

Unpacking

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I.

Immigrants arrive with two suitcases that their kids schlep around their entire lives, looking for a place to set them down.

II.

His bright blue eyes would watch me from the fireplace mantle. They'd follow me around as I pirouetted and cartwheeled around the too-small room crammed with too-large furniture. We hadn't used the fireplace in years, since it wasn't safe and there was no time for someone to come clean it. When I turned, just like my dance teacher had taught me, I chose a center point to spot—I spotted the left blue eye. And sometimes, when my gaze would shift to the right eye or down to the Mona Lisa closed-mouth grin, I would falter like a top off its axis. Then my mother would shout at me in Turkish from the other room to be careful before I would start spinning, spotting, spiraling again.

They were my grandfather's eyes, or so I thought. I had never met either of my grandfathers. They had died before I was born, or so I thought, instilling a precocious feeling of being born too late, an intimate knowledge of life preceding my own, grandfatherless, time. I would learn the subsequent angst associated with

this feeling decades later: *epigonenhaft*. As a child, I imagined a world populated by grandmothers alone.

In Turkish, I knew the two words for grandmother: the maternal *anneanne* and the paternal *babaanne*. But, in the pragmatics of diasporic language acquisition, I had never learned the word for grandfather, out of lack of necessity. When I had asked my mother who the man in the picture was, she explained, “that’s Atatürk. Ata is like baba, father.” So, this was my mother’s father, my grandfather, I had thought. This would explain why my *anneanne*’s eyes would go glassy as she gazed at the portrait adoringly, saying, “çok iyi bir adamdı.” I would feel sad for her for the husband she lost. Long he sat in his place of veneration at the center of the mantle place, surrounded by family photos, dance recital trophies, school certificates, bouquets of flowers that withered and calcified in a house full of people too busy to care or notice, eventually camouflaging.

It wasn’t until years later, when I saw a picture of *the* Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the father of the Republic of Turkey, in a high school history textbook, that I realized my misunderstanding. Either all Turkish grandfathers looked this one way, or he was not my grandfather at all. By then, the picture had been put away in the dining room China cabinet, after yet another parental dispute about the legacy of the place they left, under piles of documents dating back decades, safe from the dust but lost for easy finding.

Here?

III.

The hallways are chaos, the home ec teacher happened to have the TV on and heard the news, so his students are our intel. Nervous giggles wondering if we’ll get a half day. But a second plane hitting cannot be chalked up to coincidence or mere misfortune. It sinks in. Our stomachs drop. Most of our parents work in the city. Friends take friends, classmates, home with them on the bus. The bus drivers

don't ask. It's important that no one is home alone, waiting for a phone call that won't come because the system is overloaded. Eyes glued to the screen, mouths covered, generations together taking it in on the basement tube TV, the same images, every time a surprise, wondering if it will play out differently if we think "please don't" hard enough. We watch the buildings topple like Jenga blocks, we try to slide a piece back into place before it's too late. My best friend's mom reminds us to eat and hands us a plate of something we chew and swallow without tasting. The smoke billows towards us in black waves. (Years later, I'm convinced I must have imagined this and Google it to see for sure.)

The TV is on for weeks and weeks and weeks. We spend more time listening to pundits talk than each other. We've memorized the looping images, we see them in our sleep, we can describe them with our eyes shut. Soon, there is talk of war. In my 7th grade social studies class, we're learning about the 1960s, Vietnam. We listen to protest songs, we learn about youth culture. We listen to "Blowin' in the Wind" and "Born in the U.S.A." and have to select one to visually represent in our wide-ruled composition notebooks. I'm bad at drawing but handy with a glue stick. I make a collage in red, white, and blue.

