

**MAHİR ÖZTAŞ**

A fragment from

**Feeding Desire**

*A restless world reflecting on the steamed up glass of the broad windows, and from there onto the curtains, swaying trees, the low hum of the waking city. We would open the door, and depending on the season drops of rain, the smell of the earth, purest white snow, fluttering leaves would drift in. Depending on the season, but the season was certain now, wasn't it? Together we would look out at the world visible from the open door; let's assume that we saw the same thing; even if our descriptions of them did not quite match, was it not clear all along that that thing which I tried to share with her, and sometimes thought I had succeeded, that thing with no name, was in fact a thing of nothing, consumed.*

*This was summer; the light seeping through the closed blinds casting wavy lines on the faded walls of our rooms. We would sprawl on our beds, trying to forget the days when we shivered under heavy layers, chilled to the bone; the desire to bask in the idleness growing inside us, but a lazy desire.*

*We spent long hours sprawled out in this dimly lit room, barely talking, secretly drinking each other in. Mostly she would start to tell a frightening story in that deep voice of hers. All of these stories related to herself. In the old days she would recall these stories in letters that were never sent to anybody, but stored in an old drawer. But now she had a memory, and she practically spewed it over me.*

*I'm thinking about the past right now. She would wander through all these rooms without making a sound, like a ghost. Both of us loved to daydream. Often, relaxing after making love, we would talk about the good old days, the sea, the sand.*

*She truly bewitched me; above all when she was by my side I never needed to tear myself away from my own world. At those times she didn't demand special words.*

*Finally, one day when she accused me of not showing enough interest in her stories - or in her- I defended myself saying, "Who can bear to see passion reflected in a mirror?" Understanding that this was not a real question, she fell silent. It was a hot summer afternoon. She narrowed her eyes as if she was sleepy, but I could tell that something stirred in them. She told me the story of an old friend who abandoned everything he had on the spot for his desire. This brave man - according to her characterisation - immersed himself in obsession, lust and evil for the sake of the woman he loved. The story rang true. I felt that the woman in the story was herself. A cold wind went through me. This is always the way. Women never heed the evil of an obsession that is directed towards themselves.*

*"So which one are you? The abandoned one? The desired one?" I guess this can be counted as a question. Her response was one of feminine wile, "the direction of my desire can change at any moment; what I desire right now, I may not desire by evening."*

*No matter how light the words, it was impossible not to perceive the veiled threat behind them. I never backed down. We were trying to get beyond words. I thought the time had come then to say this. I planned to say, "This is an old love. Your past, how you lived before, these do not interest me at all." Then she*

*would have looked in my face with a fury beyond words, and somehow I in turn could not have expressed this hatred in words.*

*Sitting silently opposite her, I examined her hands, visible through her glass. I can name a thousand reasons for my silence. True courage was feeding desire with shadows and cavities in the laziness of this hot afternoon.*

*Who knows, maybe in the cool of the evening her seductive magic would be defeated and I would find the strength within myself to tell her a story that would make her desire me.*

1.

The moment I landed in the San Francisco airport I realized that the totality of everything surrounding me, its typical unity, was slowly disintegrating, that there was nothing I could do to halt this feeling and that this was a state of affair I had had to accept long ago. I went to the conveyor belt and waited for my luggage. Once I was finally reunited with my baggage, I packed into it all the odds and ends I had been carrying. I knew that I would find hot weather the moment I stepped outside the airport terminal. That was exactly what I needed in this month of the year, since February was always very cold in New York. The flora of San Francisco and especially the plants around the airport reminded me of the Mediterranean coasts. I most certainly had not come here on a vacation. Actually, when was it that I had last taken a holiday? I did not like cold weather, but once again I had found myself in the midst of a long winter. Even so, my coming to California was not due to February having started with a blizzard. The whole winter had been particularly tiresome; I would even go as far as saying that that winter had been driving me crazy. I felt as if it was never going to end. On top of all of this, there was also the fact that instead of traveling a lot like I usually did in this season, I had been cooped up in my study trying to write and this unfortunately had smothered the creative spirit I thought I possessed. To make a long story short, the reasons for my trip to San Francisco were not just because of the weather, but were also connected to the strange mood I found myself in. Sam's phone call after so many years had left me confused. Anyway, whatever the reasons for my trip, it had at least served the purpose of freeing me from the spiritual oppression I had been in the grips of since the end of the last year. As I was waiting for the bus that was supposed to take us to town, I contemplated that this state of affairs could be considered just an annoying lack of luck. It was clear, though, even at that moment, that simply making the decision to come to San Francisco had led me to regain much of my feelings and rejuvenate my talents. There had been many occasions in which I had felt a sudden and very real longing for Istanbul, something we might call a sudden and unexpected remembrance of the past. And this in itself was enough to lift and revitalize my mood. Something similar happened as a result of this trip. Nevertheless, that February was fated to be remembered for much more than just this and to shadow all the other Februarys in my memory. The month of February was not always as lively as it was turning out to be that year. As I boarded the bus, I thought how Burcu had always been able to live exactly as she pleased, no matter what was happening in her life. Unfortunately this freedom was not synonymous with happiness. I thought how, without any doubt, Burcu had not lost herself just because of some of her tendencies that others found most eccentric, but because she was consumed by her failure to find the road to personal salvation. During almost all the years I knew her she had never been able to overcome her lack of success, what I could describe as her fruitless striving. On the other

hand, Selin's situation was different and so was mine. For more than seven years I had lived a life of adventure in New York, running around ceaselessly, tirelessly, a never-ending stream of exhibitions; hours spent in museums. Seven long years spent amidst visual objects, which Selin teasingly called the hell of modern art. Fragments from experiences we lived through, details, all that we have not forgotten or that we presume to remember. All this tends to accumulate as the years go by and at some point it surfaces and some of the mysteries of life are solved. What we have lived through becomes clearer, at least from our point of view. As the bus approached its stop I saw in my mind how these mental sparks made everything fall into place and illuminated everything in a clearer light. Showing us how we had distanced ourselves from reality. I have to confess that I have never really believed in destiny. As far as the past is concerned, I believe only in what I have experienced, not dwelling on what could have happened, and as I get older I believe only in what I am experiencing at the moment. It is impossible to guess what would have happened if I had not come to San Francisco. What is certain is that I would have been deprived of the opportunity of getting to know myself better and, not having been able to receive news from Sam, I would very probably never have been aware of what had happened. Now I recollect that past, almost exactly fifteen years ago, when we were living in Beyoğlu, days I, must admit, when we were having fun. I don't know if this was also true for Burcu, but it certainly was for Bora and I. This was followed by a mostly boring, hot and endlessly long summer, which we spent in some resort on the southern coast of Turkey. Now, as I was approaching the city, I could not escape the sensation that I was once again on the Mediterranean coast. The Mediterranean had left marks on my life, marks that could not be very easily ignored. As for Bora, he had met Burcu much later than me in a town in southern Turkey and had fallen in love at first sight. Bora had not told anybody, but during that month, which they had spent together, they had made love like crazy. Even much later Bora was still unable to face the truth, but one has to admit that Burcu was provocatively attractive and when she had set her sight on someone, could be extremely seductive. Anyway, I think it was much later that Bora fell under her spell, much later than that day when we had so much fun on the boat excursion to the inlets in the vicinity of where we were staying. At one point, Burcu and I left the boat and from Karaincir went to Akyarlar. The shadows had already grown very long when we finally came back much later and saw that Bora was repairing an unexpected breakdown in the engine of the boat. Bora gave us a look, the meaning of which I failed that day to comprehend. There was no reason for him to be angry, because he managed to finish the repairs only much later. Anyway, more time had passed than we realized and we were very tired, so as we went past a rocky promontory and suddenly saw an imposing full moon over the Bodrum fort, we understood that it must have been very late. I saw Burcu envelope Bora like a dark shadow. That surprise, at the very moment in the night when I had grown somewhat despondent, was a scene both mysterious and one that hurt me very much. I thought that I had missed my chance for action once again, or maybe I didn't think of anything in particular. I don't know, but when we reached the jetty, Bora held her by the waist and helped her to disembark. This intimacy was rather strange and made me think, even if I didn't understand everything, that something important was afoot. At least that is what I think now, but my intuitions have never been very correct. The really important developments, from my point of view, occurred when the others had gone back to Istanbul while Burcu and I stayed behind. That night everything appeared normal. The three of us sat under an open shed on the shore drinking wine. Bora rolled a cigarette while he recounted some old memories. Later, just before dawn, it must have been towards four AM, Bora, with an expression of weariness, sat

