

# New Poem from Nazlı Karabıyıkoglu: “Hymn: A Coffin at the Gates of Topkapı”



COLD SONGS / *image by Amalie Flynn*

The head, decapitated,  
it sits on a shore, at some corner of the world.  
Desperation is what they feel as blood gushes out from the  
half-neck.

Death, however, has always been there,  
nothing new, an enslaving event.  
The name of the deal was predefined –  
“flight”. It has been around since the Order of Assassins.  
Part of us see the beauty in all this, even when the tortures  
last  
till the moon starts to shine over us.  
Sir!  
There you lie, your frail length almost pours out from the  
bed.  
And here I am, by your side, barren inside,  
yet my mind replays a moment with you,  
where you feed me freshly-picked strawberries.  
My worst nightmare is finding a way into my life,  
into you, through your flesh and bones  
yet my heart replays a moment with you,  
where you dress me with freshly-picked strawberries.  
Sir!  
Many calls for prayer have been sung.  
And here I am, can't look away.  
My devotion may be in vein, but what I'm losing now is  
transcendental.  
You missed most of it, as they held a mirror to your nose  
and checked if you still breathed. So beautifully you lay  
there.  
Before this fate, I was as effective as a human shield.  
Here I am, bitter as rock, by the frilled duvets,  
thinking how we must keep you alive  
and not sickly-yellow and quiet like this.  
See? I'm here by the frilled duvets, ice cold,  
thinking how I crave to coil up next to you.  
Sir!

We finally made peace with death. First our eyes  
watched the floors, then our fists beat our chests.  
Distances reached, horizons obtained, flasks of

scarce water and worn sheaths. Almost everyone lost their sons to this war. Our sons. Our people. They believed in the protection of their shields and wanted to go as far as it got them, is that why we say our hymns for our sons, on and on for days? Is this our fate?

I decided I'll surpass fate and kismet and luck or whatever. So here I am, standing before that reckless hope. I grabbed it by the chin, pushed it against a wall and I let anger take control. I asked it, and I was quite sincere about it too, "How is it that death gets in?"

The way you put your head on my head,  
lifeless, breathless, heavy.  
Your word is my law, and I stand by its chime.  
With largest oceans behind my back,  
you were my creation, and I gave you away.  
Your first steps, your first words, have been my challenge.  
And the way you put your shoulders on my legs.  
Sir!

Greatest storms whirled inside me, and, oh, I prayed  
to the Almighty; to His holiness, I presented all of my  
organs,  
but they pulled out my womb, or what's left of it,  
and even then, all that mattered was you, sir.

Something penetrates, once, twice, my spleen  
watches it happen, smells pleasant, like linden, my  
favorite, something to go for a child is being  
created, from the char of my liver, my flesh puffs,  
my flesh grows fat,  
count those things that penetrate me, arms maybe,  
one, two and three,  
stop there, stop at the second syllable of my name,

I did not do this to  
me, I did not choose to carry this burden

Beings must produce, yet I'm barren inside.  
Your look is my law, and I stand by its tingle.  
With vastest moors behind me  
you were my darling, and I gave you away.  
Your first words, *my sultan, your highness*, have been my  
challenge.  
Beings must produce, yet I'm barren inside, and you're lovely  
inside.  
That's what you said

All this glory and all these gifts, what use do  
they serve, I pondered for  
a long time and I could not find the answer. I knit  
for a long time, laces  
and wools too, wore them in the cold maroon rooms  
of this palace, in  
the cold of my own body, cold, songs were cold, my  
violin was warm,  
only to me. They took me right away, and no  
surprise there, I was  
pretty, I stayed quiet when they split my legs, but  
I'm known for  
kicking quite hard. How funny, the way things  
change so much so fast,  
we were a thousand and now I'm just one, do the  
winds always bring injustice with them or does it  
travel in the pockets of soldiers?

Crying my lungs out, biting my tongue, fires scorching my  
stomach, do these all go together for me now?  
Or have I just comprehended death and broken apart while at  
it?  
If we can't breathe where the dead go,  
tears can flood, for the duration of the earth's age even,

quail with rice or grape compost.  
He found his place in the history books  
as did I.  
It takes courage to stand before a dagger; I did,  
I stood still as a brick and I shed tears.  
If it wasn't for your shadow, I'd call you my child,  
my life, my signature, the one that makes me get lost in those  
oceans.  
Don't be hurt, because I'm ordinary, I think you'll outlive  
me.  
You'll have no idea though how we managed to get that life out  
of you.  
I bit my tongue, held back at every chance, and saved the pain  
along my spine.  
My womb dried off and shrunk, they pulled it out, but I  
will not give up on your scent.  
I yearn for your chest to rise up to the highest,  
for you to take one deep breath.  
If it wasn't for your soul, I'd call you my child,  
my flesh, my bone, the one that makes a prisoner out of me.  
Don't be hurt, because I'm ordinary, you'll outlive me.  
I think I see the blue of your eyes again, yes.  
You'll have no idea though, what getting that life out of you  
cost us.  
I bit every part of me within my reach, saved the pain deep in  
me.  
The nightingale dried off and shrunk, they pulled it out of  
me,  
but I will not give up on you.  
How hard it was to bring you to life!  
If it wasn't for your soul, I'd call you my child.  
  
Sign off my sentence, my tears are my sin.  
Tightly tie the rope around my neck  
and tightly tie a knot to the rope that goes nowhere.

***Translator's Note:*** The story, although fiction, sits in actual

history, and gives us some pointers towards having an understanding of era and geography. Topkapi Palace is in modern day Turkey, and was mostly used as the emperor's residency during the Ottoman Empire's rule between 13th and early 20th century. The Order of Assassins, Hashashiyān or Hashīshīyya, was a radical Nizari Isma'ili sect that assassinated Muslim and Christian leaders before that time period. The ordeal of flight, as in the work towards enabling humans to fly by any means, caused controversy in the Muslim world in the past, since it is simply unnatural for humans to fly, but attempts are encountered in Ottoman history. The story, too, is likely placed in a time period where such attempts stir political balances.