

How Women Mourn

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Travel is a seduction I refused for many years; it remains a difficult challenge.

That places, unknown, exist, throws me open wide to the unknown in myself. Expert in no place at all, I can hardly say I know my own small corners.

But if this particular presentation of voice would fall silent, this skin peel away....

I doubt very much whether I could whirl myself into another existence the way dervishes seem to do but speaking another language—if I could do it with some fluency—is a kind of whirling I think I could manage.

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My Turkish, like my Hebrew, remains bookish and private. A linguistic masturbation. Perhaps this is the source of my shame, my rage. Still, I have these books, these grammars and dictionaries—my porn.

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No sun to speak of, just light though the low clouds. Sun, a belief. The rain has stopped. The wind a slight breeze.

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One becomes desperate to change one's personality—or find some way of spinning out of it. Fixing to be a dervish...

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We passed a sign on Istiklal yesterday afternoon—a misty painting of my husband's favorite twirlers—and followed it to see where they would be whirling, in performance, which is not what he wants to see. He wants the real thing and of course that's impossible. Just outside the spot where they'll be performing tomorrow, Sunday, a man working on a roof flicked something metal that came my way—and missed, but only barely. A close call with my eyes. The man seemed slightly angry but not at all apologetic. Why would he be?

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Last night, a professor of translation and her husband, an art historian, took us to dinner in Nişantaşı. He has a bald, red-orange expressive Turkish head. His great aunt



was Atatürk's nurse and we spent a part of the evening discussing the history that was being lost by our not writing it down at that very moment.

Instead, we enjoyed each other's company, sipping good wine and basking in our common failure, letting the possibility—which has already washed over us so many times—descend upon us like a beneficent cloud and then with a small wind, the conversation changed direction, the cloud was dispersed.

The desire to record seems to get buried under the everyday detritus we seek in order to avoid facing the fact that we will—all of us—become history or, more likely, nothing at all.

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My husband's father kept very meticulous war diaries that were lost to the Turkish invasion of their home in Famagusta. Is this loss in any way related to my husband's loss of two small notebooks (one through negligence, the other theft) containing the beginnings of the last poems he attempted—as far as I know?

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Our wet clothes stuck to us as we observed: hands, feet, faces, heads, veils, and elaborately draped clothing, all made of marble.

My favorite were the mourning women, each—as he pointed out—holding her hands differently. One woman held her left hand across her chest and her right straight up, grasping her own shoulder. We walked around the marble sculpture, observing the way women's hands fold and grasp as they mourn.

One envies those ancient women their scarves and veils: the utility of an ever-present cloth to wipe away the tears, hide one's grieving face from the world.

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It may be time to call a ban on all this greed for languages. They are beautiful and perhaps less unknown than they once were but still very out of reach.

I would like to leave them where they are so that I may resume my existence without being tortured by the possibility of learning more than what is, most likely, my share.

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My husband's brain, too, flits.

*



If not a ban then a truce.

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Those people who process languages side by side—in the blink of an eye. Beside theirs, my efforts are poor, tawdry.

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You ask about happiness; you wonder about love.

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The giant hands, the beautifully sculpted toes—all marble and cold—these are what remain of that morning, stepping slowly through the silence surrounding those large pieces, chunks of beauty and solemnity rescued—stolen—from the past. Even in the midst of such solid proof of a deep, barely fathomable past, we're short-sighted, cowardly.

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I sat with myself in the middle of the night, three until four, reorganizing my psyche. The moon is full.

*

When we got back from dinner, the turn-down service housekeeper had put a small white towel on the floor next to each side of the bed as she'd done every night. But, on the towel near my side, she put two sets of simple white hotel slippers, and one more set on my husband's.

What is she imagining? Does she possibly understand things about us that we don't? Or do, but would rather keep quiet, especially in a city as mysterious as this one?

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Pamuk's latest novel, about a love affair, has become a little grating. I could do with some reality. Eros is fine but how much romance can a person take? I suppose romance and melancholy are part of the same coin, melancholy being his specialty.

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Many CityLine boats making their way between Eminönü and Kadıköy. As always, when we stay on this side of the Golden Horn, we miss the mosques and the intermittent comfort of the muezzin's call. But we've made our choice and are obligated to stick with it.



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This purple-backed mirror we occasionally can't look away from: against it, everything looks bruised.

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Sun! Miraculous! After four days of rain, wind turning umbrellas inside out and throwing dirty paper against our feet.

*

The jury is out—a phrase I couldn't remember earlier today.

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Formed thoughts and feelings come less often. There are many more places where the random stuff may stray and gather.

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I'm not so sure about love stories.

*

He wanted to eat at one of the little nondescript eateries off Istiklal and I refused. He dreams of those side streets, his alternative routes—we all have them.

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Five short fire engines passed us and then we met up with them again on a steep Beyoğlu side-street, in front of a narrow tall building that was burnt black and destroyed. In the charcoal of the wooden building were several gleaming instruments: a saxophone, a clarinet, and part of a xylophone. The firemen wore shoddy padded navy blue outfits and the youngest one bent to begin the long process of rolling up first one length of red hose and then another.

