most beautiful.

### **Smuggling *Simit***

In the Square, packed with people like a fairground, one can buy pomegranate juice, apple tea, carrot juice, fried dough soaked in syrup, milk puddings, doner kebabs, *ayran*. From before dawn until nearly eight at night, no food passes the lips of the people who gather here after dark, no liquid wets the tongue.

Walking in the street past people who are most likely fasting, we hold the irresistible *simit*, a ring of sesame-covered bread, in our hands, smuggle pieces to our mouths and chew as unobtrusively as possible.

### **Rug Men**

Most men, especially Turkish rug salesmen, tend to flatter a woman, taking a few

years off when guessing her age. In my experience, the rug man is someone who will say just about anything in order to close a deal. But this rug salesman guessed upward – I must look ancient.

### **Us and Them**

The first time I was here, the scarved, coated women scared me. I looked on them with fear and judged them. Now, at night, the streets are so thick with people that the fully-clothed women and I can't help but look at each other as we pass, no time for anything but a quick smile.

This is a month-long holiday involving thirty day-long fasts. We know nothing of this, nothing like it. We don't fast unless we're sick or preparing for a medical test and even then, we drink white cranberry juice and slurp broth.

### **Shiny Pennies**

Yesterday I was ready to jump into Justinian's cistern, anxious to drop away from the world and swim with the fat penny-eating carp.

Today, the Victorian-era railway station was empty before noon. Nobody whirled there but one corner was inhabited by a man sleeping in a wheelchair, breathing softly.

### **Food**

My husband eats food that turns him pasha, sultan, conqueror. And then afterwards, thankfully, he's just a man.

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Five figs left in a white dish. Four tiny pastries, ridged like small mountains. Crushed pistachios, almonds, walnuts.

### **Pronouncement**

Yesterday, my Turkish teacher didn't turn up so we had apple tea at the Marmara Hotel on Taksim Square. As he said – and I hope he's right – it's unlikely that the modernity and sophistication in this country would be turned back by the allowance of head scarves in the university.

### **Where We Are**

Here on this back alley, people come and go. Cars disturb the silence which closes over the noise seconds later.

## *Aksaray*

I was stripped of several layers of skin yesterday in *Aksaray*, a working-class, religious neighborhood. The women sitting around in the rickety wooden building couldn't fathom what it was to not speak the language; they seemed not to have that concept in their grip.

I stripped in a small glassed-in room, donned the somewhat waxy red woven strip of cloth and followed a woman into the main room of the baths. There, I took off the cloth, sat on a beige plastic stool while she filled the marble basin with water. She told me to sit on the marble which I did, naked, nothing between me and the marble, no idea what I was supposed to do and not really caring.

I lay on the central marble stone which was heated from below and she – we didn't exchange names – scrubbed me with a loofah-like black glove as I'd never been scrubbed. I lay on my stomach, then was told 'don' (from which we get doner kebab), turn. I lay on my back and was scrubbed everywhere except the dark heart of me. She sat me up and proceeded to scrape the skin from my arms. It's only then that I opened my eyes and saw the many inch-long lines of dirty skin – at first I thought her black loofah was leaving welts on me – along my arms and legs. I knew enough to say 'pis' (dirt) and she nodded before asking me why if I shaved my armpits, I didn't also shave down below.

Turkish was mostly unavailable to me, though Hebrew would've been happy to oblige. Useless at that moment, I remembered enough Turkish to tell her that I'm American, hoping my foreignness would suffice as an answer. She wasn't perplexed, merely curious and also probably slightly damning. I would've liked to laugh but there was no one to laugh with.

Next, I sat back down beside my marble basin and poured many plastic jugful of water over myself, attempting to rid my body of the evidence of filth. I was alone, pouring and cleansing when she finally returned with a curt 'gel' (come) and I went back to the central marble stone, naked, nothing between my body and the marble (she wore lacy-ish yellow underpants). She asked me if I had babies, I said that yes, I have two children, then gave their ages. I couldn't think enough to ask her if she had any but assumed she didn't.

She used a bath mitt filled with soap to lather my body entirely, neck to toes, and began to sing a little song. I wondered if the song was part of the treatment, and if it were a prayer, whether it was possibly damning foreign women and their filthy display of pubic hair. I felt chastized but innocent. How could I know?

Turning over was dangerous. She held onto me so that my soaped-up body wouldn't slip on sheer marble. The same thing, but without the song, many times over my stomach and breasts. (It's a good thing I have no modesty.) This was about cleanliness, not relaxation.

Later, she washed my hair, scrubbed my forehead, cheeks, and neck, poured countless jugs of warm water over me. When she left, I poured colder water, wanting to wake up a little so that I could navigate my way home.