A girl across the class sneers at me. "You weren't born here anyway, why are you even making one?" But I was born here, and besides, I'm trying to maintain my perfect notebook grade. "Where's your headscarf, huh?" a boy snickers. They're joking, only it doesn't feel funny. The teacher says nothing, he turns up the Springsteen. They insist that being Middle Eastern means that I must speak the suspicious language now piped into our homes on the nightly news. They can't know that Arabic was actually my dad's first language, which he still lovingly screams into the phone to *babaanne*, a relic of when he first moved here, when the connection was so unstable, they might as well have conversed by stretching a string across the wide ocean and talking into used cans of *İpek* tomato paste. "Tell your grandmother to stop bombing us," the first girl says. This one is said with a laugh in her voice but is not a joke. I think of my grandmothers on opposite sides

of the strait in Istanbul, *anneanne* gazing at Atatürk's twin portrait, *babaanne* shouting into her twin receiver, and wonder what they have to do with all this.

IV.

I'm filling out my college applications with my best friend at my dining room table. They are handwritten in ink on paper and my mom is supervising us to make sure we're writing neatly enough, our unpracticed small caps crammed into tiny boxes. We start with biographical information, and I get to "citizenship" and need to check off either U.S. or non-U.S. Both are true, but there's no room for two, there is no "and," only "or." I remember from my guidance counselor that if you fill out your form erroneously, admissions may discard it. I don't want to lie. They only care about the American one, my mom clarifies. This feels safe yet insufficient. I remember hearing about illegal aliens on the news and I screw up my courage to ask. "Mom, I remember you said that you weren't citizens when I was born. Are we...are you...allowed to be here?" Yes, she laughs, she and my dad received their citizenships in 1992, when I was three and my sister was nine. The year is 2006, and Congress is debating the phenomenon of "anchor babies." My parents are jewelers and I imagine myself being wrought from a heavy metal.

V.

As a kid of immigrants, I always feel on the verge of being found out. Like one of those '90s misfit flicks without the makeover. Theater is where misfits thrive and can feel their big feelings for praise instead of punishment. It is a long con, one where I belong. I start off-script when I'm three or four, chasing my big sister around her school playground until she gets tuckered out and I can corner her and her friends long enough to force them to listen to one of my self-written knock-knock jokes. None of the punchlines make any sense, but that is beside the point. Their laughter is what I crave. My lust for the spotlight grows. In my third-grade dance recital, I get chosen to lipsync the first minute of a song called "I Wanna Be a Rockette" before the rest of my class comes in kicking with top hats and canes. *My big break.*

Once I get to the tenth grade, my parents make it clear that the theater hobby has gone on long enough. I need to focus on my studies rather than pleasures that will lead, if not nowhere fast, then possibly to a regional theater outside of Poughkeepsie, slowly. A life that would not be worth my parents' having sacrificed theirs. My biggest rebellion is continuing to act in musicals when they've told me not to, but I know the jig is up. My voice teacher and my friends' parents ask me where I'm auditioning for college. I retake my SATs.

I was a ham in front of everyone else but terrified to perform in front of my family. That vulnerability of being most like the self I wanted to be and unlike the self they knew me as felt too raw. I couldn't let them see me.

My mom sneaks in with flowers and sits in the back.

VI.

Words I apparently can't pronounce correctly until I leave home for college: Iron (Not: I-Ron or *ayran*). Sword (Not: Swvord). Arabic (Not: a-RAB-ic).

Words I misuse until I leave home for college because we use them this way at home: Higher (a verb meaning to raise the volume of a TV or radio). Open (a verb meaning to turn on an electronic device, such as a lamp. For the opposite meaning, see "close").

Words I can't *not* pronounce the Turkish way, even today: Hummus. Kismet. İstanbul. Any surname beginning with the prefix "Öz" (See: famous authors and a former U.S. senatorial candidate and charlatan, but not the wizard behind the curtain.)

Turkish phrases that I will never be able to translate into English without sounding maudlin or ironic: Hadi bakalım (let's see). Kolay gelsin (take it easy). Afiyet olsun (bon appétit). İnşallah (God willing, hopefully).

My high school thespian friends try to imitate my parents' accents. I'm good at accents, and can rattle off Italian, French, German, Russian, Southern, and Cockney. Even though I can recognize any other Turk speaking English from the very first syllable with my eyes closed, I just can't hear my parents' accents. Not until I leave home for college.

