

Voicing the Ney

By George F. Woodward III

Big. Twice the size of California; Anatolia is a place that invites the imagination to turn in leisurely, hang glider circles. The central plateau rises some five thousand feet above sea level, and the highest mountains, the peaks of Ararat, to seventeen thousand feet. This is terrain that gets under your skin.

We are bound, my wife and I, for Konya on the inland steppes to witness the *sema*, the whirling, centuries old dance of the Mevlevi Dervishes. Our seats on the bus are good ones with space for our feet and a wide view on the world, but we travel no more than forty kilometers, aren't even off the Cukurova Plain, before we regret not taking our own car. The bus driver is fast and heedless.

This is our second year on the Cukurova. During cool months, charcoal clouds drop in next to the mountains and stalk over the flats like panthers. The sun burnishes the greens and browns in the space between the mountains and our house, so the fields glow with interior light snuffed slowly, inexorably by the dark clouds. Thunder percusses tin ducts in our ceiling, lightning irradiates the walls, somewhere generators go dead, and we move between oases of flickering candles and kerosene lamps.

In June, heat drapes the crops and grows along with them so by August we escape to the sea. The Cukurova displays like a peacock, colorful and extreme, though not as wild as the surrounding territories.

People have settled into sixty feet of topsoil on the plain. Nomads come down from the mountains with wool to market and to glean the shelves of the city. Every autumn, as migrant workers engage the harvest, tents appear at the rims of villages, then one day vanish as quickly as they arrived. Wanderers are welcomed to the Cukurova so we have pitched our tent here, too, for a time.

Sometimes I find myself aspiring to the solid life of the plain, to the goodness of seasonal commitments and predictable outdoor labors. Two rivers, the Ceyhan and the Seyhan cruise wide between low banks the length of the plain watering fields and expending into the eastern Mediterranean. Shepherds lean on long staffs at dusk; women fold their arms to survey a day's work. They seem satisfied with the crop and the graze, and it's a satisfaction I would like to get hold of.

"Come, come again, whoever, whatever you may be, come: heathen, fire worshiper, sinner of idolatry, come. Come even if you broke your penitence a hundred times, ours is not the portal of despair or misery," said Celaleddin Rumi. He was a restless man. I'm curious to see his tomb and the Mevlevi that keep his discipline. I don't know what he would have called us, fire worshipers, perhaps.

Celaleddin Rumi was born in Balkh, Afghanistan early in the thirteenth century. When he was three years old, his family, descendants of Mongol invaders, fled the new hordes of Genghis Khan. Celaleddin was conscripted to a nomadic life: Baghdad, Mecca, Medina, Nishapur, Arzanjan, Karaman. In his sixteenth year he came with his wife to Konya, already a *haj* and a scholar of the Koran. His father was a holy man devoted to the way of *zikr*, the remembrance of God that in Sufi Islam involves the meditative repetition of *laillaha illa'llah*: "there is no god but God."

It's said Abraham lived for a while in Harran, near Sanliurfa, before he had his visions of the Promised Land. It's not a tradition that surprises me. Terrain around the Cukurova is unexpected, sometimes sprawling and desolate, sometimes unbelievably rugged, the sort of land where life is tenacious and seems sustained by caprice; God haunted for those of a certain disposition. Celaleddin mixed his tracks in with Abraham's, Saint Paul's, Mohammed's walking in a different generation along the same trails through the same eye-piercing countryside.

Thinking back, it's hard to connect events that brought my wife and me to live where so many ascetics have camped on pillars and hid themselves away in rock and desert. I have always felt a certain synergy exists between people and the land they dwell on, and so I worry that some quality of the soil here will work its way into my blood, some insidious craving after holiness. I've told my wife this fear, lying together at night in our bed during thunder season as the walls flicker and the rains pound.

The earth of the Cukurova blisters into the Taurus Mountain Range as our bus grinds gears in ascent to the Cilician Gates. Karstic limestone from the plain rifts into pinnacles where golden eagles nest above twisting gorges. The ancient route is spread now, with asphalt and winter. The sky is swollen with snow. When the driver punctuates his arabesque song with a prayer, "Masallah," my wife and I look over the precipitous ledge where the guard rail should be, and into the chasm below.

As we climb toward the pass and the road narrows, the Turks become uneasy, shuffling in their seats, looking through tobacco smog at conditions outside. When we pass a crowd gathered around an

accident, everyone looks into the overturned cab for signs of life, but the body is blanched and untended: a corpse. Men remove their hats. A woman across the aisle in purple balloon pants gathered at the ankles pulls back her veil and is sick into a bag. The bus attendant comes and splashes lemon cologne into our cupped hands and we rub the lotion into our faces and onto the backs of our necks, all of us in the bus grooming and preening ourselves. The menthol prickles against our skins. I attend carefully to the sensation.

