



**OTTOMAN
BEACHCOMBING:
EXPLORATIONS IN THE
BALKANS, TURKEY,
ISRAEL, AND EGYPT,
1983
PART 3**

**BY
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XII. AN INTERLEAVED LETTER

July, '83. Cairo

Dear Diahmel

In this one I might be telling you about Cairo because you knew it once and you somehow escaped...

Dear Sara,

How goes? Hope my letters haven't been too intrusive. We just escaped from Cairo; took us five days before they'd let us go. We flew to Athens on a plane that listed 10°-20° the whole way.

...There where you lay for dark ages on end, burning in rooms that lay askew, the floor tilting, the walls curved and cracking. The slaves held you down and would not let you go till you burst their grip with demonic anger...

By the last day, our friend Linda was near panic and Nancy was not far behind. I was coping by being angry and nasty to people, who themselves were intolerably rude by American standards, having no regard for personal space or privacy. Such a contrast to Israel!

...It might be the Holy Land I'm talking about, or the Sacred Pyramids, the Visionary Tombs where they altered the alignment of your cells. Your friends panicked; they left you. The Priests entered your body without regard for borders and membranes. Was it here and now or was it ages before in a dream? Filth poured from your open wounds, and cymbals clanged ceaselessly in your brain...

It was different from the moment we crossed the Israel-Egypt border. The desert began, confusion began, and a hopelessness about nature began that Israel doesn't have; nor do we. So the streets piled with filth; the old mosques became garbage dumps! They drive their cars with one hand on the wheel and one hand on the horn. If they want to light a cigarette or shake a fist, they use the hand that was on the wheel. The rule is: don't pay attention to anyone behind you, and constantly honk. It was Ramadan, so people were up all night driving.

...We have lived this at least 99 times, and still, consider our confusion and ignorance. Before the Priests came it was more like a game; the collisions didn't seem to do any damage. There was still hope you would come out as easily as you went down in ~ go down Moses, way down ~ but Pharaoh spread a desert around you that you couldn't cross; a sealed entrance to your Tomb. When you tried to run you could only walk. When you tried to walk you could only crawl. When you tried to sing, you howled. When you called for help you babbled. When you tried to help yourself, you could only beg. A day of fasting, a year of starving. At night, in the darkness, you were free, wildly free...

Ramadan; 110° in the day, and nothing was permitted to be drunk, not even water, not until 7:00pm. Then the mad celebration began. We staggered amidst it. We made plans to leave but they wouldn't sell us plane tickets. We begged; we threw tantrums. Then the computers went down and the room filled with 100 people trying to get to the counter, disbelieving. We spent an afternoon trying to find the bus station. But we did find it finally, and it was much worse than the airline office. There were no trains available for two weeks to get us out of Cairo, except 3rd class cattle cars. I needn't tell you any more. You already know. Anyway, we escaped.



XIII. FISHERMEN AND THEIR WHARVES

Istanbul.

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I am now living in an old wooden mansion beside the wall of a 15th century fort, perched up on a high bluff flanking the Bosphorus. Giant Russian and Turkish tankers slowly plow the narrow channel that divides Europe and Asia. In between them, large ferries shuttle back and forth and up and down to the various towns that have been swallowed up in Istanbul's modern sprawl. There are also commercial trawlers, 40-60-80 footers with their one or two high winches, stodgy, solid, plodding. Scuttling and darting among these larger boats are the innumerable colorful taxi-boats, harbor patrols, row boats, sloops, yachts, and one and two man fishing dinghies. Oh, and I mustn't forget the occasional submarine or cruiser that slides by like an alligator. The current is strong, flowing from Black Sea to Marmara to Aegean Sea, so docking boats angle in carefully to maintain position. Underneath the surface, sardines, mackerel, and giant blues, among many others, jockey for position much like the boats above them.

Near the S.W. extremity of the Bosphorus (which all the westerners here call the 'Bos') is the Golden Horn, where new and old Istanbul meet. There, the waters are unbelievably crowded. In addition to all the others, ocean going cruise ships anchor in mid-channel or are tugged over to docks to pick up and discharge passengers. Black smoke, cinders, and sparks belch from the smoke stacks of the coal-driven ferries, darkening the sky. Over the years, the old stone mosques and narrow alleys have also been blackened. The current is stiller in the Horn, and the water is thick with debris, and slick with oil. But not to worry. It ultimately gets washed out into the Aegean.