VII.

türken: to fake; to make up; to fabricate

White Germans are often indignant when I explain that I did not start learning German until my first year of college. Such a challenging language, they reason, presupposes birthright or, at minimum, early intervention. When I studied abroad in Köln as a sophomore, I ruffled many an eagle feather with my unrepentant audacity of pronouncing German well. While *Wander*-ing through the *Wald* and arriving at the *Gipfel* just in time to enjoy the *Sonnenuntergang*, the Caspar-David-Friedrich-Moment-of-Zen promised by my *Anders gedacht* textbook was interrupted by a fellow who, in utter disbelief at my assertion of non-German background, maintained that such an accent could only be procured through a direct bloodline. When I explained again that I truly did not have any familial connection, and, indeed, was actually of Turkish heritage, he chuckled and postulated that perhaps my mother had been doing it with a German milkman. That would explain why I was not *dunkelhäutig* like most Turks, he continued, quite pleased with his own deductive reasoning. This word was not on my vocab list, but a language learner can surmise meanings through context clues.

If this scenario were in a novel, a German Jewish Studies scholar might read it as an allusion to Celan's *schwarze Milch*. An antiracist feminist literary scholar might

read it as a commentary on the exhausting ubiquity of white male origin myths—whiteness as provided through the milk, a feminine object yet only obtainable through a masculine *Ursprung*. A Turkish-German scholar might think of *rakı*, a licorice-flavored spirit nicknamed *aslan sütü*, lion's milk, and the drink of choice of Özdamar's *Karagöz*. I don't know what to say other than: It really happened.

Definitely not here.

VIII.

The first time I ever meet another person with my name, I am lost in either Germany, Belgium, or the Netherlands. With cellophaned *Printen* crumbling in our pockets, we, the pilgrims, had taken a bus from Aachen to hike through winding, hilly paths to the *Dreiländerpunkt*, the literally named place at which you and a buddy could straddle all three countries during a three-legged race. We eat soggy waffles and drink carbonated mango Nestea in the café on the Belgian side and then set off on our return, only to get turned around as the bright afternoon turns to gloomy dusk. This is a time before international data plans and phone GPS, back when we needed to rely on our own sense of direction (none), our memory of the walking directions we had looked up that morning (fading as quickly as the daylight), or the kindness of strangers (there is seemingly no one around for miles). Our sore feet grumpily take us down another path, finally leading to an unfamiliar freeway—civilization, at last. The closest town, in whichever country that may be, glows mirage-like behind the mist. Then, clear as a bell, I hear someone, two people, a couple holding hands about 15 feet away, speaking Turkish and feel a surge of relief. The friendly couple's eyes light up when I ask them *could you possibly point us in the direction of Germany*, and they say, of course, but first: *Are you hungry?* Too exhausted to do the dance of resistance, we let them take us out to dinner. When the woman introduces herself and I hear her use my name as her own, I think, *kismet*. Our third cups of tea reach their dreggy ends, and the couple leads us back to the bus. The woman with my name gives me a kiss on both cheeks in farewell. Our bus is here. I can't stay.

Fifteen years later, I think of her when I play our name for the first time on Turkish Wordle. I always start with *KADER* because it breaks Turkish vowel harmony and helps me see where to go next. But then I try our name, five letters that autocorrect to *DIADEM* in English and *DUDEN* in German; my students joke that I'm the dictionary. I don't even know what it means as a common noun, beyond the idiom, apple of my eye, which I am convinced that my dad has made up, from *DIDAM*, the Persian past tense first-person verb meaning "I saw." I get the solution on the sixth try, from the Latin present tense first-person verb meaning "I see": *VIDEO*.

IX.

Aus, außer, außerdem, ausgerechnet.

My German words may not have a childhood, as Özdamar famously wrote, but they are embedded in vivid memories, maybe all the more so for that.

The first two words in this series have been sung to the tune of Strauss' "An der schönen blauen Donau" by generations of intrepid German learners, a mnemonic device to remember the dative prepositions. To be teaching the song now, years after I first learned it at my students' age, feels like I'm a world-weary pirate initiating a new crew to come aboard and gain their sea-legs. Without fail, at the next exam, the entire room is swaying, the lilting waltz rocking between their ears like a ship on the water, until the moment they stop to look around and laugh that the others can hear it, too.

