

Wilderness House Literary Review 20/4

Robert Loomis

Orchids and Plums

John watched the street scene through the window of his favorite pub. A middle aged man in a faded striped blazer, baggy pants and a matching flat cap, had a table set up that heaved under the weight of what the uninitiated would take to be some sort of miniature green apples.

He opened his notebook and began to write.

Modernization and urbanization show no sign of slowing in Turkey's capital. Yet seasonal eating isn't going anywhere, even in Ankara's beating heart of Kızılay. Winter's sahlep (a hot sweet drink made of rice) disappears just as Spring's erik (unripe plums)

He stared at the words and frowned slightly, then finished his beer.

(check what sahlep is made from before posting)

He stuffed the notebook into his backpack and got up to pay at the register. He didn't recognize the bartender but he was pleased the man hadn't asked him where he was from. Ever since John had moved to Ankara he'd thrown himself into mastering the Turkish language, taking weekend and evening courses around his teaching schedule. But he still couldn't open his mouth without the response: *Yabancı mısın?* Are you a foreigner?

As he was paying, he noticed an older man sitting at the far end of the bar smoking a cigarette. Indoors. In front of him sat a half liter of draught beer and a plate of pickles. John considered this combination.

It had been at least a year since he'd had a cigarette. He'd never been a smoker at all before coming to Turkey. But there was something fitting about the odd cigarette enjoyed with a beer in one of Ankara's many grungy bars, or with tea served in a small paper cup at some Anatolian bus station.

He left the bar, walked past the plum vendor's stand and ducked into a corner store for a pack of cigarettes, then walked quickly, up towards the Kocatepe Mosque neighborhood, weaving his way through the crowd.

Su'dem was just how John remembered. He'd been holding off on writing a restaurant review, waiting until he could return for a second experience. But he'd had it in mind ever since he'd started his blog. From the entrance he took a picture trying to capture the scene before him.

Small groups of clean-shaven men in cheap-looking suits, civil servants perhaps, sat around wooden tables, drinking *rakı* and eating fruit, laughing, gesturing wildly, and from time to time glancing at a large table in the corner that must have been a bachelorette party. A group of students sat opposite them at a long table overflowing with small plates of *mezes*. In another corner, three women with dark hair and tattoos were sharing a small bottle of *rakı* and a cheese plate. One of them was sitting below a large government-issued poster warning, "Smoking indoors is strictly forbidden!" She ashed her cigarette into a paper cup.

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A makeshift stage had been set up in one corner. Two musicians sat on metal fold-up chairs, staring down at their phones with their instruments and half-full beer glasses at their feet.

"Hoşgeldiniz. Welcome. How many are in your group?"

"Hoşbuldum, he confidently parried. "Just me. I have a reservation for John."

The waiter paused before indicating a small table separated from the rest of the dining space by a rectangular column.

"Unfortunately, this is the only one available. The others are all fully booked," he motioned vaguely towards the abundant empty tables all around.

John kept looking at him, waiting hopefully, but the waiter stood there stubbornly smiling as if they were sharing a private joke, until John acquiesced and took his seat.

When one says "Meyhane," one says Su'dem. A hole in the wall that offers respite to the eager diner from the chaotic churn of Kızılay. A hidden gem that serves up classic mezes (small plates). From cacık (tzatziki)

Wiggling his pen back and forth between his fingers, he tried to recall what he'd tried on his previous visit.

to ezme, a spicy

"Sir?"

The waiter stood before him, balancing a large circular tray of cold *mezes* in white porcelain dishes, saran-wrapped shut to prevent leakage.

John's eyes widened. He pointed to a series of plates, naming them each in Turkish.

"Of course. And any hot dishes? The liver is our specialty."

The thought of liver made him recall the squishy, unseasoned slabs of gray meat-like material that his father would order at restaurants along route 1 that hadn't changed their menus since the 1950s. But on the other hand, what food blogging expatriate can't wax poetic about offal and sweetbreads?

*"Yes, I'd like to try it. And can I have a double *rakı*?"*

"You're a foreigner, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am American," John carefully enunciated, trying to hide his accent.

"Oh, you speak Turkish better than me!"

John couldn't help but smiling.

"Which one is better? America or Turkey?"