This is the route Saint Paul and Saint Barnabas took to Konya, then called Iconium. It's the route Celaleddin Rumi followed. They likely craned their necks as we crane ours, looking for portents in the sky above the black molded rock dotted over with scrub pine. They found their own reasons for prayer.

Prayer is defiant, resisting temporal constraints, reaching for engagement beyond all that is seen and known. It is an act of imagination, and imagination is firm ground on which to stand. It's the power that lets me conjure a shape for my life and slip into that shape when the time arrives--a spalling hammer useful for nicking away at the idea of death raised at the end of my days like an obelisk. What I nick into the obelisk, the cuneiform I leave, is my meaning.

I keep at prayer, not knowing precisely what I'm about--a dark business all in all.

Celaleddin wrote a book of poetry called the *Mesnevi-i Serif*. In his poetry, he compares men and women to the ney, a reed flute used in the dervish dance called *sema*. The reed for making the ney is cut from a reed bed, then dried, hollowed, and pierced with holes. The reed feels lost and alone, Celaleddin wrote. When the wind of God passes through the flute, the man, the woman, it makes a mournful sound of separation signifying our longing to be joined to God again in death.

My wife finds this poetry excessive. Prayer eludes her. She does not feel especially lost or alone.

Excessive poetry, mystical prayer, an incense of symbol a scripture of word, a muzzein sounding his call from twin minarets.

Celaleddin Rumi was chipping away in cuneiform.

Old calligraphic miniatures from Topkapi Palace in Istanbul depict Near East life in Celaleddin's time. Heads are wrapped in swaths of white cloth, bodies hung in embroidered damask, the Sultan presides, janissaries ride to battle in pointed helmets carrying garish shields. A pronounced slant mark the eyes. Customs have changed in Asia Minor, physical characteristics have softened over the centuries, yet, when I'm sitting at a tea house watching passers-by, I can see elevated cheeks burnt by Mongol winds. The Turks rode off the Central China plains

less than a thousand years ago, extending the range of spoken Turkish from Siberia to Macedonia, leaving cousins behind in Samarkand and the tablelands above Mongolia.

What inspired them to roam so far from their homeland? Was it famine, conquest, oracle, or simple curiosity? Wanderlust slipped into whole tribes. Marauders pressed the forward march, the rear guard left to fold skin tents and follow with herds, year after year. What was it that drove them, drives any of us, that impels humanity into every niche on the globe? We dream of what might lie over the next range, lured by our dreams the way birds are drawn by instinct, a species yoked to inner vision. Our hearts proffer us Promised Lands, Holy Empires, Manifest Destinies: a species full of restless movement.

Restlessness is how I came to wake mornings in the strong light of the Cukurova Plain. I want to inhabit the furthest reaches of existence, something I have in common with the ancestors of these Turks I live among.

En route to victory and the establishment of empires in Asia Minor, the Turks embraced Islam, which means, "submission." They didn't relinquish everything to the new tutelage, not when it asked them to forsake dance and song. They persisted in the forbidden, lilting tunes that healed infirmities and bound up wounded hearts during primeval winters in harsher lands, dances that had melded to their shamanistic bones. In the midst of their long wandering and seeking there were a few things they knew they had already found.

Celaleddin Rumi was Mevlana, "Our Guide," to his disciples. He wasn't given to austerity in religion. "He who does not dance in remembrance of the Friend, has no friend," he wrote. To the ney he added the ut and lute, the fiddle-like *iklig*, a seventy-two string zither, a pair of sticks called *zahme*, and the *kudum*, a double kettledrum with the copper cup covered in camel skin. Feeling the music, chanting to God, his dervishes were told to do the unthinkable. Rise and dance.

A shrinking world is hard on religion, knocks up against it, loosens the chaff; a good thing all in all. The Arabs and Persians had Islam to themselves four hundred years before the Turks arrived with their durable convictions--a difficult message for the old-line, that Islam could capture imaginations wholly different from their own in unanticipated ways.

What is it that endures for an American? So many nations and creeds on our fresh continent, so many plumb lines with which to measure, so many symbols converging and modifying, so that when they finally take us by the throat, we are unsure, for the most part, where they have come from.

America is young in centuries and unformed in soul, it's progeny more restless than most, like Mongols folding and re-folding their tents.

Brown hills, bruised and wet, push against the snow line of a mountain that seems poorly anchored on the meadows and floats in the sky, more mirage than rock. I'm reminded of long drives through the Owens Valley in California on my way to ski summits at its furthest northern tip. Watersheds there were the same dense, weather trodden brown, too low for snow, broken by stands of poplar decked in bright bark, and the occasional abandoned homestead listing to one side. Here, the ramshackle homes are occupied. A house with chinks in the mud brick, turf for roof, connects with a wooden shack. To the right is an unseasonable garden full of cabbage, any one of which would fill the arms of an old woman. The sky is washed paler blue than in the Owens Valley. There are no fences here. Soon, we're out of the mountains and onto the steppe, the nubbe of grass on the barren plateau tan almost to white, the flat accentuated by a few small, perfectly rounded hills that seem struck by the light with particular directness, as though there were suddenly less to the atmosphere.