I remember exactly where I was when I learned the third word—in the third row of Wright Memorial Theater at Middlebury College, where my fellow German School students and I were rehearsing for our production of *Die Dreigroschenoper*. The word featured in a particularly tricky turn-of-phrase:

Jakob *entsetzt*: Wieso bist du nicht in Highgate?

Mac: Heute ist mein Donnerstag. Ich kann mich doch von meinen Gewohnheiten nicht durch solche Lappalien abhalten lassen. *Wirft die Anklageschrift auf den Boden.* Außerdem regnet es.

Our Mackie burst out laughing each time he stumbled over “solche Lappalien abhalten lassen” only to turn mock-serious in the next moment, straightening his bowler hat, a deadpan meteorologist. We used “außerdem” to concoct increasingly ridiculous excuses that summer, having fun only as language nerds can until tears of mirth streamed down our faces.

I don't remember exactly where I was when I learned the fourth word, but I can recall every time it has been used *at* me, often but not exclusively by professors in my field nearing retirement. To ask why someone with *ausgerechnet* my name, *ausgerechnet* my background, would study *ausgerechnet Deutsch*. To marvel at how I ended up *ausgerechnet* in their small college town when an abundance of Turks was already to be found in Berlin. Who probably wondered why, if their committee could choose one person to teach their students, it should be *ausgerechnet* I, a sentiment I share when imposter syndrome creeps in. Of all the gin joints, of all the electives I could have taken as a college freshman, of all the textbooks I could have flipped through that first week of college to see, of all names, my dad's, in the pages, portraying a character who didn't know where he belonged. Here I am.

X.

I've always worn a *nazar boncuğu*—an evil eye housed in a bracelet, necklace, or keychain, sometimes silver, sometimes gold—to guard me when traveling. A little superstition, along with *haydi Bismillah* to bless the journey and the clandestine pouring-one-out-behind-the-tailights, *su gibi git, su gibi gel*, go like water, return like water, a tether to home. I lost my blue-eyed insurance policy in Leipzig; it must have slipped off my neck and fallen between the trolley tracks on Goethestraße

under a clock captioned *OMNIA VINCIT LABOR*, a reminder that I should be writing. I scoured my blue floral suitcase for it, certain I would find it twinkling for me in some forgotten pocket, even though I knew it was gone. The story goes that if you lose it or it breaks, it did its job protecting you from harm. Two days later, I received a text from my mom: *I don't know how to tell you this, but anneanne died and they had her funeral this morning. She is buried on a hill overlooking the Bosphorus. We will plant violets later.* She had lost her life the day I lost my necklace. I wasn't home and I wasn't there. I left the diversity workshop and cried in the corridor. Untethered.

When my dad's tumors came back, quadrupled, in his brain, we held hushed conversations in the hospital's too-bright hallway about where we would put him when his body was no longer his house. I didn't tell anyone that he was making plans, too, to make one last trip back home; I read a text he sent earlier that week to his sister in İstanbul with the instructions: *Canım, bana Avcılarda mezar alsın lar.* His undeterred optimism had finally met its match. I had seen films, lectures, read stories about dying in the diaspora. They didn't help much here. Near the end, I flew back to Atlanta and toured a New York cemetery on FaceTime. There were few in the area that would take Muslims and accommodate our rituals. This one was more like a park. He'd like it, we agreed.

When it happened, I packed my blue floral suitcase in a blur of tears so heavy, I forgot my black dress under a wrinkled pile of clean laundry and had to settle that morning for something gray. It didn't matter. It was too sunny, and we squinted and sweated, our living bodies weak to the slightest discomfort. We repeated the Imam's prayers in three languages and each shoveled in our clump of Long Island earth. As my tears turned dirt to mud, my mind flashed back to nine years prior, holding my dad as he cried at *babaanne's* funeral in Avcılar—three years after she had met my husband and guffawed when he said he was musician (“no translation necessary,” he quipped), fifteen years after she had knelt to pray on a *kilim*-style mat in our dining room, thirty years after she had her own tumors treated at a

hospital in Bethlehem, PA—and marveled at the speed of time. Before I left, my mom asked if I wanted a new *nazar boncuğu* to take home with me.

