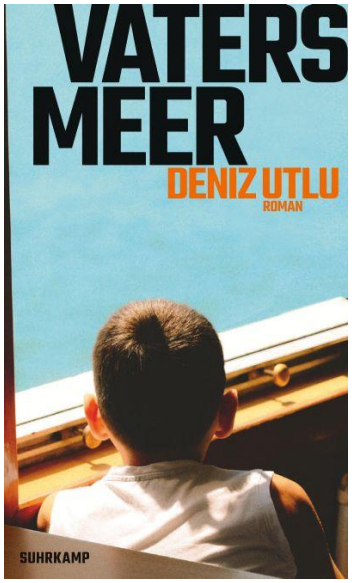

Deniz Utlu

Father's Sea

Novel

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Our Name

Our name doesn't mean anything, Father said. A name that some official gave his father, that is, my grandfather. Father said: Many of the names that date from the time when Turkey introduced family names can be traced back to witless officials. And surprisingly many people back then were officially born on January 1st. That's it. Name: Stone. Date of birth: 01/01.

But our real name is beautiful, he said. Someday, he'll have entered into his passport and then we'll have a new name, that is to say our old name, our real one. What is it? I asked. As I remember it, we were taking a walk, the sun shone down through watery green leaves, and there was a pond in the city. Father said: Beyt Haydo, that's our real name. What does it mean? Father laughed his laugh that came from deep in his throat. Bandits, he said, seeming extraordinarily pleased. I was pleased too. I had a secret name. It belonged to bandits.

Some time later, at a book presentation in our school auditorium, I saw a writer for the first time and could hardly believe it. For me, writers were higher, almost immortal beings. They weren't mere flesh and blood, probably not even of this world—their words were connected to gravitation and stars, to light and darkness. We—several hundred children—watched this man on the auditorium stage. There actually was something unearthly about him. His thin, blond hair fell onto the collar of his trench coat. His legs were crossed. He gave me the impression of being indifferent to these children, the very readers for whom he wrote, after all. Or maybe he didn't

write for them, or at least not for the ones sitting there in front of him, but for children yet unborn or long dead.

At home, I told Father that I wanted to read that book about heroic outlaws in medieval England. Gray light shimmered through the glass door of the balcony, at which Father stood, gazing out, and he replied that I had no reason to be impressed with half-baked and basically pilfered tales from the West. But I really want to read them, I insisted. Rubbish, Father shouted. I didn't need to read such tales, which would have me kneeling down before false idols; I should look within, that's where the stories were buried.

Mother said: Everything is meant for humans. This included tonsilitis, chicken pox, diarrhea and heartache—all of them meant for humans. Who decides? I asked. God. Why did God want it that way? We need tonsilitis so that we're happy when we wake up one morning and can swallow without pain.

Everything meant for humans also included automobile accidents, bicycle accidents and household accidents. It did not include earthquakes and airplane crashes, at least Mother didn't say they were meant for us when they happened. It also didn't include falling from a ladder when you were home alone, because solitude is only for God, not for humans; that's why God created animals for Adam and then, when that didn't change his solitude, He created another of Adam's own kind. It also didn't include middle ear infections if you went skin-diving despite having sensitive ears. But it did include fever and colds, and that was helpful, because I found it easier to bear things that were meant for humans than things that weren't. Father's first fall was meant for humans. Father's second fall was an earthquake.

There was no longer any chance I would become Muslim, but that was his fault, not mine. On Judgment Day, Father would have to answer to God for why he'd never made any time for me and as a result, I'd strayed from our faith, having never learned or even understood it. He would die one day, and my mother wouldn't live forever either and then nothing would be left to bind me to our faith. Even if I managed to teach myself something about it—how to read the Koran and study the life of the prophet—it would hardly be the Islam that he, my father, had no longer practiced for decades now. We were just then walking along the fence around my primary school playground where the jungle gym on which girls climbed during recess stood abandoned. What Father said seemed terrible to me. As we walked down the street towards the intersection where we'd turn onto Kollenrodstraße, he told me that even if I managed to take up my parents' religion, my children never would. Father said: I didn't know any better and didn't do anything

to prevent it, but here in Germany, the chain of our culture snaps. At that very moment, a flock of black birds took off and flew over the school. I asked my father what religion animals followed, were they Muslim too? Of course, Father replied, all animals are Muslim, they go straight to paradise when they die. Only humans are tried by having to balance on a hair-thin thread and only if their hearts are pure do the angels help them. But every animal's heart is pure, that's why they don't need to be tried. Will the angels refuse to help me balance on that thread if I forget our religion? Of course not, Father said, your heart is also pure, and the angels will help you. But as for him, he added, he would probably fall.

He wouldn't always be around, he told me, that's human fate. He said: In the best case, parents die before their children and it's up to them to prepare their children for this, that's why you're going to be circumcised.

I have an improbable conception of my foreskin, namely, that it's held up by two tiny white bones in the shape of a cross. I think I remember asking my father about these bones at the time—after all, these were the only bones in my body that weren't covered with flesh and skin, and so the only ones I could see. In that conversation, which probably never happened, Father said: It's not important, it will all soon disappear anyway; it's an inevitable step in becoming a man. But aren't I a man? No, you're a child. And after the circumcision, I'll be a man? That's right, he told me, but it doesn't mean that I won't have anything left to learn, on the contrary, it's just the beginning of my life as a man. Does it hurt? A lot, Father said, it's the most painful experience a human being can have—the only thing more intense is probably giving birth. Once I've gotten through it, I won't have anything to fear, and I'll be able to face all of life's challenges. For the time being, he's here for me and will keep me safe.