on a stone--which may have even been a royal sarcophagus--in the archaeological ruins nearby. So much time has gone by, but I still have a vivid image of him, visibly tired and looking up towards the starry night sky, with a preoccupied and at the same time inscrutable expression on his face. In the afternoon we sailed away, this time towards the Greek isles. The shrill siren of our boat had at first been barely audible, but then, joined by little spurts of steam, it emitted a sorrowful cry. A short while later we were already far away, sprawled on the spacious deck of the boat, watching our surroundings transform and become the sea. Bora was pensive. I presume he must have been preoccupied with the thought of what to do with this young and rather strong woman and this train of thought had drained him of his energies. What had transpired between him and Burcu the night before must have seemed as incredible to him as a dream you see and then forget. I watched them for a long time. I was suddenly overtaken by doubts about the color of Burcu's eyes, which was rather strange as I have never really cared for such details. I had been under the impression that they were the color of unripe almonds, or in other words green, but now that the sun was shining on her smooth skin, the moment she slowly took off her sunglasses, I saw the flickering reflection of the Mediterranean sun in her shiny eyes. That day her eyes had become hazel. Yes, I came to the conclusion that they definitely were hazel, hazel but dark, the color of a foggy sky. I had the impression that she was a girl who liked to behave and look natural. She didn't use lipstick, even when we went out dancing in the evenings. It didn't escape my attention that at times Bora also could not stop himself from looking surreptitiously and shyly at those attractive and full lips, which had become more definite under the afternoon sun. We saw that the blue surrounding us was getting lighter, bathed as it was in the sun, and that the white clouds over us were speedily flying away, while the increasing speed of the boat was taking us farther and farther away from the world made of the earth and white houses that were so familiar to us. Towards evening we reached an island, the name of which I don't remember. We were dizzy with wine and the effect of the burning sun. We all jumped onto the wooden dock, full of enthusiasm. We found a few rooms, not too clean, in a small hotel near where we had tied our boat. We were too tired to worry about small details like cleanliness, especially considering that the dinner we had in the hotel's restaurant by the sea was delicious. At one point during the night a warm sea breeze slightly stirred the candles in their colored glass containers, which had been placed on our round table. We were all taken slightly aback, almost as if an unseen presence had blown on our faces; God knows why, maybe it was the topics of our conversation or maybe the magic of that enchanting night. It was as if all the lights surrounding us had suddenly been turned off leaving us only with the flickering stars in the dark sky. Once my eyes had grown accustomed to the dark, I was able to see even the red light of a faraway boat. Then the light turned green, for some mysterious reason the boat had turned back. In the meantime the skipper of our boat told us that the following morning we would have to leave just after sunrise, for many reasons, none of which I remember. After having briefly shown our annoyance at this, we went to bed. I realize now that most of the memories of that summer are about long nights, which we spent in conversation. That is the way we spent all those days, flitting from an island to the other, in a joyous and intense, carnival-like atmosphere. It was clear that the beaches had been abandoned until the next season, because they were all deserted. As our boat sailed on, the small waves created in its wake washed onto the rocks surrounding the isles. Further up the isles, the strong light of the sun played gaily between the needles of the pine trees, which notwithstanding their thick trunks had almost disappeared behind a thick mist that had a cloud like consistency, while their unmistakable fresh smell literally whet our appetites. As I look back at those days, it seems to me that they

were all like this, an endless stream of songs sung all together, merry laughter and squeals of delight. The sun's reflection played in the golden jars of honey full of pistachios, in the bottles of pure olive oil, in the bottles of home-made raki or in the glasses full of wine, which were continuously being drunk to the health and well being of someone. The smell of grilled fish or of aniseed mixed with the smell of thyme or with the salty tang of the sea, according to the direction of the wind. Actually those last days in Bodrum, which coincided with the last days of autumn, were much more tedious than they now seem. I can't really pinpoint the real reason for this. Maybe it was because we were about to part or just because by then we could not stand each other. God knows. The last evening we met at the bar. It was a mild evening, even if late in the season. That year autumn had held on much longer than usual. We spent the night drinking and dancing till sunrise. At one point we drank to our next meeting, promising that it would happen as soon as possible. In this, at least Bora was sincere and enthusiastic, but all the others had become prey to a strange melancholy; we were all apprehensive about what was waiting for us. The following day, for lack of anything better to do, we drifted aimlessly along the seashore watching the stormy sea. In the afternoon we wandered along the streets of the hamlet, which being completely deserted increased our melancholy and the impression that we would never see that place again. The blinding light of the sun shone on the parasols with their contrasting colours, while the waves were crashing onto the wooden pier and onto the jetty. As I look back, I realize that that small group never again came together in any of the following summers. It is really true that even if we do not appreciate their value at the time, some things are destined never to be repeated again. Before going to the bus terminal, we stopped at a coffee shop, which we all enjoyed during the summer, and had our last drinks in almost complete silence. Somehow, just coming to the bus terminal to utter those standard words of endearment and longing and waiting for the time when the bus would leave so we could say our last farewells had given us a certain peace of mind. As usual Serhan avoided looking us in the eyes to hide the fact that he was moved. As for Bora, he knew that at least for a short while he had to act strong for he was to be separated temporarily from Burcu, who that same night had to go to Marmaris, for some business related to the boat she worked for. As the bus left, I was overcome with an indescribable sadness, but Burcu had looked rather indifferent. After Burcu's departure I walked back to my hotel, taking care to use the longest possible route so that I would have the possibility of being left alone with my thoughts. Once I was back at the hotel, the darkness of my room seemed unbearable, so I immediately went out on its small balcony. It was as if everything that surrounded me had changed, that everything was there temporarily, on loan from a different world. I sat drinking wine, with the hope of lessening the load of this oppressive situation, while watching the sun set on the town that had grown even more eerily silent. It is so easy to criticize and analyze others, but what can I say about myself? I have always had the opportunity of doing whatever I wished. I really can't complain on that score, but unfortunately, almost knowingly, I have squandered most of these opportunities. In part that is what I wanted, seeing them melt away in front of my eyes. This was always due to my blasted apathy and spiritual inertia. Time has gone by and I have come to the conclusion that it was this indifference and lack of spiritual energy that ruined me. I knew that it was not absolutely necessary for me to analyze and describe this confounded world, all this confusion. Such questions, which mostly we could classify as essential, don't have answers, but trying to formulate an analysis somehow made me feel better. I have never been able to decide if it was the indifference of people in general or their stupidity or even a mixture of both characteristics that I found unbearable. Finally I have reached the conclusion that it is the people themselves whom I can't stand and I feel

the need to underline the point that once the realization that the world was an immense garbage dump dawned upon me, I decided that I had to act before it was too late. Up to that moment I had not done anything. The reason for this was not that I was afraid to commit mistakes. God forbid never making a mistake, being always coherent. Such a thing must be insufferable even for the person in question, let alone for all the others in his circle. A person so naturally and inevitably good, I should say good from birth, would be the thing calculated to arouse the greatest anger in me. I think that it is because of such people that others as a reaction are pushed into the arms of evil. Anyway, I had by then understood my rightful place, but there was nothing I could do about it. Daily life thrusts us into a pit of boredom, which leaves us no way other than daydreaming. It seemed to me that this fragmented, chaotic and dispersed world was just a rough copy, a mess of various materials that needed my words to become a coherent whole. Unfortunately, what I was doing was quite the opposite, shattering and fragmenting everything I laid my hands upon. You can't imagine what a distressing and shameful situation that was. One would get into such a state of hallucination that one ended up blindly following the dark and distorted image that appeared in front of us, seduced by it, though knowing full well that it was a delusion, a mirage. Thus it became slowly clear that what we saw in our small private world was just an illusion that did not correspond to what was really happening. When Selin settled in New York we thought we had lost her completely, both in the sense that she would change and in the sense that we would never see her again. She was so completely immersed in what she called her art that she wasn't able to notice anything else. We thought that she would forget us and that we also would end up by forgetting her. We were wrong. About three years after she left Istanbul, Selin had her works exhibited at a show in Paris. Seeing her once again, being able to talk to her reminded us once more that we had to confront our past. All sorts of newspapers wrote incredible things about this exhibition. Things that Bora and I knew and had been claiming for years appeared in those newspapers in a distorted way. After the exhibition we met at a restaurant near the Montparnasse Station, a favorite of mine and one I knew Selin also liked. Since Selin was rather tired we could not really talk about much. Or to put it in another way, after having left her at her hotel that night I realized that we had not really talked about anything. Another four years went by. We met once again, this time on the occasion of an exhibition held in Istanbul. I went to the exhibition with Bora, who was not really keen on it, but went along all the same. I told him, without any hesitation and sincerely, that not only hadn't I thought it probable that I would meet her ever again, but that I hadn't had any expectation on that account. Our expectations concerning Selin were that once she had settled in New York, her love of art or her fixation with it, call it as you may, would have meant that she would be completely lost to us in a very short while. We realized that we had been wrong about her. That chaotic city, with its inebriating bustle, constant ambulance and police sirens, never ending rush, perennially crowded shops, well lighted cafes and the crazy enthusiasm emanating from the museums and art galleries, where Selin spent most of her time, had literally renewed and refreshed her soul. As I was traveling from the airport towards San Francisco, I thought about how coming to a new city was really a momentous occasion that renewed a person, woke him or her up so to speak, and that the sense of revival one felt upon arrival would never again be forgotten. I remembered the complex set of emotions I was prey to the day I had first come to New York and seen Manhattan suddenly across the bridge. The snow that had fallen on the city the previous week had not yet melted completely and what was left of it gave the city a dirty, but at the same time familiar look. Later, as I listened to the noise emanating from the bustling street below my hotel and watched the skyscrapers from my window, I was able