"Um," he leaned into the back of his seat slightly. "Both are good..." John gave his rote response to the question, usually posed by inquisitive taxi drivers.

"You're like a politician!" He laughed, and slapped John's back with

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his free hand, then rushed off, quickly returning with the *raki*.

John took a sip of the cloudy liquid, felt the strong aniseed-black licorice flavor on his tongue, and let the surroundings envelop him. The musicians were beginning to set up their instruments once again. The bachelorette party erupted in laughter. John smiled, taking it all in, and thinking that there was no way he would ever leave this country.

A minute later, the waiter was back. He covered the table with small plates of *mezes*, pushing John's notebook and drink to the furthest corner.

John reread the scribbled draft. "A hidden gem?" "A hole in the wall?" He frowned, feeling a slight discomfort he couldn't put his finger on, then crossed it out.

"And our olives are on the house this week, from the chef's village in Hatay," the waiter beamed, presenting a tray of green olives floating in a pool of olive oil.

Hatay + Olives + Free

After a second sip, John began carefully portioning the *mezes* onto his plate and took a small bite of each, one by one, pausing each time to write and take pictures. He finished his *raki*, then put his fork down and lit a cigarette.

He looked down at his pack. The EU-mandated health warning stared back up at him sternly. A man and a woman sat in a bed with their arms crossed and the covers pulled up to their waist. They sat turned away from one another, their relationship evidently disintegrating due to their inability to conceive. "Smoking severely damages sperm," or something along those lines was written below. He smiled.

The waiter swooped in and placed a paper cup, half full of water, in front of him to ash. John ordered another *raki* and read what he'd written.

The diner sits and considers the scene before him. Small white plates dance around the table in a kaleidoscope of color. This one is filled to the brim with cheese, dyed a vibrant green, and with a scent of basil and garlic that shouts over its competitors. Yellow zucchini blossoms, blood-red beets, and sleek strips of sea bass sheened in a delicate mustard sauce await, hopeful. And in the center of it all, an elegant strip of liver awaits, confidently unadorned.

Smiling, he dropped his cigarette in the cup and closed his notebook.

"I love this place! Anytime friends visit, I always bring them here." Another English-speaking voice smothered all other sounds in the restaurant.

Sitting at the table opposite him was a woman, roughly his age, wearing jeans, flip-flops, and a kaftan. She was accompanied by a couple who could only be her parents. A large man in cargo shorts, a thick head of boyish blond hair, and an oversized Florida Gators T-shirt pulled out the chair for a graying woman who was looking around with her lips pursed.

"Oh, I just hate the smoking in this country."

"I know, Mom, it's disgusting." The young woman's mouth crumpled

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into an ugly pucker. "But most of the more authentic places still allow it. They just go around telling people to put out the cigarettes if they realize police are in the area. Could you imagine that happening back home? As if the police would walk into a restaurant reeking of smoke and leave just because there are no ashtrays on the table!" She laughed harshly.

"But this is one of TripAdvisor's top ten restaurants in Ankara. And the waiters are so nice, I'm pretty sure they remember me. They always bring me free food."

Somehow, John's olives didn't seem as fresh and green as they had a minute ago. He opened the notebook again and crossed out "*a hidden gem.*"

"Excuse me, can we order? We'd like the *topik*. This one's an Armenian *meze*! And the *cacik*. It's like tzatziki, mom. And grape leaves and cigarette *börek*. A hot one for you, Dad. Then can we get some *hamsi*. They have the best fish, Mom. It's sardines, I think. Oh, and let's get the fried calamari. Dad'll like it."

The embers of John's cigarette seemed to burn faster and the tail of smoke snaked upward, causing him to gag. He thought of his sperm.

The musicians began playing.

"Oh, I love this one, mom. Look!"

The musicians bellowed the chorus in unison.

The 3 tattooed women started dancing as the table of civil servants clapped and sang along. At the bachelorette party's table, two women got up and began twisting wildly while the rest of the group shrieked and laughed.

The chorus started again and the whole room shouted along with the singers.

John strained to understand the lyrics over the American woman who was continuing her lecture. As the music and singing got louder, so did her hand gestures.

He lit another cigarette and held back a cough.

