

What Won't Betray Her

Mostly, her apartment is silent.

Dust seldom stirs over night-tables crowded
with doily-rugged fossilized memories and
a desk buried with letters that Dot opens two times each,
except for when the phone caws with synthetic callers,
and when the door swings open with nurses ready to storm
her body with pills and needles.

Loneliness tyrants

until the grandfather clock chimes a love song from a dead man,
and she thanks God for the hour.

Mostly, her apartment is silent,
except when her foot snares in the cord as she reaches for a cawing telephone,
and she crashes to the rug, and the grandfather clock catches her
forehead, and slices it jagged.

For eternal minutes, she's stranded

between the chair and the door, blood a rushing river over broken bones,
between earth and heaven? She doesn't know. Fear is her greatest hurt.

She learns again to get out of bed and walker-hobble,
she learns to pull scalpel-thinned hair over spider-leg stitches.

Every corner is a swordblade. Every frame is ready-to-be-broken glass. Every wire is a serpent.
Every chime of the clock is a call from Death.

Every motion of hers is a shudder. What won't betray her?

A Story

Everyone loves a story. Let's start ours with a beach.

We can plie over it, picking up treasures:

bottle shards smoothed to gemstone by the tide,

the raised letters spelling their names, frosted to indecipherability;

strands of champagne-colored cloth,

silky, ripped to ribbon-thinness;

a life ring, stiff from saltwater but unclawed,

gently used.

Those bottles must have been emptied into mouths

of wild teens hypnotized

by music that boomed so loud

you could hear it onshore.

This fabric must have cradled some poor girl as she spiraled into the waters

that now lap so daintily at our feet.

Do you wonder who did this?

Someone will. Someone will come

to this beach, their footsteps crashing angry like imitation tides,

looking for the story.

No one will find

the evidence:

the remains of the beer bottles I ordered will shine on your shelves,

the bikini with my fingerprints on it will brittle beyond recognition,

the lifering that came free only when the boat capsized

will decorate your poor house.

No one will find

me in my villa, my hands and beach

cleaned of the girl's blood.

Ode to Anna

I.

For the girl beside me. At the pond's edge, we raze the world where we speak in whispers: where we are hazed in jeering voices, where children slam doors in our faces, where our table of two is a lone island in the ocean of the cafeteria. It does not matter to me that her bookshelves are dusty with collectibles or that she doesn't even have a library card. She understands me: she knows what the playground looks like as its image blurs with held-back tears.

At the pond's edge, we send the bullies into the beyond-horizon abyss in the form of stick dolls marooned on chestnut boats with leaf-sails. Under this same sky, we stay up late, squinting through the trees, waiting for showers of meteors that will sweep our troubles out of the galaxy— meteors that never drizzle. We gaze into our gilded futures: surfer-bod husbands and kids with fairytale names. Kids who love us. We imagine our guestrooms with sheets forever rose-petal-rumpled from each other's coming and going. Together, we are no longer worthless castaways. We are worthy of being loved.

II.

For the girl who laughs with me. In the midnight darkness of my room, her face is only visible by the light of my phone. We've fled the school and made a sport of our old bullies. We scroll through their Insta posts, roll our eyes at their splattered makeup and bet which ones will become porn stars. As slowly as the stars behind our windows fade in the morning light, the children's voices become echoes in the masoleum of our memories.

III.

For the girl on the other side of the table. The oceans of our conversations are reduced to puddles, but she's still invited me here to share a bowl of guac with her and her new friends. My voice can sustain in the noise-haze, but I do not speak: I cannot speak this language of sports rivalries and celebrities. In my heart gapes a space the size of the pond we pass by now: I have no one to dream with, and my table of six is a lonely island. But I still sign her birthday card "Love," and when she texts me thank you the next morning, she assures me that I'm her best friend.

How The Shadows Caught My Baba

Doktor Nejat Çağınalp left the sultanate that shone in his palm
left the land where men sealed his ego every time they invoked his name,
with such reverence that each syllable glowed,
left and came to this Neptunian power, America.

He was no abrasion victim—

I mean, assimilation victim.

Here couldn't drown him:

untether him from his culture, strand him with his language trapped inside,
make the wounds of displacement scream with the salt of hate.

The Saturday nights, his voice shone with laughter, flowed like full moonlight into conversation,
unchained from unfamiliarity anxiety.

He and his friends, stethoscopes draped over their necks like lion's pelts,
leaned over tavla boards

quaking with his might,

the dice he tossed thunderclapping on their return to Earth,

düşüş combinations working his checkers to victory.

Yes, the English

he spoke was cratered

by his real language.

Could you shovel the snow help me?

my Baba would ask his neighbors.

His voice no matter,

they'd venture into the cold: Nejat was white, beyaz, doktor. That Turk-immigrant

would never come home to a front porch sizzling

with the words "go back to where you came from"

stinging him in spray paint. Such a white doktor,

so beyaz that he had a travel agent, who never would have guessed

to tell him to bring his greencard to the airport.

No Aruba for Baba that kış. Eventually,

he pledged allegiance in a glass box of a courthouse,

swapped his greencard for a dime-store U.S. flag.

And?

He was natural when he was fresh off the Boeing— a reality rare, glorious,
and sweet as rolling düşüş.

Who, having lived in this warmth of acceptance, would want to sink into clamminess,
the shadows that cloak regular immigrants?

Not you. Not I. Not they.

That's why Nejat did not retire, especially not when his memory splintered
and he was shouted into assisted living.

No— he was thrust down to lonelistlessness.

He was gazing into the belly of a snowstorm, eyes hungry for salvation

the taxi that would whisk him to work, away

from the facility where his name was chopped down to Doc,

when a blood vessel burst in his brain.
Fade to not to siyah, fade not to the opposite of beyaz— fade to gray.
He reached the hospital at nine sharp, his neck cold, tanlined,
and aching where the stethoscope used to shine,
Doktor Çağınalp made patient
number twelve of the ICU
a body to be needled, tagged
with a name that no doctor, no nurse, no one calls
because its foreignness churns fire on their tongues
and they'd rather sting him with silence.
Hope of leaving rivered through his mind, hope of returning
to the place where he'd at least be called
by a shriveled apocopation.
The English
he knew supernovaed. Every word contorted in the gravity of his heavied accent.
What kind of a voice is that? a woman spat at him
through smudged-rouge lips.
Turkish? Don't Turkish people blow things up?
Anger cracked through him,
and Old Country memories washed over him, fresh and perfumed with longing,
the distance between him and his country yawning to the size of an ocean and a continent.
Friends came and went, taking with them Turkish
words, hediyeler that rippled in air
and vanished
in his mind. The Saturday nights, hallucinated
lions tore through his room then. My Baba cowered
in the language that wasn't trapped inside, cried
for home.
He was citizen then, passport festering in safe, still
he could travel to no nation
of his
not even sleep.
I worked my voice into salve: *Goodnight, Baba.*
The words tumbled over his body, dust in the wind.
The words that would have saved him were words I was too American to know,
words I was too abraised to know
yet:
İyi geceler.

Footnotes

İ, i [dotted i] as 'ee' in 'see'

I, ı [undotted i] 'uh' or the vowel sound in 'about'

Ö, ö same as in German, or like British 'ur', as in 'fur'

Ü, ü same as in German, or French 'u' in 'tu'

C, c pronounced like English 'j' in 'jolt'

Ç, ç [c-cedilla] 'ch' as in 'choice'

Ğ, ğ - a 'g' with a little curved line over it: not pronounced; lengthens preceding vowel slightly

Ş, ş - [s-cedilla] 'sh' as in 'shine'