to confirm to myself that I really was in New York. That same evening it became clear that Bora was just as much in love with the city as I was. Actually Bora had been entranced with New York and stated repeatedly that it was a living organism, just what he needed. Nevertheless he reached the conclusion that for him it was too late. If he had come there twenty years earlier, there would have been some hope, he could have lived there, but in present circumstances that city would just wear him out completely. My sentiments were similar to his; I was simply enthusiastic, and the only difference was that I did not think that it was late at all. We were staying at a hotel on the East Side, or to be more precise on 20<sup>th</sup> street. That same evening we went out to explore the surrounding area. The things that amazed me were the fact that not all the buildings were skyscrapers and the amazing variety of restaurants serving ethnic cuisine. We called Selin that same evening. She was very happy about our arrival and asked us how long we were going to stay in New York. Bora and I gave different answers to that question, because we sincerely did not know how long our stay would last. Due to the jet lag we were suffering from, and notwithstanding the fact that I had had a very long day because of the difference in time zones, I could not sleep all night. Early the next day, towards noon, we met Selin. It was our first meeting in years and she embraced us both, holding us close to her for a long time. After which we started walking excitedly in this new environment. Selin gave us practical advice like how to cross a street and about other customs concerning New York. In all the excitement and bustle we could not find a lot of time to talk, or rather we were all talking at the same time, which ended up being the same thing, since no meaningful conversation was possible. Selin was extremely gratified with our surprise at every novelty we saw. She wanted to show her new guests, Bora and me, the Statue of Liberty, which she thought was something that typified the city and something that every new arrive should see. Our persistent objections squelched that idea. When we told her about our first night impressions, Selin not only seconded all our observations, but made also an enthusiastic speech. According to her, because it was a city devoid of intellectuals, New York was better than Paris. Really there weren't any. It was a city of people like us, people who in some way dabbled in the arts, liked to think about various affairs and that just wanted to be left alone. For such people it was a universal city where they could feel at ease as soon as they arrived. Plus there was also the fact that you were the beginning and end of everything. There wasn't that oppressive presence of a centuries old heritage. Selin was living in an apartment in New Jersey, which she used also as a painting atelier. We were her guests for ten days, after which we moved to a hotel. During our stay at the hotel, Selin picked us up every four or five days and showed us around, taking us to the art galleries of Greenwich Village, to the best known bars of Manhattan, and introducing us to her few friends. Sometime during our first week in New York, we went to a restaurant in one of the two twin towers of the World Trade Center. Even now thinking about it makes me shudder. As usual Selin ordered something for us. She was so sure that she knew us very well that usually she ordered for us also, without bothering to ask us what we would like. Selin pointed out the lights flickering beneath our feet, the dusk slowly enveloping Manhattan and New Jersey and the area where she lived across the Hudson River. It was impossible, even if only for a brief moment, not to be enslaved by the enchanting dance of all those illuminated windows and by the labyrinths that surrounded us. I remembered how one of our professors at the Academy had told us that an endless row of monotonous windows was akin to the rhythm of a tom-tom. For the first time I thought that I had actually learned something at school and that leaving it had been my fault, even if one could assume for a moment that I had developed my ability to reflect, by myself. Anyway the music emanating from this city was certainly not the monotonous

rhythm of a drum, it was more like mysterious and complex jazz music. Bora had fallen silent, content with the fact that the usual city noise could not reach us up there; he looked dreamily towards the dark and indefinable emptiness behind the windows. The uninterrupted stream of car lights, deep down below us, literally hypnotized us with its monotonous continuity. The fact that this continuous motion did not degenerate into a disturbing chaos made it appear as if it was all an illusion. Far up Manhattan, the skyscrapers loomed as a dark and scary presence and gave us the impression that they were just steel monuments and not something with a practical purpose. Nevertheless the last light of day, which was glittering on their glass facades and flowing from one building to the other, had an enchanting quality about it; it was an exciting festival of lights that gave the impression of having been organized just for us and which looked as if it was made up of an infinite number of crystals of all sizes. As night approached, the show got even more impressive and more colorful. After sundown, the skyscrapers stopped being black towers in the half-light; it was as if night had mercilessly swallowed them, leaving behind only the lights coming out from the windows. We were being surrounded by a monster with an undefined number of eyes, a monster whose immense strength reflected itself in its lights. The sky was a black mantle that the monster trailed behind him. A lighted curtain made up of innumerable windows. That was what it was; there was nothing else. The gigantic buildings looked like they were slowly swimming in an ashen fog. Down below, the streets streamed like golden rivers seen from the summit of a mountain, cleansing and purifying the human spirit, readying it for a more intense inebriation. Living in New York had always been my dream and I do not know why I had postponed it for so long. I think it may be that I wanted to hold on to something about which I could dream, because I was afraid that my dreams would end. As for Selin, her situation was different, she was no longer a baffled stranger here, afraid of the dizzying and deadly speed of this city, someone who did not know where she could entertain herself or where she could eat. She was one of the millions of people, privileged enough to live in that city and to have become part of it. When Selin had just arrived to New York, she visited the Italian and Chinese neighborhoods to find something that might have been a little more similar to the world she had left behind, since she was still feeling herself a stranger in a strange land. All that was in the past now; New York had no secret left for her, and it was her new home. This was clear in everything she did. She was restlessly active, lively and joyous. Anyway, by some kind of mental process I cannot pinpoint, I decided to settle in New York. This decision could not be realized immediately. I lived for another few years in Istanbul and then four years in Glasgow. After his return, except for that long summer in southern Turkey, Bora did not go on long trips. When I left Istanbul for Glasgow, leaving him behind, I remembered that it had always been thus. I had also left him behind years ago, when I dropped out of the Fine Arts Academy just before graduating. I couldn't decide if leaving a city was more difficult than leaving a school. I had managed both things and, having once left a school, I also managed years later to leave Istanbul. I had questioned the attraction of the academy, asking myself what it was that had convinced me to choose it. I think that the main reason was not a desire for fame, but rather a wish to find something to keep me occupied. This of course was not an easy way to do so, but it was a quick and appropriate solution nevertheless, for all of us, Selin, Bora and I. Actually my case was a little different, because I had never wanted to be a painter. The Academy and everything related to it was just a way to escape the boredom that was weighing on me. Later on I understood that I was better and more talented than most of my classmates and this made me realize my strength. I knew that I was much more powerful than they were. All this led me to make a decision and I left school. I felt immensely



relieved. As I was approaching San Francisco I was thinking about the fact that this had really made me a freer man; it had elevated me to a completely different level, one where I could be more easily distinguished from those who were needlessly persevering, those who did not have the courage to leave the school, those who were absolutely not more talented than me, but who thought that they were. Naïve tricksters who saw themselves as great masters, people who needed the hypocritical compliments of others to feel accomplished. The bus driver was extremely talkative, ceaselessly telling us about San Francisco's points of interest, the Chinese new-year parade, the old and famous districts of the city and so on and so forth. Of course here old had a completely different meaning in comparison to what we were used to, since it was the New World. Old meant old enough to attract the interest of tourists. All in all the bus driver was a pleasant enough man. He reminded me of someone, but I couldn't remember whom. Very probably he was a simple fellow. I wondered if all this information he was providing us with, as if he was a professional guide, had something to do with a possible wish to get a generous tip from us. We spend all our lives trying to imitate common people like this bus driver. We would like to be like them, live like them, eat what they eat, dress like them and make love in the same animal like way that they are used to. Our main wish is to have a life devoid of worries, a life like theirs. We end up by finding the courage to approach them with an offer of friendship, telling them that we would like to be like them, that in our hearts we harbor only good will towards them. The only result of this is that they make fun of us and behave almost as if they were shooing us away. They mention our incapacity of making a living; that we could never make love like a long haul driver; that we are like children. All this is stated arrogantly and rudely. I was also thinking that even people who claimed to have studied and risen above this level, were in reality not much different. Since the very beginning I had been different from these stupid people dabbling in painting. Self-appointed artists, pursuing prizes and titles. I considered that I was very different from those people who had studied painting. I mean those that went to the Fine Arts Academy and then put it in their biographies as if it was a great deal, those who put so much effort into having their work exhibited in a gallery. I had very different expectations from life and very different tendencies. This thing about becoming a painter had never really convinced me. Maybe at the beginning I had had the intention of becoming one, but this had never really been my overriding objective. I always avoided setting goals to be attained and this had the result that I never had a personal exhibition. I traveled, read and even if for reasons very different from Bora's, I never had an exhibition nor was I ever interested in starting to paint. Of course all this does not mean that I am not interested in pictures or that I had never anything to do with painting. It is a bit like when you are separated from a woman and this does not mean that you'll never again feel attracted by one. From the very beginning, my interests in art and in painting were theoretical at best. I think that in part because of this indifference that I was never successful, but I did not try to justify this lack of success, because I had never pursued it in the first place. I say this in all sincerity, that contrary to Selin, who had set out to make a name for herself, I had chosen normality and was content with my commonness. By the time I entered the hotel I had reached the conclusion that even though the academy was in a way unique in its field, it was not such a big deal after all. At the same time and looking at the matter from a different point of view, I have to admit that going to the academy had been useful, for it was there that I had discovered myself. As I think about it now, it seems strange that you meet someone in the school cafeteria, start talking about inconsequential matters, discover that you have a lot in common and this is the beginning of a friendship that will last a lifetime, notwithstanding the occasional differences of opinion. Of course at the time you don't