In spite of the traffic, noise, and pollution, the Bos is renowned for its fishing, no less than the Black Sea or the Mediterranean coast. Up and down its length, and even from the Galata (GAL-a-ta) Bridge, which spans the Golden Horn, men and boys and an occasional woman can be seen fishing all year long. Bait sellers hunch over on their stools,



each attending to a bucket of live sardines, which is the most commonly used bait. Some of their clients have nothing more than a coiled line, a hook, and sinker. Others are sporting sophisticated reels on colorful fiberglass rods.

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Docked at waters' edge are hundreds of 12' to 18' motorized skiffs, often with fishermen in them, cleaning and repairing their nets. Fishing from these boats is usually a two person operation, and the catch, likely as not, goes directly to the restaurant or fishmonger nearest the fisherman's docking spot. Occasionally, however, you may find a man selling his fish directly from his boat. One especially popular depot is the Galata Bridge, which is Turkey's 'Fishermen's Pier'. Along the sidewalk, or in bobbing skiffs tied to the docks, batter dipped fish filets, fried in large wok-like pans, and served on a quarter of a loaf of bread, advertise themselves with delicious odors. They are famous and cheap, and often the sellers are quite entertaining. Some guide books warn the traveller to beware, but that applies only to those tender ones who need the protection of a 5-star hotel. (Unfortunately, the Ministry of Tourism, taking its cues from Madison Av., has decided these fish sellers are too funky, and has begun to shut them down. This tradition may soon be a thing of the past.)

But the Galata Bridge is more than funky, funky Broadway. It is a two story pontoon structure in constant motion. Underneath the roadway 15 or 20 restaurants occupy every available cubic centimeter. Some are seedy, some are rather rustic and alluring, and even a bit posh. Generally, each will be offering three to five different types of fish, including bluefish, perch, mullet, swordfish, bass, halibut, and/or sardines. Appetizers (Turkish: meze (MEZ-ay)) almost always include various preparations of mussels, squid, and shrimp. A meal here will range in price from 15 cents for a toasted cheese sandwich, to about \$12.00 for a luxurious dinner including multiple fish and vegetable appetizers, salad, grilled or baked fish, wine, raki (Turkish Pernod), dessert, and coffee.

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In spite of the abundance, and seeming cheapness to Americans, fish here is more a luxury than a staple. Although fresh sardines may be got for a dollar or less a kilo (2.2 lbs.) bluefish is about the same price as beef (\$3.00 - \$7.00/kilo), and swordfish or red mullet is upwards of \$25.00. In this country where a common salary is about \$6.00 - \$8.00 a day, there isn't much room in the budget for fish or meat. For the poorer families, the only fish they will eat, outside of sardines, will be that caught by a child fishing in the oil slick waters of the Golden Horn.





XIV. THE IZMIR FISH MARKET

Izmir

Izmir is Turkey's third largest city, and a very modern place by Turkish standards. It sprawls among the hills at the back of a very long and narrow bay on the Aegean Sea. An hour to the north is the important Roman site of Pergamon on the edge of the gorgeous and quaint town of Bergama. An hour to the south, and now inland, is the even more important site of the Roman port of Ephesus. Perhaps 2000 years hence archaeologists will discover a large military complex at the edge of silted lowland. If they have done good research, they may be able to determine that it was Turkey's largest NATO base in the late 20th century.

But for now Izmir's bay is not silted. A wide boulevard parallels the waterfront for miles, and on the inland side of the road high-rise apartments and hotels jut one after another. It appears as a rather ugly and uniform wall of terraces as one comes into the port by sea.

In the center of town the wharf area is restricted to a naval base, and 100 yards south is a two-story concrete warehouse. Beyond that, very colorfully painted, oriental-looking fishing trawlers are anchored in the bay. At about 5:00 A.M. the warehouse begins to stir with life, and by 6:00 its wide doors are open, revealing an enormous fish market. There is, in fact, no second story inside the building, and the space is only divided by a temporary wall part way down the center. At the far end of the warehouse is a restaurant, not cleaned up for tourists, or anyone else for that matter.