It has taken me two months to unpack that suitcase.

Glossary of Unglossed Terms

aus – (German) from, out, of; English-speaking learners of German often wish they could use “von” instead

ausgerechnet – (German) of all things/people; come to think of it, I may have learned this word from the 2008 song “Warum ausgerechnet ich?” by Die Prinzen.

außer – (German) except, besides, excluding; or, as a conjunction, unless

außerdem – (German) furthermore, moreover, anyway

Canım, bana Avcılarda mezar alsın lar – (Turkish) “my dear, they should get me a cemetery plot in Avcılar”; my poor dad’s hands were shaking, and his eyes could barely focus, so he sent this with a typo.

çok iyi bir adamdı – (Turkish) he was such a good man; a controversial statement.

dunkelhäutig – (German) dark-skinned (pej., obv.)

Die Dreigroschenoper – *The Threepenny Opera*, by Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill, and an uncredited Elisabeth Hauptmann. The quotation, as translated into English by Ralph Manheim and John Willett, reads:

JAKE *horrified*: Why aren’t you in Highgate?

MAC: It’s my Thursday. Do you think I can let such trifles interfere with my habits? *Throws the warrant on the floor*. Anyway, it’s raining.

epigonenhaft – (German) epigone-ish; an epigone is an inferior imitator; in a seminar on medieval and early modern German literature during my first semester of graduate school, the professor explained that early modern Germans felt that literature had already had its heyday and they had been born too late to take part in it; for a more modern example, see the economy and Millennials/Gen-Z.

Gipfel – (German) peak, pinnacle, zenith; In the basement café of the now-shuttered Karstadt shopping center at Leopoldplatz, I was once was eavesdropping on a conversation between three dyed-in-the-wool Berliner dames gossiping about the foibles of their adult children in which one of

them remarked, “Det is doch der Jipfel!”; I itched to tell her that “Über allen Gipfeln / Ist Ruh’,” but I don’t believe that Goethe would have helped the situation.

Goethestraße – (German) Goethe Street; in Germany, they name their streets after famous poets, and sometimes after infamous colonialists, though there are amazing activists working to change the latter.

haydi Bismillah – (Turkish) I cannot really translate this, because it’s actually Arabic, but it has something to do with going with God’s blessing. We say it at the start of a journey.

Kader – (Turkish) fate, destiny; often said in place of a sigh when something doesn’t go your way.

Karagöz – (Turkish) a folk character from Turkish shadow plays who also stars in Emine Sevgi Özdamar’s comedy *Karagöz in Alamania*, written in 1982.

kilim – (Turkish) a style of rug, traditionally handwoven, with beautiful tapestry-like designs; my post-academia retirement plan is to open a Turkish rug store called Kilim with Kindness.

İpek – (Turkish) a popular prepared food brand; “ip” also means string, so this is an overwrought pun.

OMNIA VINCIT LABOR – (Latin) work conquers all, and I should still be writing.

Printen – (German) a delicious gingerbread variety from Aachen.

schwarze Milch – (German) lit. black milk, a motif from Paul Celan’s post-Holocaust poem “Todesfuge” about the horrors of the death camps; the phrase stems from Rose Ausländer’s poem “Ins Leben,” published in 1939.

“Über allen Gipfeln / Ist Ruh’” – (German) if you’re still here, this is a line from a poem by Goethe that Wikipedia calls “the perhaps most perfect lyric in the German language,” so now you have no choice but to learn German and decide for yourself. Once you do, read Daniel Kehlmann’s 2005 novel *Die Vermessung der Welt*, where he has a character freely translate the poem into unpoetic nonsense, and enjoy a belated chuckle for all of your efforts.

Ursprung – (German) source, wellspring

Wald – (German) forest; best experienced alone, with a lover, or with a sibling and some breadcrumbs

Wandern – (German) to hike, which your lovely host family will invite you to do on weekend mornings when you would rather sleep in; for best results, reread this section while listening to Schubert’s “Das Wandern ist des Müllers Lust,” a setting of the poem by the aptly named Wilhelm Müller.