Back in the wooden glassed-in changing room, I towelled myself off (two thin red and white towels, one for the head, one for the body) and put my clothes back on. When I tried to leave the room, she motioned for me to stay. So I stayed for a while, few if any thoughts in my head. It occurred to me that this was the relaxation part. Eventually, I made my way out of the room and was allowed to sit with the five women who were in various states of recline. They talked among themselves, occasionally looking over and asking me if I understood, then continued their conversation with a glance up at the small t.v. mounted high on the wall where a bad desert movie played. I, too, watched an apparently dead camel come back to life after much strenuous praying – a miracle.

After a period of time I deemed sufficient, I stood and went to the window where the cash box sat. I paid with a large bill, received change, returned some of it as a tip, then walked out into the hot, muggy atmosphere that made me begin to sweat all over again.

At the hotel, everyone exclaimed over my shiny skin and asked to touch it.

**1:09**

A lot of calling to prayer, across Sultanahmet. The sun is shining, the religious are praying.

### **A Man and his Ram**

The white-haired, red-faced man selling watermelon and a yellow melon the Greeks call *peponi* resembled the small, hennaed ram standing beside him. I've never seen a jewelled ram – this one wore a necklace of blue-and-white beads to protect him from the evil eye. The ram was not chained or roped and stayed beside the man as he moved through the transaction. We asked the man if he would one day eat the ram. He smiled and said no. Then we asked what he fed the ram and he retrieved a partially carved raw potato from the stone wall behind and used a blunt-looking knife to cut thin slices which he placed in the ram's mouth. They were obviously a very loving pair. I imagined his wife had recently died. Who wouldn't want a pet ram like a dog or a lifelong mate?

### **Experience Declined**

Yesterday at Eyup Cami, I decided to stay outside the gate and wait while the others took off their shoes and walked through praying people who were no doubt in a kind of trance. I had seen that once before and did not want to see it again. Also, I wasn't properly covered and did not want to force the believers to look at what they had denounced.

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## The Staff at Our Hotel

Each of the people who works at this hotel has something a little bit off: When Evin walks down the stairs after bringing us glasses of tea, we can see that she's losing her hair. She can't be much older than thirty. And when she looks at us with such dedication, such deep, true hospitality, we see that one of her eyes bulges a little more than the other. Could it be a badly fitted contact lens? (Is there such a thing?)

Asli is fit, wears jeans and t-shirts that show off her tight body but her left eye – is it merely avoiding us, or something else?

Deniz, the night boy who greets us when we return from dinner and lays out breakfast on a wooden table, has a stutter in English but I haven't yet determined whether it's there in Turkish. I would have imagined that it would disappear in the foreign language rather than the native one. But perhaps it's any language at all that gives him trouble.

Languages are definitely troublesome. I attempt many in order to swim in the nothing at the heart of them all.

## Computer

A triangle of blue sky, curly ironwork and a brick wall are reflected back at me beyond the shadow of my silhouette on this screen.

## Camera

I mistakenly erased most of the images I had snapped yesterday. I can hardly be angry – it's such a greedy, vicious way to go through a place.

Today the weather is cloudy.

## Pide

The thin unleavened bread they offered, *pide*, was exactly what our hearts were set on: still-hot airy bubbles of thin-crust dough. *Pide* offers something else – a beyond – along with the purposeful bite and solidity of real food.

## Turkish

*Unutmak* (to forget); *hatirlamak* (to remember); *hazirlamak* (to prepare); *gelmek* (to come); *kalmak* (to stay); *denemek* (to try); *dusunmek* (to think); *umarak* (to hope).

So many *cek*, *cek*, *cek* in any conversation – looking to the future. But there are *dims* as well, looking back. And *mushes*, entering new territory, open to doubt. Sometimes, my Turkish teacher told me, people use two *mushes* in a sentence, the second one

usually a sarcastic comment on the content of the first.

## **Crisis**

In between walks through crowded squares where views of aged, famous buildings prevail, we speak with relatives in distant countries, gathering news of illness, doctors' opinions sought – rarely offered.

I told my husband that I have my black outfit with me, then held up a black v-neck sweater. At that moment, he told me, his skin went cold.

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Sometimes you wish you'd never bought that camera, the one that sits in its soft black container in the dark.

And sometimes you wish you'd never begun the onerous task of learning a foreign language. Why court displacement and ignorance for the illusion of a new beginning? Where are your values? At your age, shouldn't you be adding up rather than subtracting, or worse, deleting? Aren't things precarious enough already?

\*

On the slightly shiny white tablecloth with a pattern of (white) leaves: a bowl of yoghurt, smaller bowls of olives – black and green. You can say these things. That's a start.

Our lives fit in the cracks – or not at all.

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We sit behind a doorway, one half of it open and offering a view to the street. Conversely, others glance in.

Above, seagulls call. A single crow attends.

## **Cats**

In the mosque gardens, we see cats so still and exposed – their necks to the sky – that we think they're dead.