know if that will turn out to be a strong friendship for all your life. Actually at the beginning it is quite the opposite, but then as you go on conversing excitedly with the person you have in front of you, on extremely disparate subjects, it dawns upon you that this person may be someone special after all. As the years go by this realization sinks in and is confirmed. You see that this friend of yours is someone who understands you very well, the only person you really need. For some reason you understand this only much later, when many years, during which this friendship has been tested, have passed. As I look back I see that there were innumerable probabilities of getting to know all my other classmates in the academy, who were studying with the aim of becoming painters, but I had gone straight to Bora and talked only with him. A short while later, on the basis of this conversation, I had discovered that we had some interests in common. Later, it also turned out that we had met previously in a bar in Bodrum and that we had even talked to each other. I had not recalled this incident, because in those days I drank so much that I literally lost myself. It was Bora who remembered this and made him very happy. Those were nice days, but for some reason, in later years Bora always complained about his days spent as a student. I personally think that in those days, when he had just met us, Selin and I, he had somehow, thanks also to the long walks with us, managed to conquer his previous heartrending solitude and even if he was not really happy, had at least learned how to make his life bearable. Later on, when I had started to give serious thought to my intention of leaving the academy, I frequently found Bora in a silent and pensive mood. He would just sit on the shore and watch the sea without saying anything. Once I even happened to see him sitting in the shade, leaning on the wall, drinking alone. In later years he frequently drank too much for his own good. As for me, I have never been sorry for having decided to go to the academy, first of all because if I hadn't, I would never have met those two true friends, Bora and Selin. It was strange that I should think about them, because as a matter of fact I had nobody about whom to think. The only person I should have really thought about, Burcu, was dead. Even if I could not confess it even to myself, I had come here to solve the mystery of Burcu's death or rather to find the answers for some questions that had been nagging my mind. It was even probable that I had come to pay my debt of gratitude to Emre, Bora and more than anything else to those happy, past days. I recalled how Emre had wondered aloud on how Burcu had had the courage to do that to him. He had told me that he had done everything for her, as I knew very well, everything necessary for her happiness, without any hesitation of any kind; in exchange she had just left him, without having the least doubt about the correctness of her course of action, without any worry about his feelings. As I was entering the lobby of the hotel I thought that these were the typical complaints of a scorned lover, the result of the enormous pain felt in such a situation and as such should not be taken too seriously. He had added that women have a way of latching onto men who have made their money in shady ways, sometimes due to luck but mostly without any scruples, men who are in any case worthless, useless scoundrels; that women really like that kind. I personally thought that Burcu was not like that and that these were words uttered in anger and jealousy. I think he had said all this much later during a phone conversation. I remember his angry voice and all those broken, interrupted sentences he liked so much. At that time I was in Glasgow and Emre was particularly hurt that she had never called him again. As I looked around the lobby, I thought that in those days this all had not interested me very much. The lobby of the hotel, a place that tended to attract young people, was deserted. A small basket full of colored condoms that looked like so many candies was conspicuous on the check-in counter. As far as I knew, Burcu had left him suddenly, without even collecting her belongings and without saying anything to anybody. In his phone call Emre had, with a

whining voice, complained especially about the surprise factor in her leaving him and had seemed particularly hurt by the fact that she had not taken any of her belongings. This made it a kind of an escape. Apparently she had promised him many times that she would never leave him, but this had not stopped her from doing just that. I did not think it probable that she could have promised such a thing, because this was against her very nature. I thought it perfectly probable that while Emre was complaining in this way, she could be for example in America and that this would not surprise me in the least. The Burcu I knew was totally unpredictable, which was of course perfectly natural. I met Burcu in a strange way, on a beach at Olimpos, a place connected to my early youth. Actually I think that I saw her a couple of times in Istanbul at a cafe frequented by young people, but I had never talked to her before our meeting at Olimpos. That summer I had gone to Olimpos with Ceren and we went to the same small beach each evening. It was one of these evenings that the fact of having seen each other previously led us to greet each other warmly. The beach I am talking about was known as the beach with the archaeological site. Those staying at one of the wooden houses in Olimpos would first cut across the archaeological site, using their flashlights to pick out the way, and then would reach this small beach through which a small stream passed before reaching the sea. This was the meeting place of couples who loved to dance, of lovers. Every night innumerable couples just sat on the beach drinking and waiting for the sun to rise. It was on such an evening that Ceren and I had just swam in the sea and then walked along the stream that went up to the archaeological site until we had found a small restaurant where we ate. By the time we had finished our dinner we were very tired, but seeing the many fires that had been lit as soon as the sun had dipped behind the hills, we regained some of our energy and decided to go dancing. By the time we arrived there, a great number of people decked out in multicolored summer clothing were dancing around the fires under all sorts of pale lights. As usual Ceren had managed to surprise me. Her eyes were alight with a passionate glimmer; she swayed lightly, her slim body covered by a jet-black dress. Just as I was embracing Ceren, I suddenly spotted Burcu in that anonymous crowd. She was dancing, her face towards us. Not having met her yet I did not know her name. There was something strange in her expression. I had thought that I could easily interpret the state of mind of a woman dressed for the evening and dancing, but I also knew that frequently my observations could be wrong, because events had a way of developing in surprising ways. I still am of that opinion. Anyway we met officially the night when we went up the mountain, to a place called Yanartas, a place where there are perpetually burning natural fires. That first night, while I was dancing with Ceren, I was not certain if Burcu was looking at us or at the fire. The following night Ceren and I climbed up to Yanartaş with a big crowd. Young people singing and playing the guitar had assembled around a fire. Much later, that great crowd had finally dispersed and almost everybody else had gone down from the mountain in small groups; Ceren and I were among only a handful of people who had stayed on drinking wine. Just as we finally rose with the intention of going back, and just before leaving the light around the fires, a sudden shadow appeared out of the darkness. It was Burcu, who said she didn't have a flashlight and wondered if she could go down the mountain with us. My observations of the night before were absolutely correct, but tonight she looked very different. Seeing that she would be hiking she had dressed in sports clothes: a body-hugging black t-shirt that showed the shape of her small breasts and a tight pair of jeans, just as revealing as her t-shirt. So it was that the three of us went down the narrow trail, guided by a single torch. We helped each other during the descent and inevitably our bodies touched from time to time. I felt her legs tremble like those of a small and scared gazelle. At one point I had to hold her hand to prevent her from rolling down the