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On either side of the temporary wall dozens of small fish stalls display fish so fresh that the gills still suck for water. Here is Turkish marketing at its finest. Stall owners must surely compete with each other to display their fish most attractively. Some arrange them in neat rows, from largest to smallest. Others create a design of little circles. Still others make concentric circles or scalloped lines. In some, fresh, giant fish heads with mouths propped open are placed, like gargoyles, at the corners; or one enormous fish might be put in the center, and smaller fish arranged around it. The fish themselves are silver, striped, mottled, grey, gold, pink, and opalescent. Often the displays are decorated with tomatoes, parsley, flowers, or finely arranged fishnet. To prove their freshness if the gills have ceased to pulse, a neat little slice is made beneath a gill and it is turned inside out. Thus displayed, it stands out like a little fan, pink and ribbed, surprisingly attractive. Among every species in each stall, one or two fish have their gills turned out.

Actually, not all the stalls are so ornate. One stall has 40 or so rays piled on the dirty concrete floor. They are slimy and slightly quivering, and slithering with their last twinges of life. A couple of rays have four foot wing spans. Another stall has three or four shark, each over 3 feet long, and back in the corner, the heads of more shark whose bodies



have been sold. Another stall has buckets of octopus, with three very large ones out of water on the floor. A few stalls have only a couple of fish left. There is an eel seller, and two men selling spiny little clams, and two stalls specializing in shrimp, some of which are 6-7 inches long. All in all, I counted over 25 species of fish, including some very strange warty and spiny ones, which are not entirely uncommon. I've seen them in Istanbul, as well.

150 This is the condition of things at 10:30 A.M. It is busy but not crowded. Stalls seem about half or more sold out. I was asked numerous times if I owned a restaurant, so I presume many of the buyers are restaurateurs. At one point a man wanted to sell his last kilo and a half of fish, and was certain I was the one who wanted them. We bargained for a few minutes, and his price dropped in half, step by step, but fortunately I was offering too little and didn't get into the embarrassing situation of having gotten my price and yet still refusing to buy. In general, prices are posted, but I'm certain that the final price is often open to discussion. I am, in fact, surprised at how expensive some of the fish is. Giant shrimp, for example, are listed at about \$20.00/kilo, and fish large enough to cut into steaks are commonly \$15.00/kilo. Sole is \$20.00 or more per kilo. But bluefish can be got, depending on size, for as little as \$2.00/kilo and, of course, sardines are cheap enough for anyone to afford at \$.50 - \$.75/kilo.

Museums in Izmir? Local crafts? Historic districts? I don't know. I spent my time on the wharf, comparing this to what Doug Trumbo and Bob Meads taught me about Cape Cod's ecosystems. You want to know about discos and restaurants? Read your guidebook.



XV. FRAGMENT OF POETICS TO A BIOLOGIST

Istanbul.

175 ...so that the whole can be known in itself, or as a product of its parts. Of course, a tissue, cell, atom can also be viewed this way. So the Poem is arranged, composed in the same way. It is not so much (or only) a story line, but a story cycle in which the lines create a greater pattern than themselves. This is the shape of the space. The content of the space, the story is of seven Seraphim who leave their home, their Moment of Bliss, at the command of their Eldern (Mater-Fater)(old name: God), to go as emissaries to the children of Eldern. Those children, Protos, and his wife Solyla, have left Eternity to establish a separate "kingdom." Protos and Solyla embody perfect love. They are the body made of organs; the organ made of tissues; the tissue made of cells; the cell made of molecules; the molecule made of atoms. Thus, their kingdom/being is comprised of lesser states, human, common, incomplete, fragmented. The Seraphim are drawn into these lesser states and lose



contact with their higher selves, their Eldern.

Each of them falls in love. With this final descent they lose contact with each other, and act out their individual dramas. But the poem shows how these individual dramas unconsciously but profoundly affect and influence each other, for they (we) are psychically related without knowing it. Their thoughts are felt/experienced by all the others, yet they have not yet gained the discernment to distinguish among the multiple threads, personal and other, in their thoughts, that constitute their being.