My husband loves sultans and their grand graves. Today I chose to stay outside rather than taking off my shoes in order to see something new. Even outside a designated sacred place, you can see something original and worthy. But he's right. I'm slightly envious that he stood in the presence of Mehmet the Conqueror's 500-year-old bones.

## Ramazan continues

The buses grunting out passengers in Sultanahmet Square this morning polluted the air, gave us headaches. Their riders? Scarved women and children, making a pilgrimage to the mosque during Ramazan.

Last night we slept through the early morning drum. The night before, I heard it coming and jumped out of bed to see him as he passed – a lone man with a small, tambourine-like drum. He banged it very softly for a minute – perhaps he knew that no one fasted beyond this wall.

## Parallel

Like a sick or dying parent, a foreign language is both remote and comforting. Switching modes comes over you stealthily, almost without your knowledge: One minute you want to stay beside your sick mother until she is no more, the next you want to go away to reclaim yourself.

In a language it's exactly the same: the vastness of the knowledge just beyond your reach is a promise you can't resist. Soon, its vastness dwarfs you. You denounce all previous intentions you had toward it so that you may return to your native tongue.

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He went out to discover; I stayed in.

## Friends

We took a 9.40 boat from Eminonou to Kadikoy where Ugur picked us up and drove us to their house. We ate at their beautiful laden table: dates, walnuts (*ceviz*), almonds. Butter, *kaimak*, olive paste, honey, jams, olives, five types of bread, *pastirma*, two types of sausages (cooked), cucumbers, tomatoes, probably twelve kinds of cheese. Tea, filtered coffee, apple juice.

Fatma (scarved) seemed to have done a lot of the preparation. She greeted me openly, saying *Hos Geldiniz*. I was able to reply. I am puzzled by the combination of openness, apparent happiness, and the clothing that must be burdensome. (Tuliye says Fatma's hair is weak, unhealthy. It doesn't see the sun or air. She shaves her head once a year to let it grow back strong and healthy. Isn't that a vicious cycle?)

I must admit: I am stumped by the scarved women.

## A Word

Listen carefully, again, then body forth the syllables, trying to maintain the correct shape of lips, placement of tongue, awareness of teeth. Flick your mind back: know



the meaning of the word as your breath displaces the air with it.

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My photographs show colorful signs, dingy buildings, perfectly balanced mosques, covered heads, bright scarves, and playful or speculative children. Most of my pictures were lost but what remains satisfies my desire for mementoes, every one of which is never anything but *mori*.

\*

Evin told me that I wouldn't be able to live in Turkey because I don't eat enough.

She remembers hearing her grandmother, forced to leave in 1922, say that she wanted to go back to Crete and water the plants she'd left there.

\*

The drum again, as if he's practising. Does it take practice to wake people up after midnight with a cheap drum?

\*

His mother sat up yesterday; his mother is incontinent.

\*

We had *pide* from the next neighbourhood over, freshly baked, doused in oil and sprinkled with salt.

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Last night there was a cat on the roof next door. It mewled and I did in return. Everyone thought there were two cats.

\*

I would be happy to return to my life.

### **Coda: At Home with Turkish Friends**

Eschewing religiosity, they turned ironic: *She* fasted for two days, they said, pointing. No, just *one*, she said. The second day, your maid served me apple juice, her breath stinking of hunger.

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They said: AKSARAY?!  
We've only gone to the hamam at expensive hotels in Istanbul.  
They didn't say: You're the real thing!  
But they did say: You're nothing like the other Americans we've known.

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The one had parents with names like Fatma and Ali. Her father didn't want anything to do with hand-kissing, especially on the holidays. Or was it her parents who loved the hand-kissing, whose mother kissed her husband's hand, but *only* on the holiday?

The upcoming holiday is the throat-slitting one. Just lambs, they said. Of course.

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They said: We're taught that the Greeks don't like us.  
We said: Generally speaking, they don't.

The one with the parents who would have none of the handkissing (or was it the one whose parents liked it, but just on the holiday of the throat-slitting?) and I came upon a conundrum: Why had my husband resisted going to Istanbul for so many years?

Simple, he said: The sadness of loss. It was *ours*, once.

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When I asked if there are other women like them in Turkey, they answered: You'll find women like us only in Istanbul, and even there, we're unique.

Each one's mother had come from one place and her father from another. Not one of the parents was from Istanbul but their offspring, these three women, were Istanbulus. Only one generation away, they were already ironised by their distance from villages.

That afternoon I was certain there was a connection between irony and iron's qualities of hardness and cold: we were all iron, drenched in honey.

Those women gave me back my own iron(y), sitting on the verandah overlooking a mute Aegean. Only the grapevines waved, but very mildly, as if representatives of the three monotheistic religions at one wooden table was too much for them.