mountain. Once down we rejoined the crowd and walked with them towards the spot where the stream joined the sea. Burcu walked just in front of me with quick steps. When we finally reached the beach just in front of the archaeological site, she was in no hurry to sit down. It seemed to me as if she purposefully put off sitting so as to find an occasion to sit near me. We found a dark nook near one of the rocks, a place that had a rather frightening appeal in the moonlight, and sat down. There were many other such small groups all along the beach. I sat silently between Burcu and Ceren. I don't know how long we sat there doing nothing but listening to the sound of the waves and smoking grass. Slowly Burcu got up, walked towards a reed marsh near the stream and without even thinking of concealing herself, nor feeling any apparent embarrassment, calmly took off her t-shirt and trousers and stood there in her plain black bikini. I can't deny that this simple but decisive act was very attractive in itself and had impressed almost all of us. With her short hair she looked a bit like a young boy. The fact that she was whistling added to that impression. As she started running daintily towards the sea, under the moonlight, she once more became a passionate woman. Her body had something about it that could almost be called transparent; it was as if all her tissues reflected the moonlight. It seemed as if, no matter how long I watched her, I could never have enough of her. Her remarkable body had the enchanting, fragile and at the same time modest qualities of the semi-adolescent girls portrayed by Balthus. It was that night, as Burcu was swimming alone in this small far away inlet along the Mediterranean that I suddenly realized that I had discovered a new person within her. While she swam alone, Ceren, all the others and I watched her with a mixture of longing and apprehension. It was as if my body were engulfed in flames. The call of the sea was irresistible and made me feel as if I were all alone in that beach. I also ended up removing my clothes and going into the sea. I caught up with her some short distance from the shore. It was exactly like the previous evening when we were dancing around the fire, far enough so that we could not touch each other, but in a complete harmony as far as our swaying was concerned. I felt both the salty essence and coolness of the black waters at the same time and the waves were as if caressing our swaying bodies with affectionate care. Even though there was a full moon I could not see her face clearly, but could sense that she was smiling at me. It was as if we were accomplices in some secret pleasure. Repeating over and over again the same sin and resulting pleasure. Finally we both swam back towards the shore, our movements in coordination with those of the other. We reached the shore at almost the same moment and stood on the sand, our bodies dripping. It was that night that I swam with her that I first got to know her and later my impressions of her did not change. As early as the first time that she went to southern Turkey to look for a job Burcu had understood that she had to do something to protect herself from the merciless world she was in if she was to survive. It was as a result of this that she had had to create a masculine outer shell in which to preserve and hide her fragile inner world. What was worse she had also had to hide this from the people in her immediate vicinity. In those days, the roles deemed suitable for women were much more restricted than in our times and it was very difficult to overstep those boundaries. Burcu expended great effort in trying to protect that rebellious streak of hers, her masculine side. I think that this created a great tension within her and that she herself was aware of this. All the same it was difficult to change these visible truths. Burcu was after all a woman and a beautiful one to boot. Thus she was proud of being able to live by herself without having anybody to account to. From this point of view I have always compared Burcu to the girl in the painting by Balthus titled *Therese*. The one with the girl with the confident look and the crossed legs. As for me, my never ending boredom in Istanbul had finally pushed me on, as a result of which situation I first isolated myself from

my environment and later came to the conclusion that I had to leave that place. Suddenly I realized that I was having difficulty even breathing in the oppressive atmosphere of Istanbul. All sorts of disappointments had accumulated within me. Also the way I had left the academy had been somewhat similar. I found that I could not bear the oppressive environment of Istanbul, an environment so opposed to the arts. All these factors that were negative per se had served the purpose of spurring me on. I suddenly understood that if I were to escape I had to run away. Everything that surrounded me in Istanbul was extremely tiring. I found the exhibitions held in the art galleries sponsored by various corporations oppressive, the articles about these exhibitions boring, in short everything around me gave me the impression of closing in on me. Later I even started to think that the conversations I had with my nearest friends in Bora's penthouse were going to drive me mad. Maybe this was the real point. Everything may have been concealed within the most ordinary conversations among us. I thought that maybe Emre's fears were the starting point of everything. The long conversations we had on Bora's terrace may have been the beginning of the story, of our efforts to understand each other. I reached the conclusion that the truth hidden by the fact that we all found each other years ago, independently from each other and almost without noticing it, may have been of vital importance. Maybe Emre's fears were actually fears shared by all of us. Like Bora, Emre Seber could also not stand the fact that his immediate vicinity should be filling up with all sorts of people, and not being able to stand crowds he was rebelling. Of course one has to make an exception for all his admirers and readers, who never tried to approach him. In addition to this one has to consider that he was not at peace with himself. Consequently and despite the fact that he vehemently claimed the opposite, writing alone was never enough for Emre. The satisfaction one feels from creating something with artistic value or that from writing is much less than we imagine it will be and it is never enough to completely suffice. As a result Emre became more and more a person who was loathsome to the people around him. What is more, susceptibility and touchiness not being things one can easily measure or understand, they can result in other people being put off by irritability. I personally think that it was quite natural that Burcu left him. As I stood there in the empty lobby I thought that my situation was much worse. Just like Emre or Bora, I had not managed to live in Istanbul, or to cope with that old town, but unlike the others I at least had not closed my eyes to my surroundings, I had had the courage to face reality. I thought that if I wanted to remember the days when such a scary rumbling noise had not yet taken over the city, I would have to go with my memory to much earlier times. Gated compounds and new buildings have been built behind tall concrete walls all along the Bosphorus and sit perched on top of each and every hill that enjoys a view of the sea. The contact of the city with the sea has progressively diminished. Fires have been breaking out in the last woodlands surrounding the city. The last surviving wooden buildings in the genteel but faded neighborhoods of the city have been burned by mysterious hands with the aim of replacing them with concrete houses. The city has been growing in a haphazard way, like a malignant tumor. Every time I chanced to pass along the Kuruçeşme section of the Bosphorus I used to think what a pity it was that coal warehouses should be located in the nicest spot of the Bosphorus. Of course I also realized how that same coal was vital during the winter when used in the stoves of the city, or in case of the luckier people, in central heating furnaces. All the same not only were those warehouses very ugly, but there was also the fact that when it was burned in all the innumerable houses of the city, coal filled the air with an acrid smell that concentrated especially in the lower districts, the number of which had increased so much. Even when the sun shone, the air had a certain consistency about it that absorbed colors. It was this that on rainy days gave

that unbearably sad look to Ortaköy, with its decrepit buildings, churches hidden by high walls and forgotten synagogues. There were also a few positive developments. At least theoretically the first shelters for battered women had appeared. This was certainly a good thing even if arguably it could be called just a sop to our consciences. Maybe just like me, Bora and Emre expected many things to change for the better, but I was much less patient than them. I could not bear to live in Istanbul anymore; I knew that I had to get away from it. So instead of just sitting around complaining I decided to do everything in my power to escape. I thought I was already late, so I started to travel very frequently. Not content with this, I also decided to go and live in a city like New York, a place that was completely alien to me. I never even considered any alternatives. Even when I was in Glasgow I did everything possible to escape from my past. I think it is in part because of this that Emre's call, at such a wrong time and with such a subject, together with his rattling voice, surprised me, nay terrified me so much. I couldn't ignore the symptoms of lunacy in his talk, nor his sick tone of voice. Not only was he extremely angry, but he also spoke of unconnected things as if they were vital subjects to be discussed at that very moment. I listened to him until the very end, patiently, lest he should get even angrier than he already was. Nevertheless, whatever the magnitude of the problem, I really could not even contemplate interrupting my work, much less returning to Istanbul, for the sake of an adventure of a very indefinite nature. I was very busy in my house near Glasgow, writing a biographical novel about Count Balthasar Klossowski, better known as the painter Balthus. It was impossible for me to interrupt it, because that would mean that all my efforts had been for naught. That was something I really could not risk. That was what I had thought at the time, but eight years had gone by and I realized that I had been kidding myself, because even as I stood in the lobby of the hotel my thoughts concerning this work about Balthus had not noticeably matured. Emre had always been extreme in his passions, creating obsessions out of them. He had never forgotten, much less forgiven, how years ago Burcu had left everything behind, not told anybody of her intentions and went south, without sparing a thought for anything in Istanbul or even for Emre himself. At the beginning Emre had lost all his bearings in what had become an empty house too big for him. Getting used to Burcu's absence, finding some sort of consolation had proved to be impossible. For days he just moved about in some sort of trance. I remember in particular a nice and warm summer night. Emre had been sitting alone and in silence, while in the distance a sad song was being played in a seashore café. He suddenly got up and went out in a fit of mad emotion. The fact that Burcu had left him, had by then acquired an irreversible finality that could not be ignored even by someone as insensitive to reality as Emre. Once he realized that it was time to change some of his habits, he had sort of let himself go. From time to time he used to claim, almost as if he was proud of it, that he sensed that Burcu was not always faithful to him, but that this had not disturbed him in the least bit. This of course was met with scepticism by everybody around him. Nevertheless Emre clung to this logic, which could be better described as a hopeless effort to console himself. In practice what he was saying was that maybe she had been unfaithful to him, but he hoped that she had not made a blasted habit of it. Nobody had anything to say about this. Even though Emre could not find the confirmation he was waiting for, he went on with his questions hoping to get answers. Yes he admitted, Burcu must have been unfaithful to him, but she couldn't have done this with great enthusiasm, not with all her soul at least. At this point he looked at length at our faces, trying to gauge our reactions and ending with the statement that they must have been only small adventures. Among all of us, it was only I who agreed with him, or, if not, at least tried to understand him. This encouraged Emre, with the result that he insisted even more.