Nearer to Konya, the land evolves yet again, and now we are in the Iowa of Anatolia. Earth goes dark and furrowed waiting Spring planting. The snow exhales a stale breath of fog into the air so the white sky and the white of the fields blend in diffuse, sourceless sunshine as though we were driving through the interior of a barium lamp. Trees are ice blown, wagons flocked.

Celaleddin lived in this starkness, felt wind suck by him off the plateau and into gorges plummeting for the sea, wind full of nicking ice that could scour flesh from bones if faced long and directly. Perhaps the elements moved him to his contemplation of death and his musings over the ease with which it carries away wary and unwary alike. Transience is the primary theme of his poetry and the wordless center of his dance. His dervishes wear a honey colored fez for the *sema*, narrow and cone-like, symbol of a tombstone. Their white skirts are figurative grave clothes, and the black cloaks worn over the skirts, a tomb. Ecstasy in mourning robes.

I'm able to muster a small measure of gratitude for death, for its cold eyes gazing into my own from the future, for the immovable rock of it thrown across my years to interrupt them with a verdict of finitude. The knowledge of coming death instills a certain urgency. My imagination works to construe meaning great enough to justify my days, roils as it wouldn't otherwise save for this fear.

I share my wife's rationalist perspective, but I believe anxiously, with reservation. Rationalism doesn't answer death, stir the heart, or assuage my restlessness. I give allegiance to the scientific and verifiable. I believe it to be the way of truth. Yet, when it comes to much that matters: to the ways of families, to the measure of literature or laments at a funeral bier, it is dumb as stone.

Konya is an ancient city. The Hittites called it iKuwanna four thousand years ago; the Phrygians, *Kowania*. In the center of town is the Alaettin Tepesi, an immense tumulus containing bones from well before the bronze age. An old mosque dots the pinnacle.

For all the ages this town has seen, and all the difference of its ways from those to which I am accustomed, Konya seems down home in the style of Des Moines. The eateries fill at noon with the sweet smell of *borek* and men intent over bowls of stewed meat, hats on against the cold, cigarettes smoked throughout the meal. It recalls photographs of immigrant America in the first part of this waning century, though the impression doesn't last. Gangs of women hurtle along, their velvet balloon pants swollen with winter air as though flight were impending, and the bright, impenetrable fog is full of purposeful tasks that put goat cheese on tables and children in school.

We stay at Otel Dergah where the bellhop is an autocrat determined to make us comfortable according to his own measure of things. Now we will have tea. Now we will move to a room with a better bed and a more pleasant view of the fog. His fussiness lessens our anonymity, and we are grateful.

Our itinerary carries us to every Seljuk edifice surrounding the Alaettin Tepesi, each bearing an impressively carved marble entrance, doorways being what Seljuks did best. We join up with the pilgrims at the tomb of Mevlana, remove our shoes and leave them in the bitter cold of the courtyard outside the mosque.

Devotion at the tombs of Muslim saints was outlawed in the early nineteen twenties by Mustafa Kemal, the military leader who rescued the Turks from the rubble of the Ottoman Empire and proclaimed a Westward looking Republic. A glance at the pilgrims standing with arms lifted and palms open before the tombs of Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi and the most revered of his successors shows this is one reform gone unattended. Prayers are vocal and earnest. Men pick at rosaries among illuminated manuscripts of the Koran.

Kemal's program hasn't failed. There are a few women tented in black, floor length chadors, peering through the slit in the head scarf as though from an armored helmet, but more often attire is from the villages, bright head scarfs exposing voluptuously full peasant faces.

In the tomb, my wife attracts frank stares, long and surmising, at her slacks and knit sweater. The Kufic inscriptions in gold, black, and blue tiles, the pitched cover of Mevlana's tomb draped in Islamic green and capped with a turban wrapped dervish fez, the carved mihrab and scalloped dome and the presence of the holy dead are only of aesthetic interest to us. The smell of bodies fresh from travel ripples through the crowd.

This human impulse to hover around our good dead goes deep. Bishops display like potsherds under glass in half the altars of Italy's churches, miters cresting skulls stretched over with papyrus skin. Even

death-timid Americans fuel an industry of posthumous, intemperate biography. Mevlana's gaudy tomb is only the local vernacular for a common concern. Scrape long enough at any piety and you come to the same unyielding bedrock.