XVI. OASES AND CARAVANSERAI

Tokat

Impressions:

In Trabzon the Byzantine church overlooking the Black Sea; where we got the woven horse-strapping; where a bookstore owner gave me a gift of a tattered volume, since no one else seemed to value antique books. Eight hours on a bus through high passes and rough gorges, on dirt and gravel roads, hazelnuts drying on many roofs, to Erzincan (ER zin JAN). Then the train to Divrigi (div REE ee), a village all mud brick and timber. The old man that walked us from the train to our hotel, big and a bit round, happy to talk to us, tell us of his home, his children and their successes. Happy with or without us, a wise man for all appearances. The little shepherd boy who walked us around Divrigi till Nancy and I fought and went off separately. The boy stayed with me and we walked among the mud brick and mud plaster houses, he announcing me to everyone we passed. Because of him I got to see the inside of three houses – immaculate and ordered, mud plaster floors and walls, timber and straw ceilings. They had no corners square or sharp, all rounded, smooth, unforced. The inlaid woodworked doors made by local craftsmen; the deep storage cellars and kitchens underground; the plaster falling off the exteriors, revealing lath, timber, brick. The women who were not afraid to show their faces, their smiles, to me. I climbed to the kale (KALL ay; fort) overlooking town, gathering sherds all around it, and then back down to the market, where we tried to trade a calculator for a saddle bag, spindle, knife, and shotgun bullet loader. No deal. All eyes on us, sweat pouring down from the heat; dust all over us from the unpaved roads, and afraid to drink the water. Guzzled beer; true infidels.

In this region we saw villages as primitive, or moreso, than any we'd ever seen. The piles of dung cakes, the hay piled in great mounds on the flat roof tops, nearly the size of the houses themselves. Only residential buildings, mud brick dissolving, barely surviving the elements. These are the villages, and Erzincan too, that in 1939 fell into a single heap of rubble in an earthquake. And when the quakes occur at night, these towns become a giant



tomb, everyone buried in their beds.

On to Sivas (SEE vas) where we remained a great attraction to the people. We were blatantly stared at, constantly approached. One after another, people asked, in German or in Turkish if we were German. This is the heart of the worker exodus to Germany. Even the gray beards who wear the skull caps and tattered gray sports coats and old woolen pants, the ones who go to the mosque at each call, even they came up and spoke in broken German. Not once have we been approached and asked if we were Americans. Always German or English. Sivas seemed rough and outpost-like, a large town with few cars, but lots of horses and carts. The line-up of push carts at 7:30am, at least 50 of them, waiting at the central warehouse to buy fruit and make their rounds, many with wheel-spokes painted blue, red, and white, with rural scenes painted on the sides. We loved it there, the smells like Afghanistan, like times when we were wilder.

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From there to Tokat (toe KOT), and instantly we knew this place was better still, magnificent, untouched, prosperous but old. Sometimes it looked Alpine; other times smelled like Darjeeling. The stark stone mountain and kale (fort) behind, and the Afghani women begging (refugees from the Russian invasion), sitting on the street corners. Not Sivas, but Tokat was the place to come for a month or a year to do research. Tokat even surpassed Bergama in quaintness, beauty, livability. The children, who in groups, would call out “How are you?” as we passed, a chorus that crescendoed when we’d call back, slowly, clearly, “We are fine,” repeated and repeated as we walked away. The children who’d giggle when we’d say “Merhaba” (MARE ha BAH; hello), and excitedly whisper “Merhaba sogledi” (SOY led eh; he said ‘hello’). The parading escort of children when we explored the back streets and saw the women spreading wheat on blankets in every open space. The friendly smiles; the curious “Merhaba’s” when we’d say “Merhaba” or “Iyi gunler” (EE yee GOON ler; good day). Sometimes five or six would gather round, and we’d chat in Turkish awhile. The boys who held my hands as we walked and explored. Once they asked my age and I said “12 years old” and they laughed and laughed.

I climbed up to the kale and perched like a dove or an eagle on the cliff and saw how truly beautiful and traditional Tokat was. Reminded me of Prizren, another place I could call home. Bargained a lot. Traded a new \$5 calculator for 3 hand woven bedspreads. In another three hour session traded a pair of Levis and another calculator for 3 kilim cuvals (large kilim-weave bags). It’s hard to imagine a more beautiful place, but I expect Amasya (ah MOS ya) may be it. Tomorrow we’ll see.