Like the rest of us he was perfectly aware that there was always some man around Burcu and this made him ask us if it could be possible that she had been unfaithful to him with all of them. Emre was sad as if he had just figured out what had been happening in the past and even that Burcu had loved him. At the same time he was full of remorse and repentance questioning himself as to what he had done wrong. He had found a strange way of consoling himself that come to think of it was not so strange after all. It was the realization that no matter what he had done, the final result would not have been different. That is why this state of repentant submission did not last very long and with a new-found and illogical sense of pride, as if he suddenly felt much stronger, he announced that he had never asked for a single thing from her. He knew that the love a woman like Burcu felt for him should have been a source of pride, but he was also aware of the fact that this situation could not go on like this. All he wanted was to get rid of his solitude. That's the truth unfortunately, he said, we are all alone, there is nothing wrong in that, but seeing the situation we have found ourselves in, I can't avoid being surprised, not that I care, because one does get used to loneliness and when one thinks about the worries one has subjected oneself to, all the effort put in the love, the passion invested in a woman, one does, if you'll pardon the expression, get disgusted by it all. Upon these words, Demet looked us in the face with a victorious expression, claiming that Emre had no understanding whatsoever of a woman's soul. The argument heated up, with Emre's lack of understanding and egoism pushing Demet over the top. What are you talking about, she had said, there may have been someone, you were afraid that she was unfaithful, what kind of strange comments are these. As far as I knew her, the word strange, was not a word used by Demet very frequently. On the other hand it was often used by Burcu. Demet went on by saying that on the matter of loyalty and self-abnegation, Burcu was a much a better person than Emre credited her with. She concluded by telling him that all this was clearly one of his silly fantasies. Demet always took very personally any unfavorable comment uttered about other women or women in general. I know what you want, she went on saying, that she should think only about you, that she should live only for you, as for you, you want to find her exactly at the spot where you had left her, you want to be sure that you'll always find a woman waiting for you. That is all you want; the moment you could not find her in the exact spot you had left her, you realized that you were on the edge of a precipice. Demet's conclusion: women are like this, your problem is that you don't know them. I remembered that about six years before this conversation, Demet had been married to a doctor and that she had lived with him for five long years. The description of those five years as long had been Demet's and she had stressed that word while saying it. At the end of those years the man had left her and such an experience had made her renounce marriage as an option for the future. She had said that she would not even consider marriage from that day on, after those five long years it would have been much better to live alone. Nevertheless she had admitted that even though one does forgo marriage immediately after separation, one goes on making every effort possible to find someone. After all, after five long years it was inevitable that some habits should have formed and that was why one tried to use every occasion that presented itself. Even though she had not stated it openly, it was evident that she was happy that he had left her. It could be read from her eyes. She had met that doctor during a party organized on the occasion of someone's degree. One of those boring parties, had been her comment. Actually she had gone there upon the insistence of one of her friends. She had ended up by finding herself alone and reaching the conclusion that nobody was interested in her and what is more that nobody was going to be interested in her, she had decided to leave. It was at that moment that she noticed a man, clearly a nice man, just as alone as she, standing there watching the

others. Forgetting her own situation, she was moved by his loneliness. She went next him, stood a while like that, met him and later married him and went with him to some far away corner of Anatolia. Later they settled in a coastal town. Her view was that, despite all the years that had gone by, he had still not managed to settle down, he just could not do it, it was against his very nature. The strange thing was that, notwithstanding this unfortunate experience of hers, she was not making any effort to empathize with Emre, even though this separation had clearly been a shattering experience for him. Come to think of it, it was very difficult for Emre to accept such a separation, to accept the fact that he would never again see her, that they would never be together again. Emre could just not bring himself to believe that she could have gone away without telling anybody and he preferred to think that she had disappeared. I recollected how we had had spent an entire day looking for Burcu for an entire day and that once we had come back, Emre lay down without saying anything and just stayed in that position like a dead man, staring towards a fixed point. Emre had said that such a situation was too much for him; he simply did not have enough strength to respond. What can I say? I agreed with him. As for me, the moments when I have felt so disconsolately exhausted are few. Bora told him that he should be strong, that with the help of reason he could overcome this situation. Emre stopped defending himself and since his arrival had not uttered a single word. As I think about it now, it seems strange how that evening his sadness had enveloped us all. Nobody talked, while in the next room Emre lay on the bed staring at the ceiling, utterly oblivious to everything around him. Having understood that Burcu had really left him and that she would never again call him, he lay there as if dead, ignoring even the ringing phone. He was like this for more than a month, during which time we were convinced that he had gone crazy. From another point of view I thought that I understood him and that we always postponed everything, never keeping up with the speed of life. It looked to me as if Burcu, with all her charms, had seduced not just Emre, but all of us and that when she disappeared she had left us all stranded in the middle of a space of nothing, just like a violent wave would leave all sorts of trash and useless objects lying around on the edge of the beach. The result of all of this was that Emre decided to dedicate his life to writing, to using writing as an antidote to his pain and rebelling at his own ordinariness. At the end of this arduous process, which evolved in an orderly fashion, he ended up being a famous novelist. At the end of that summer Burcu went back to him, but something had been irretrievably lost. Emre had been hurt, he had buried his pain deep within himself and not told her anything, but he had never really forgiven her. He had said, she has come back to me and that is enough for me, even though I can't be sure how long it will last. I asked him what he meant by that and instead of answering me he just shook his head and then with the low voice of someone who is confiding a secret, told me that Sam must have disappeared, leaving Burcu. It was clear that he was wrestling with conflicting emotions. That was the first time I had heard Sam being mentioned. Emre also told me that Sam was using his boat to smuggle either archaeological artifacts or drugs in the Mediterranean. Emre thought that Same was doing this for his boss or without his boss knowing, but was in any case afraid that this could somehow harm Burcu. Sam was really a boat skipper, whom I also met later. Burcu had mentioned to me that she was going to work in his boat during the following summer. According to Emre, the last thing he had heard about Sam had been what a young girl, an old acquaintance, had told him the previous winter. Apparently and understandably Emre had not told Burcu about this. Emre had come upon this girl in one of those bars where you can get cheap beer. Emre used to sometimes go to this bar and the reason for it was very simple. As he himself could never forget it, he had once found Burcu there, sitting in a corner trembling as if she was very cold



or terribly exhausted, either caused by drug taking or despair. With a deep sigh close to crying, she said that she had reached the end and that if someone did not take charge of her, she was finished. Upon hearing this, Emre had at first been very surprised, but then like a mad man he had started showering her with kisses, renewing his claims of neverending love for her and admitting that he also was finished without her. I had not been able to get anything more out of Emre on the subject of Sam. I only knew that he had embarked on a trip to France with a woman and that nothing else had been heard from him. Up until four days ago I had not heard anything from him. On the weekend my phone had rung and the caller had introduced himself. Many years had passed, so I at first could not place him. It was Sam, telling me that he wanted to see me. He gave me his phone number and at first did not tell me anything else, or rather I was so surprised that I had not been able to understand a single word. I could not understand much, neither why he had called me after so long nor anything else. At first I had thought that he had not heard about Burcu's death and that he was calling to enquire after her. I had no idea how he had got hold of my phone. Very probably he had got it from one of Burcu's friend, a woman who had called me previously. Maybe she told him things very similar to those that she had related to me. Maybe he had learnt from her, like I had, that Burcu had died seven years ago. This girl must have known my New York number, in the same way that she had known my Glasgow number. Sam told me that he already knew about Burcu's death, that Burcu's girl friend had called him in San Francisco the same day that she had called me in Glasgow. Unfortunately, he was not able to tell me on the phone the reasons for his not being able to come to Burcu's funeral, but added that if I could meet him in San Francisco he would be happy to talk to me at length. In addition to this he had a present for me, something the value of which he thought only I could appreciate. I was very surprised by Sam's phone call and I recalled that I had been surprised in a similar way, many years ago, with Emre's call. When Emre called me in Glasgow from Istanbul, more than seven years ago, I remember having immediately felt that something was amiss. Emre's tone of voice was even more worried than usual. Even his having called me was not a good sign. As I was standing in the hotel lobby, looking around me without really seeing much, I remembered not having understood what he meant, why he was complaining. I thought of it as futile attempts of escaping reality, or as reflections of hopelessness and worry. We all make the same mistake actually, instead we should desist from always trying to discover the reason of our existence or from trying to learn the reason for affection or love. Struggling and making special efforts are bound to be unsuccessful; we should be content with simply loving or feeling affection and let thoughts run their natural courses. We should not try to do anything else. Everything is so simple; we should just let our thoughts be free. Unfortunately we do the exact opposite; we are always trying to explain the reasons for everything and in this way lose everything without understanding what is happening. Everything is lost while we are busy ourselves trying to discover underlying reasons. We do not realize that most things just happen, without any particular reason. Separations, murders, love, they all just happen. The more I elaborated this line of thought, the more I realized that the real even if secret reason for Emre's spiritual exhaustion was this effort to explain things, not the fact that Burcu had left him once again. The real causes are not only hidden deep down, but they also get stronger with the repression of our passions, the uncontrollable strength of our desire or more simply as a result of us meeting the wrong people. All this had confused Emre's mind, it could not have been just the fact that Burcu was so independent minded. We should choose a point of view or a life style for ourselves and than stick to it, even if sticking to it requires a certain effort. We should let ourselves just flow in the current of our life style. Live just as we wish