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Do fat people enjoy sex more than thin people? Do they enjoy their food more or do they simply enjoy more food? Or is eating a tangled misery for anyone whose body hangs down onto itself, sitting or standing, and especially lying down?

Maybe one of these days, I'll gather my courage and ask.



Asking is something we tend not to do: Without questions, we keep our worlds small and sufficient.

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These simultaneous interpreters—brilliant queens with skills I admire and covet. I once called a massage therapist a genius. Oh well.

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Characters: the only way to achieve the everything one covets.

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He said: Sex and coffee.
I said: What else do you need?

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Waiters, doormen, watch repairmen, ticket takers.

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Here, we have a view of the Bosphorus with two low minarets in the foreground. We watch glinting sea, bright or dull sky, buildings—some that had no place being built—while eating off very white plates, white linen, waiters in black waistcoats standing nearby, ready to receive the smallest signal.

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And that taxi driver with the cold, showing his chiseled nose in the mirror, trying to start a (silent) conversation with me.

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Bought one of those battery-driven dictionaries, Turkish-English/English-Turkish, at an electronics store called Derty right on Istiklal. What do people who've never been there make of my throwing this street name around as if it's common knowledge?

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I am forcing happiness on him most nights. Days he needs to recover. Today, we walked in the rain, beneath one umbrella, flirting, as is our wont.

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The five year old, Deniz, was quick to use his newly-acquired English (last year he refused) and wrote in Turkish on a paper airplane he threw around, catching it in our hair and between our feet. He has bright dark very round eyes, with light brown hair tumbling around them, and sunny plump arms that are furred blond.

All their calls to one another end in *cigim*—the suffix of endearment. If I could spend a week with them, my Turkish would grow fierce.

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A light steel-blue-and-grey sky. Here, night falls early.
Now: all steel blue with red-tiled buildings and the odd minaret a kind of shadow.
Now: just lights. Cars, buses, street lamps. A swirl of activity. Skyless.

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Drinking my *second* Turkish coffee. (Shiny holes at every corner—waiting to take you down.)

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Exploring the infinite. Abjuring safety. Who is that character?

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Will we ever see this city in snow? *Kar*.

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What about all the many waiters in their formal outfits (including red vests) and white shirts, their good manners, their lack of condescension, their apparent ignorance of obsequiousness? Who is waiting for them at home each night and if no one, as with the waiter in the Hemingway story, what do they do once they've arrived? Are their walls damp and peeling or do they keep the paint new and even shiny?

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I love those cheap toys various men sell on Istiklal: the automatic bubble guns and the tops they throw high in the sky that light up blue as they come back down to earth.

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For lack of company, for an attempt at diversity, we chat up the waiters on the breakfast crew. When requested, coffee arrives at the table in less than a minute. We hear the hiss of its production while gazing at the sky.



The psychological tone of that word: gaze.

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Coffee's delicious bitterness.

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He takes me past fast food joints, bus stops, stations, people whose livelihood is based on one item: Lighters! Batteries! Plastic hangers! Ballpoint pens!

*

Do I know his innards or do I only depend on them?

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In a darkly-tinted mist. Sometimes the light shines through and then, because mist isn't entirely opaque, there are moments of great beauty.

*

I was so much calmer a year ago.
Or maybe that's just what I think. How does anyone remember anything—yesterday, much less last week or a year ago?

*

Walking in Yıldız Park, we were calmed by the color green. Birds sang and flew between the trees. And my husband, as he tends to do, found a small, almost invisible path that led us back to the world.

*

Dolmabahçe Palace in the foreground; Bosphorus just beyond.

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Anything not your own linguistically speaks of lives not lived. But possible?

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Misty, cloudy skies.



Huge barrels of ginger, chili peppers, green henna. We saw puppies lying together in cages, pheasants, baby rabbits, clear jars of leeches. Canaries, parakeets, quail, partridges.

Turning back, we crossed the bridge again past the fishermen, each with his own pole, bucket, and cup of bait.

He found a music store (by ear) and went inside to listen to an oud being played. He talked again about the minor key, mystery, the east, melancholy, then bought a cup of fresh-squeezed pomegranate juice on the street and drank it down.

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On our way to dinner last night, the elevator doors opened onto a wedding reception, all the Turks dressed formally and chattering like the forks and knives they'd soon be clicking against white plates.

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If I were smart and properly daring, I would follow the maids on their rounds through the hotel rooms, trying out my Turkish on them as they shake out the bed linen and brush toilet bowls, replace empty shampoo bottles and dust the surfaces. But I fear I'm hardly daring, in fact embarrassingly cowardly.

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A woman we met told us that one day, she took a ferry across from her home on the Asian side, walked to the spice market, bought pepper, then went back home—just for the joy of being on the water.

*

Watching a cruise ship manoeuvre a turn on the Bosphorus, my husband cuts his fingernails. All the little boats turn away, giving it a wide berth.

Later, I come upon his crescent moons.