The faithful surround us again that evening as we wait for the Mevlevi Dervishes to whirl. Diversity marks the crowd. Sophisticated Turks in fine suits, their wives in furs and make-up, sit adjacent to white scarfed traditionalists, bearded workmen, fundamentalists in chador. They are all proudly Muslim, and after a sonorous reading of Mevlana's verses they join in devotional songs led by an orchestra, minor tones hit with the ease of memory.

The Dervishes no longer perform in their old *tekkes* and convents, outlawed during the Republican secular reforms. The military, which in Turkey is in the vanguard of progressive forces, eventually permitted the *sema* of the Mevlevi to continue as a cultural event. They will whirl tonight on the courts of the Konya Sports Center. But this is cultural event writ large. As the first of the orchestra's moody hymns conclude, a man in the bleachers breaks into ecstatic utterance. I feel as I might at the weather beaten Pentecostal church along the bend in the creek at the rise of the Owens Valley.

Mevlana said: "In all mosques, temples, churches I find one shrine alone," and I like him for this, as I lean forward in my seat to catch sight of tonight's spontaneous prophet. I recognize this fervor, have seen it in Haitian voodoo and Christian churches and felt its touch myself. It is the restless human spirit waxing large and stretching beyond the last niche of earth, over the final mountain range, into the pitch hollow of space, and still discontent, forging through death to New Jerusalem. This is the supper the crowd sings for.

The Mevlevi Dervishes enter the arena. Their black shrouds cast somber shadows, they incline their fezes toward the ground. Each man walks to a white sheepskin, performs a solemn bow, goes to his knees and touches his forehead to the floor, sits. The cantor begins chanting the Koran, and the liturgy is begun.

The winsome ney goes under my skin and the thumping drum could be within my sternum. Music does what music can even before the dervishes drop their shrouds and stand all in white, arms crossed to opposite shoulders ready for the turning to begin. Each dervish bows his head into the chest of the sheik, whose lips move with mystic words, and then, as the dervish moves away he begins his turning, slowly at first, then quickly so his white skirt billows from his legs like the umbrella fringe of a toadstool catching breeze and shaking on its stem. As the dervishes spin, they raise their right hands, their left palms lowered to earth, and cock their heads at an angle that seems attentive and listening: *laillaha illa'llah*.

The intoxication of the dervishes is quiet, like the ney and the drum and whining fiddle from the orchestra, and it's a drunkenness that reaches through the crowd, and even I can feel it, though it comes to me as a kind of deep respect. Here is a stretch of imagination I can admire.

Their robes unfold as they turn round and round in four long cycles, and at the end of the fourth cycle, the Koran is chanted, and all the gathered join in, hands cupped before them as though before a fountain. They chant words I don't understand. And then, they utter an extraordinary noise. It's like a low wind when I've reached my destination at the head of the Owens Valley and am on the ski slopes in an isolated place and snow rustles from out of a ravine and over me. This noise, I learn later, is called the *hu*. It is all the names of God, all the names God has been called through the ages pronounced simultaneously, and if that could happen, this is what it would sound like. Like wind.

New snow blocks the Cilician Gates, so the next day our bus takes another route home to Adana, corkscrewing along a road to the coastal highway. The Mediterranean air is warm and clear. The trip turns drowsy with stops in every other village to drop passengers. My wife sleeps, but I feel the voice of the ney still agitating my bones like so many tuning forks, lightly struck and slow to return to stasis. It seems likely as not to me that the *hu* is what I might hear when my body stops, and my soul finds unwilling release.

The Mevlevis whirl with intent. I think they find satisfaction, a kind of arrival in their dance, which must be an ecstasy. After witnessing their capable liturgy, I believe more than ever that the mystic shares common ground with the rest of us, that we wrestle in different ways for the same high stakes. I'm happy to have seen the dance, happy to have seen the shrill, restless colors in the tomb of Celaladdin.

I leave with an insight. Satisfaction is a quality I'm not yet ready for.

It seems we've been gone from the Cukurova longer than three days. My restlessness is quelled to an endurable level, no more. Tomorrow I'll go again to my desk in the first bloom of light and cipher in the way of my craft. When dawn departs like the flash of a red bird seen from the corner of the eye, and the steady day moves in over the deep topsoil of the plain, I'll stop my work and breakfast with my wife and tell her, then, something she will find morbid.

When I die, I'll tell her, before rigor mortis sets in, cross my arms so my hands rest on opposite shoulders, right over left, like a dervish waiting to unfold. Place me in my coffin like that, for the requiem Mass. This will be for me, no more than symbol, no more than prayer.

It could be that I'll hear a sound then, like wind, and begin to turn, shroud flapping, and that I'll go on turning to the furthest reaches

of imagination, on into God who fixed this relentless itch within me. Bury me this way as a last feint at meaning, because I harbor a growing suspicion that God is the most restless of us all, that we come by our nomadic hearts honestly, and that for some, satisfaction arrives only by way of journey.

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