to. I reached the conclusion that this was what was really difficult, this need to free ourselves from these restrictions. How did it all end up? Bora finally decided to follow my lead, but he tried to do this without abandoning his previous life style, to which he was so loyal, and ended up being unsuccessful. This was inevitable, because he did not have the necessary psychological and spiritual equipment. He did not know what to do and even when he did, he acted indecisively. He could not bring himself to take a firm decision, not then nor much later. When he finally did, it was too late, because all the favorable circumstances had disappeared. By then he could not even move. I, on the other hand, made a quick decision concerning what path I wanted to follow and even though it did not turn out to be easy, I managed it. I managed to leave everything behind, my memories, my few friends, my hopes for the future, my plans to settle down. With a small bag I literally escaped from Istanbul, first to Glasgow and from there to New York. More exactly Manhattan, Chelsea, near the corner between 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue and 22<sup>nd</sup> street, not far from the Chelsea Hotel. The moment I gained consciousness concerning my situation, the moment I realized that what I had been doing was to complain without taking any action, that was when I made the decision. That decision had the immediate effect of freeing me, of freeing my relations with art and the rest of the world. All right, it's a cliché, but I had become as free as bird. The moment I walked off the plane I knew I had reached a new world. I had become a flying creature; it was as if I no longer had a physical body, and I never had one. That is how relieved I felt. The moment I thought about the expression flying creature, which I had invented myself, I could not resist and laughed out loud. It was then that I realized how silent the building was. I looked around afraid that someone could have heard me laughing by myself, but my fears were unfounded, because there was no one around. As I have remarked, the hotel was completely silent, even though it was more like a youth hostel than a true hotel. I walked towards the armchair in the lobby and stood there a while, not knowing what to do. Very probably the reception clerk must have gone through the large door I could see, which led to the lounge and dining room. Having already stayed at that hotel, I knew that that part of the building was more entertaining. As for Selin, she knew very well what she wanted. She had come to New York in the pursuit of her dream of success, which had been hers for a long time now. This was the reason why and the aim for which she had come to New York. The wish to change the world by means of her paintings. I remembered the expression to change the world suddenly as I stood there in the lobby waiting for the reception clerk, who must have been engaged in some mysterious activity in the nearby lounge, from where I could faintly hear sounds of television and laughter. On one side of the lobby there was a small contraption to boil water, from which came the typical gurgling sound of water boiling. Near it there were tea bags of all colors. I personally have never aimed to change anything, seeing it as a fruitless pursuit. I think Bora must have also thought the same thing. Selin on the other hand wanted to change the world, or at least her immediate surroundings, by means of her paintings. One can say that when later she changed her way of doing art and started to package whole buildings as enormous open-air artistic events, she literally changed the way the world looked. This had happened thanks to her way of perceiving and making art. As I look back to those days when Selin had been in the midst of her quest for a way to change the world, I realize that they had been very happy days. All the same if Selin had not, years ago, met us, Bora and me, as she was going out of the library of the Fine Arts Academy, at five o'clock in the evening, as I remember so clearly, she would not have felt this need. It is strange, but she would have turned out to be exactly like us and years later she would not have felt the need to go to New York to be successful and change the world. For Selin to become different from us, she first had to meet us. As I

look back, I see that I can't say the same about Bora. I see that meeting Selin and me had not been useful for him. It is a great pity that I could not understand that in those days, that I could not notice how Selin and I had been in a way a negative influence on Bora. In those days it looked as if one had no responsibility towards one's friends. I remember the Fundamental Art Instruction classes. In the early morning we used to get the subject matter and then we would spend the whole day doing nothing, sitting, chatting, and even drinking at that early hour in the park near the academy. Then when we had almost reached the deadline, Selin would do something, be it a structure, a colored sketch or a textile design, that was wonderful, since she really had talent. I also would try to do my best. Bora on the other hand would not even try. We did our best to convince Bora to at least do something, reminding him of the danger of also flunking this course, but being naturally lazy and also under the influence of spirits, he would go back to the park. At the end of the class we would find him there on a bench drinking, God knows his umpteenth bottle of wine. I remember how Bora used to get excited when arguing about artistic matters. We pity other people, he used to say, but we are the real ones to be pitied, for we are miserable creatures. He used to shout that such a thing as having talent for painting does not exist; we are not even able to conduct our lives. We are just plain egoists, dishonorable scoundrels full of ourselves. We think that just by getting an artistic education we'll get somewhere, but that's a forlorn dream since we don't even have a sense of observation, we can't distinguish and observe what's happening around us. We don't have the patience that a painter should have, we don't live in the true sense of the word, we just think we do. This and much more he had said one day that we had been walking along İstiklal Caddesi and then in Cihangir for about five hours until we were dead tired and so went down to the seaside. Only the naïve admire a work of art, he said, intelligent ones value it in money terms. The painters we describe as being great, creative and all that, are those that make enormous efforts so as to be able to create a masterpiece that will define their century. They dedicate their whole lives to this end and once they are dead their admirers don't waste any time in making a caricature of their lives. We sat down at an open-air café, where he continued by saying that all of this was true, no matter who the artist was, it made no difference, it could have been Balthus just as well as Kokoschka. They all consume their lives until they are ruined through discontent and annihilation. At least in those days types like Kokoschka had passions. What is even more important, he had the courage to begin an extremely passionate even if problematic and scandal ridden relationship with that widow of a composer, who was older than him, what was her name, Alma Mahler, that gracious society hostess. It may be true that at the end his relation with Alma Mahler reached an impasse, it may even be true that he had difficulty sustaining the relationship, but Kokoschka's pain was not just physical, it was also spiritual and he had a close relation with his sentiments toward Alma Mahler and with what had survived from his passion towards her. Bora did not think that Kokoschka was able to understand that this passion was crazy. He also said that Kokoschka had a life-size doll, which he used to exorcise his obsessions and unceasing worries. Kokoschka treated this doll exactly as he would treat a real female companion. He had the ability and the imagination to make this doll his confidante. Bora said all this in a way that made it seem as if he was envious of Kokoschka. Apparently Kokoschka had even had the courage to take this doll to the opera. Bora's praise, implicit in this description, was sincere since he had always wanted to be like this, but had never succeeded. Bora had always thought it important to know what other people thought about him and had always behaved accordingly. Selin on the other hand had never considered it of the slightest importance. I also did not attach any importance to what people around me thought about me. As for Bora he was always

complaining, to every barman or woman that cared to listen, about his loneliness. Even though he sometimes would stress this loneliness of his and insist on repeating it many times, when talking to me, I did not believe him. I thought that I was wasting my time with him. Bora was always talking about how he was in love and how this had completely changed him. All these clichés were so obvious and tedious, he was always muttering something to himself about love. That strange itching he felt deep down himself, somewhere, which he could not really describe. He claimed to be perfectly conscious of that itching of his, but what he assumed was love, was nevertheless a game, the rules of which were self-made. I could not understand why he called love this boring game, which he had been playing intermittently for so long. Actually, it should not have been too difficult for him to understand this. He was trying to anchor his existence to love, but his attempts to get others to approve of this were simply useless efforts. In addition to all of this, we were perfectly aware of the fact that all these meaningless complaints would not change the end result. I was a little surprised at his comments concerning Kokoschka, because when Kokoschka had gone with Alma Mahler to Italy, they had visited an aquarium where they had witnessed a bug, which was being fed to the fishes, sting and paralyze a fish before it was eaten. Kokoschka had found a parallel between this and the woman next to him. As we were sitting at that café, watching the ships go by, I thought that I did not agree with Bora and also that most probably Bora also was prone to find such dark parallels. Apparently also Bora would have liked to behave like Kokoschka, but he did not have a real woman to use as his doll, he was surrounded by incomprehension and isolation. According to Bora, most of the time we like to pretend that there is someone who understands us, who listens and who will help us get rid of our fears, but as time goes by we realize that we have been kidding ourselves and that there isn't a single woman with the capability of understanding us, we reach a point when we are afraid of every new relationship. Bora described a girl, whom he had never been able to forget, even though he had forgotten her name, and was so much moved by the remembrance that tears welled up to his eyes. He was sure that I remembered her myself. Of course I did not, but did not have the courage to tell him so. Most people do not know how some regrets we feel nourish passions that we think have long been forgotten. That day that we were sitting at the café Bora suddenly started to tell me about this former love of his, including all sorts of strange observations concerning the places they went to and the promises they had made to each other, which it seems had never been forgotten by Bora. God knows how many times I had heard these same stories. All of no importance whatsoever. The smallest detail concerning the looks of a woman or the hidden meaning of a word would occupy Bora's mind for a needlessly long time. He would try to remember everything that happened and while doing this he would also try to re interpret it. He was continuously asking me what I thought, trying to understand if he were really loved or not and from time to time he would stop and observe my face to try and find out what I really thought and felt. Not that my answers were of any importance for him. Suddenly, maybe because of something he had said, I remembered the woman he had been describing so passionately and from that point on our conversation became more interesting and also more sincere from my point of view, with the result that we talked about her at length. It seemed very strange to me that he could not realize that she did indeed love him, but that is how love is, it needs the detached eye of a third person. Bora talked about her describing the most minute of details, all of which he had clearly been hashing over and over at length, before finally reaching the conclusion that a world without coincidences would be a really boring place to live in. I, personally, did not think that the coincidence that brought this woman to meet Bora had been a fortuitous one, but I refrained from saying so to Bora. I