And I mustn’t forget the yaymahanesi (YAY ma HON es eh; cloth hand-printing factory); the great muze (mu ZEH; museum); the man who made horse harnesses by knotting and weaving rope, using both his hands, a bare foot, and a horn tool. I passed him at least 20 times during my explorations and bargaining sessions. The garlic seller who saw me looking in a window, and with grandfatherly tenderness took me by the arm and let me in the shop to rummage among all the scrap-iron junk. He was a jolly seeming man with a

250



great white beard and a big belly who could rarely be found at his shop, but rather, visiting his friends in shops all around the neighborhood. The game of bargaining I play, never smiling, working hard to reach the limits of my partner, never quite satisfied that I've got the best deal. I must have drunk chai with at least 20 different people in those two days. The piles of wheat in the fields and in the hans (traditional warehouses/hotels). The old man in Divrigi making a threshing board of wood and flint chips, using tar to hold the flint in narrow slits.

What is a tradition? Perhaps, nothing more than a commonly shared idea. It becomes, though, a law and a way of life, and to do differently becomes a sin. The woman wearing her head shawl in Turkey – for her to strip it off is as great a sin as our women in the West pursuing sexual freedom. Yet this Idea is like a wall or a dike, containing what is within or behind, and making order; protecting; holding back the sea. When the wall is finally broken, the culture, and the individual may be overwhelmed; but for others, the sea is discovered to be dry and the ancient tradition is bitterly disclaimed.



MESSAGES IN BOTTLES

The Calls tu Prayer, Transliterated

[read slowly, with protracted vowels]

Yu ar... Yu ar...

The Master.

Yu ar... Yu ar...

The Master.

Baal, the golden Baal

Yu throw down.

275

How, oh how iz the lite
 Come down, far down tu our harts?
 Yea, how, oh how do we lie, do we lie in Lite
 Far down, down, oh down in this earthly ground.

Come rize in our harts,
 A sun tu our eyes
 In this earth, so far, so far...
 From Yu...
 Apart.



Yu ar... Yu will be
 Our dying labor.
 Long we call,
 We bow
 With our heads tu the ground.
 We fall
 As dust on the ground.

Clear iz the sky
 Glinting like diamond.
 Clearer Your brite dezire.
 But gloom iz hanging
 In this ruined morning
 Wen Yu have not come
 Far down, far down
 Tu our utter pallor.

300

This ball, this clay ball,
 Clay ball, baked clay,
 Yu have cast
 Cast down, thrown!
 And we ar broken.

We look so high.
 He set us so low.
 Again I call, I call.
 All my hart I call.
 Again, and again, and all my hart asks how.
 In my house and in the hills
 So high so high
 My hart it flies.
 In my home, in my hope, in my hart
 It flies, it comes.
 He takes us so high.
 And then it iz gone.
 It iz gone.
 He set us so low.

Please gather now,



The breeze wanders out of the hills.
 It gathers where fathers
 And daughters wonder how...
 The trees are filled with swirling lite,
 Pearls and sparks, unfurling shoots
 And spires of desire.
 Come gather!

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Come gather now
 And rather than hours that pass
 So drab,
 And the harsh bowers
 That grab your hair.
 Come under the wondrous
 Spell of our Song.
 Come intu the wondrous shadows.



You Beachcombers!

You lovers, drunkards, thieves; you Artists!
 Men such as these, I saw on Cypress:
 They looked like men who laugh at folly,
 Full of disdain, and disregard for sorrow.
 They looked like men who spent years crying
 And when they stopped, all that remained
 Was a grunt as they swallowed their whiskey.
 So they looked at me with disdain and laughed
 At me, who still believes in a quest,
 Filled with drummed up hopes
 And leaning over the edge, as I am.

Perhaps they are really men as I imagined,
 Who have mastered all this sorrow.
 Or perhaps they have learned only this for sure:
 To say, "Go to hell!" to everyone.

350





From the Black Sea

The hills of Anatolia
 Veiled like her women,
 Seductively wrapped in haze.

The mother carrying fruit
 And behind her the daughter,
 Subdued and obscure,
 Yet to bear her fruit.
 So the hills, one behind another,
 Waiting to be discovered.

The mother carrying water
 And behind her the memory of her mother,
 Slowly fading into a symbol
 Of all she clings to.
 So the hills allure, illusively.



Venice

A bare-breasted woman standing in a gondola,
 Drifting down a muddy canal.
 An oil-refinery emits a gray and smokey plague.
 The rotted piers and pilings jutting in the waters.



END OF PART 3