Suddenly, waiters swarmed into the dining area. "*Polis! Kontrol!*" John could make out. They rushed from table to table, snatching and tossing out the cigarette-filled paper cups. Panicking, John drowned his lit cigarette in the cup and searched frantically around.

Each sudden movement from the dancers, each shriek from the clarinet, and each echoing clap sounded like a police siren.

He looked down. The cigarette butts, floating in the cup. The ash stains on the table cloth. The pack. The tobacco stench on his shaking fingers. He scanned the restaurant, desperate to find a waiter, desperate to get rid of his evidence.

One of the waiters strode swiftly towards him and John shot up, flinging his cigarette pack into the trash can, held in the waiter's outstretched hands.

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The waiter furrowed his brow. "Why are you throwing away your cigarettes? The police come every Friday. Just wait 5 minutes." He calmly grabbed the paper cup and dumped it unceremoniously into the trash can, then rushed off laughing to himself. John could hear him muttering "*yabancı.*"

John wanted to shout a response but couldn't think of the words. He realized that the woman was looking at him, grinning. She turned back around as soon as he made eye contact.

Just when the song was ending, two police officers walked in from the main entrance. A waiter joined them at the doorway and chatted for a few minutes. The police shook his hand and walked out, not even glancing at the diners.

"Look! Mom! Do you see?" John turned red. "That's like I was telling you. And see, They're already passing out new ashtrays!"

"I wish the police would stick around then." The mother said flatly.

The young woman was right. A waiter swooped in and quickly deposited a fresh cup on John's table.

John sat back in his chair, arms crossed. The musicians were still playing, the bachelorette party still dancing, and the civil servants still drinking.

And the rest of the tables were still empty.

"And to think this is a Muslim country. You know, you'd just never expect there to be restaurants like this." John could hear the man say.

He finished his *raki*.

It wasn't until he stepped outside that he realized how much he'd had to drink. He felt light and suddenly alert, noticing the street scene around him. And somehow warm despite the plunging nighttime temperature. The lights and the music from the bars and coffee shops lining Olgunlar Avenue brightened his surroundings. And he became immersed in the smells wafting from carts grilling *köfte* and *sucuk* sausages that hadn't been there a few hours ago.

He stopped on the sidewalk, in front of a small crowd of young people huddled around one of these night vendors, and took out his notebook.

There is no better way to get to know the capital's cuisine than sampling the wares of its street vendors.

"Hey!" a voice shouted in Turkish.

Two men who looked to be in their mid-20s were standing in front of him, uncomfortably close, waiting expectantly. One was short with an unkempt beard and earrings, and his taller friend was staring with wide, slightly red eyes. They were both clutching *köfte* sandwiches. Their unsteady shuffling and physical closeness suggested that they too had been drinking. This suspicion was confirmed when the taller one opened his mouth again, releasing a strong scent of aniseed.

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"Do you know where the metro is? We're from Istanbul." Onion fell to the pavement from his sandwich as he staggered forward slightly.

"Yeah, of course." He gestured with just a little more exaggeration than he might have 2 hours ago. "Turn right past that coffee shop and just keep walking until you see a metro sign."

They thanked him and turned down the hill. John could see them stumbling slightly as they walked down the hill, eating their sandwiches. Leaving a trail of onions. He hailed a taxi.

"Ayrancı," John said to the taxi driver.

"Where are you from?"

"America."

"America! Do you like Turkey? Turkey is very beautiful.

"Yes it is."

"Cigarette? Do you smoke?"

John thought for a second before responding.

"No thanks."

As the car sped up he watched as the mussel sellers, the smoke billowing up from the köfte stands, the young people drinking from beer bottles on the street, the flashing lights at some 24-hour tripe soup joint, and the line forming to get into the late night kebab restaurant blurred together. He took a picture through the window.

They stopped at a red light. John noticed the driver had a plastic bag full of unripe plums in his cup holder.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Of course. You speak Turkish really well by the way."

"Do you know what Sahlep is made of? Is it with rice?" John asked, catching the driver's eyes in the mirror.

The driver laughed, and turned around, hands still on the wheel. "Rice? Of course not. It's made from orchids. You know the flower? They use the roots I think."

John nodded and opened his notebook.