tried to remember her face, but the succeeding years had erased any recollection of it. The only thing I remembered was that even in those days she was not a woman that cared about how she looked, much less a beautiful one. In those days she always chided Bora for being too sentimental and she came up with the strangest possible remedies against this perceived failing. Even though many years had passed, Bora had not lost faith in these remedies, but was always, according to what he said, postponing their application. Apparently he had promised to himself many times to become rigid, devoid of sentiment and insensitive, but had never kept these promises. Needless to say I found all this very strange. Why had he postponed the application of this advice, to which he attached so much importance, even though they had originated from a woman whose name he had forgotten. It was clear that Bora expected other people to understand him. I pretended to listen carefully, but actually I was busy analyzing my own approach to these matters, to my own relations to women, trying to remember how I had behaved in similar circumstances and re-evaluating everything. All these banalities had actually reminded me of a lot of things that I had long since forgotten and it seemed strange that they should somehow have remained in a corner of my mind. Bora said that if she had been present there at that very moment, she would certainly have started with her silly questions, like did he love her, how much did he love her, what did he want; if he didn't have an answer for these questions, it was because he had never thought about them, nobody ever tries to understand us. Bora was complaining, but in a childlike way, as if he was talking to himself, about the fact that we did not know what it was like to live with a woman, that we did not realize the related difficulties. According to him, he was lonely even when in her company; most evenings were spent sitting in the room, each with a book that was not read and what is more even though he thought we would not believe this one, without uttering more than thirty words. He was angry with her, he said, because she insisted in not understanding his frailty, his weaknesses, making it more difficult for him to love her, but nevertheless she insisted in not understanding. He said that he had never asked her for too much and that none of us could understand this. Bora had lowered his voice and was muttering something as if talking to himself. I think that certain remembrances pulled him back into a world of the past. While saying all this he was clearly very sad and in a state of suffering, but unfortunately he could never have been capable of living with anybody, he was destined to be alone, to live by himself in that enormous house, into which he did not let anything that was not his, enter. He said that wherever we looked we saw the same poor, lonely and unsuccessful person, who could not change his destiny. A vanquished person ignored by history, if not crushed by it. He went on observing that what we called living, was in reality nothing more than an effort to overcome this solitude or at least to come to terms with it. According to him, each morning he got up thinking of everything that he would do during the day, but nothing in that list filled him with joy, on the contrary, all the obligations and duties messed up his spiritual balance. He said that each night he went to bed with no other thought but getting up the next day and making a new start. Nevertheless he woke up each morning and found himself in the midst of the same consuming loneliness, the same pain, and this had been going on forever, but he had still not managed to get accustomed to it. Humanity, according to him, had a way of creating and imposing its own values, which it used to oppress artists. Intelligence and genius, whatever their manifestations, and very frequently they were labeled as craziness, were disposed of by means of a summary trial and the sentence was quickly carried through. Never mind, he said, this is only rubbish, the feverish nonsense uttered by someone, who has been unsuccessful, who feels a grudge against humanity. Whatever we do, whatever we say, it is all nonsense; our life itself is nothing but nonsense. In this era nobody makes a special

exertion for art, everybody is only interested in looking after himself. At this point he remembered, with an ironical smile, how Selin had had the fortune of getting away from this place and going to New York. I personally found it strange that he should be describing all the effort Selin had put into going to New York as a piece of good luck. Nevertheless Bora went on by saying that he himself had long since tried to get away, but that this was a good example of an unlucky person, since whatever he did, he did not get a result and that this was perfectly normal, since he didn't really want to get away. He said that Selin had managed it, she had managed to create a little cell, which she called a studio, for herself and for her so called art, in which she could hide by herself in New York and she had secluded herself there. It always ends like this, he went on, when they don't know what else to do, when they want to isolate themselves, they run away and they call the nook where they are hiding, a studio. Bora could just not accept Selin having achieved success. Actually what was clear was the stark contrast between the success of Selin and the death, even if only metaphorical, of Bora. He was in a state of shock and exhausted. His state of mind was conducive to crazy impulses. My conclusion was that he actually had a superiority complex and since it was impossible for him to kill himself, he used his heavy drinking as a path of self-destruction. He remained in Istanbul and since he had to go to work every day, he spent his nights in the most disreputable places, drinking. At times he just isolated himself in his home, doing everything possible to demean himself. All this he did to hasten his death, but he never managed it. I considered that we deluded ourselves with no sense of shame, that even though we knew it very clearly, we ignored it, we did not let ourselves be carried along by the stream of life, we spent our time with artistic endeavors, trying to explain them, struggling in general with existentialist matters, that we never tired of our exertions in favor of artistic creativity, that we wanted to attain the impossible. I thought also that the very moment we tried to approach a woman we liked or that we started a new work like writing a novel, we got lost, we even drowned helplessly in the endless sea of material that waited for us, losing all our bearings. As I was waiting at the check-in counter, I thought that we would never be able to learn everything about women, that there would always be a mysterious side about them and that if we tried to be honest towards them, we would always be disappointed. Preparing myself a cup of tea and watching the water getting darker I realized that impatient people, those that don't exert themselves as necessary, that are prey to an unjustified pride and an infinite laziness, are bound to be unsuccessful, and not just in artistic matters. Bora's situation was definitive proof of this matter. I sat in one of the armchairs near the window and started sipping my tea. Listening very carefully I could hear voices from the nearby lounge, but except for this sound the hotel was still completely silent. Bora had always been a bad example for me. One of the main decisions we first have to make concerning everything we do, social activities included, is--at least in my case--to commence something only if success looks possible, or not even to start it if it looked impossible. I would be dissembling if I told you that I was modest, but fame has always been irrelevant for me and I have always considered competition between artists a very silly thing. In this way I was also spared useless enmities and as a result of my efforts to write, I found myself first in Glasgow, Scotland and then in the vicinity of 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue, Chelsea, New York. From this point of view, Selin's situation was similar to mine. She was a strong person and I have always thought that strong people manage almost everything they attempt and they are successful in their endeavors. For example if they are artists, they become successful artists. I thought that Selin's situation confirmed this and since in the meantime I had finished my tea I got up and started looking for a place to put my suitcase out of harm's way. At that moment the clerk strode in and with great nonchalance told me that he hadn't heard me

entering because he was in the dining room where one of the people watching television had engaged him in conversation. I did not believe him. Since naturally enough I still did not know the man I also did not know how talkative he was and I concluded that all that he was saying must have been so many lies. If he had been sitting in the dining room, as he claimed, then he would have had to see me, because that room had a huge window. I knew this, because this was not my first stay in this establishment, but even if it had been, I would easily have noticed the fact that the window was very big. Plus there was also the fact that I had phoned from the airport and announced my arrival. To make a long story short I didn't have anything else to say to this man. I took my suitcase, went upstairs, and walked to the end of the corridor where my room was located. Before taking a look at the room I opened the window to air it. I thought that if we could only know beforehand what was going to happen to us and that if we could distinguish between bad and good, our capacity to resist would be stronger. Unfortunately, not only don't we know what is going to happen to us, but good and bad are almost always mixed together and this has an unfavorable effect on our resistance. I was surprised, because my voice had come out shaky, but I repeated to myself that we should never be tired nor accept defeat. I had a foot towel over my arm, because I knew that if I stepped out of the bathroom with wet feet I would leave a mark that would take some time to dry away. I told myself that only a stupid person would admire that which is good. The moment I looked in the mirror to see my reflection, even if I was not too keen on it, I saw a tired and unshaven face. I had to touch it to confirm its relationship with me.

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For a short story, "*Soul Mate*," by Mahir Oztas go to

<http://www.turkish-lit.boun.edu.tr/frameset2.asp?CharSet=English>