

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Poetry Two Poems

by Adnan Adam Onart



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From the Caucasus to Yemen

To the memory of my grand-parents, first generation immigrants,
who sought refuge in the Ottoman Empire

She walks back and forth,
our teacher Melahat Hanım,
and recites the same poem again
while the apple of her eye, the honor student Ali
distributes that orange substance,
with a rusty scoop from a crooked can:

*A slim file of brave, light cavalry,
we crossed the blue Danube river;
and defeated that night joyfully,
an army of thousands in heavy iron gear.*

She talks about mysterious countries:
Transylvania, Dobruja, Macedonia.
– Is she making these places up?
And rushes through a list of long-ago dates:
Kosovo (1389), Bosnia (1463) and immediately after
(1469) Herzegovina, so difficult to pronounce.
She announces the fall of Belgrade (1521) — excited
as if it were a victory of our soccer team.
She takes the Janissaries full force to the gates of Vienna.
Then she freezes with the heaviness of an unexpected defeat.
*Now, she coughs, who cleans the German toilets today?
The filthy streets in Berlin, in Frankfurt, in Munich?
Who else, but the proud janitors from Anatolia!*

I am about to throw up.
This stuff makes me really sick.

*Don't be ungrateful, she scolds,
noticing, as always, my greenish face.
This is a gift from our Uncle Sam,
scientifically prepared
in the best laboratories of the world
specifically for the Turkish taste.*

Of course, I don't know yet
what the Marshall plan is;
already I know though:
this is not our delicious feta cheese.

*O, great great-grand children
of the magnificent Ottomans
who fed everyone from Algeria to Lebanon,
everyone, poor and rich, from Caucasus to Yemen...*

Without finishing her sentence,
she comes closer to my desk,
in her breath the usual tobacco smell.
*If you don't want your share, she whispers,
I'll gladly give it to someone else.
But your mom needs, she adds
tapping her pencil on my nose,
to get a medical note for your allergy
to American food
and our imperial epic poetry.*

Boston MA, 1999 – 2008

From Sea to Shining Sea

To us just a piece of history,
to her a slice from her life.
She lectures as we eat
our daily ration –
international charity.
On the rusty cans an alphabet
we cannot decipher.

She paces the creaky floor,
pausing at the end of each sentence:
A period of anger.
A semi-colon for nostalgia.

She does not say it, but she means:
the broken black desks,
the filth on the white walls...
They are all our fault!
Even the high-rise ruins,
the sky-substitute in the windows.

On her way to the door,
she feels the map
as if it were silk:

*The green was somewhat dusty in the South,
in the Northwest, everything vivid with the rain.
Our borders stretched from sea to shining sea;
you could touch the dreams in the air.*

Suddenly turning back,
without looking at us, she asks:
*Have you ever been
to the Everglades?*

It is so cold in our classroom.
There are tiny stones in our rice.

Boston MA, 2008 – 2012

Adnan Adam Onart, a Turkish-American poet, lives in Cambridge, MA. His work appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *Massachusetts Review*, among others. His first poetry collection, *The Passport You Asked For*, has been published by The Aeolos Press. He is one of the winners of 2011 Nazim Hikmet Poetry Competition.



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