Father said that he hated cowboys. He said this when we watched westerns on television on Saturdays. Father said: the Communists are idiots. Father said: you can be a millionaire if you really want to. He said: Violence isn't good, but if you end up in that kind of situation, you have to react quickly. He said: Your mother is the better mathematician, even though I'm an engineer. He said: Your mother sacrifices herself for you, do you appreciate how much? He said: You only hurt yourself if you skip a birthday party because you're in a huff. He said: You live surrounded by cotton balls, I grew up in the filth on my city's streets.

He talked to me about desire, said there was nothing better than sleeping with a woman you'd been dreaming of for weeks or even months. I told him I thought the eyebrows of the woman in the film we'd just seen were very beautiful and I wondered what she looked like

naked. He said: Nakedness doesn't show elegance; it's shown in the clothing you choose, how you move, and what you say.

In the ten years when my father could no longer speak with his mouth, but only with his eyes, in the years after his fall, I only spoke Turkish to him. I raised my voice so he could hear me. In a certain sense, his Turkish was my German, and in that sense my Turkish was his Arabic. The language that bound each of us to his mother was different than the one with which we made our way through life and tried to find ourselves. German was the third language he spoke that was close to his heart; after all, he had come to Germany in his twenties and spent most of his life here. In his first, lonely years in Germany, I imagine that Father had hardly spoken at all, but on the rare occasions he did, he would have had to speak in German. So it was also the language of his loneliness and was perhaps centered in the place where writers find the language they write in. Eventually, I also learned a third language close to my heart, namely during the months I spent in Paris after Father's death. But French remained a foreign language for me, even though one I feel close to. It is a language in which my father's voice resonates, because I remember how much my father enjoyed speaking French and how he had once tried to teach me a few words. We had driven to Disneyland Paris, my parents and me, together with another family and their two children. It was an awful trip. My parents had argued, and my father refused to spend the night in Paris, so we were all exhausted and nervous wrecks. It was already late evening when we stopped in Paris for a short rest. Father and I walked down a street and I was fascinated by the buildings from another era. For a child who had grown up in a post-war building in Hanover, in a city, that is, that was ninety percent destroyed, these buildings had something fabulous about them. Much more fabulous, in any case, than Disneyland, where a ticket booth stood before every marvel and in the fairy tale castle there were only souvenir shops with price tags, tills, receipts and other symbols of offensive profanity and disenchantment. There's history wherever you look, Father said as we strolled along that street. Not far away, you could see the tracks of a metro line and later, when I lived in Paris, I searched the area around the Bir-Hakeim station for the street I'd walked down with my father. Back then, a boy about my age came running in our direction. He had curly hair and darker skin than mine and he looked at us fearfully. My father made room for him and signaled to him that he didn't need to worry, that this man and his son in a deserted Parisian street were not at all dangerous. The boy ran past. Why was he afraid?, I asked Father. Wouldn't you be, out alone at night?, he asked me. I thought the French had light skin and straight hair, I said. And Father explained that the boy was just like me, only his parents had probably come from Algeria and he lived in France,

while my parents came from Turkey and I lived in Germany, but in the end, he was like me. From then on, I associated this boy with Paris, and nothing symbolized the France of my time more than an Arab child out alone at night in a street of elegant nineteenth century buildings.

Another time on that trip, on the escalator to the amusement park's ticket booths, Father read me the words on the sign: *Bienvenue, Entrée*. I was amazed by the silent letters. But Father explained that it wasn't odd, even if you only thought the silent letters, it would change the sound of the word. Maybe with this brief lesson, which wasn't really about teaching, but rather about sharing something with me, he had laid within me the foundation for another language, a father tongue. Maybe that was one of the reasons why, later, after his death, I learned French in a few weeks and why, during my sleepless nights in the Quartier Latin, nothing calmed me more than Albert Camus' voice. Almost every night, I listened to the recording of a 1943 radio broadcast, in which Camus read page after page of his first novel, *L'Étranger*, in a firm and confident, but remote tone.

The single question I asked my father when he could speak only with his eyes was about which language his mother spoke. Did Grandmother speak Turkish? Father looked upward, which meant no. Did she speak Arabic? Father closed his eyes for a moment, his voiceless yes. Was she Arabic? Father glanced upward. Kurdish? Father closed his eyes. Did she speak Kurdish? Father glanced upward.

And so I believed I'd understood that my grandmother, whom I'd only seen once, on my trip to Mardin, was a Kurd who didn't speak either Kurdish or Turkish, who had never learned to read or write and whose mother tongue was Arabic. Mother said it was doubtful that my father had understood me correctly. I asked my father this question in the late nineties. The civil war in Turkey had just peaked and caused violent outbursts in our Hannover apartment as well—political arguments in which my mother spoke of separatism and I of insurgency. The conflict in Turkey reached our kitchen but without touching our family's ethnic origins because they were never an issue. I heard the word 'Kurd' for the first time on the news.

The summer my father fell twice, I learned how to play guitar. I'd made previous attempts. I must have been about ten years old when my parents bought me an acoustic guitar in the Bornemann music store on Königstrasse, which I still play now. I remember clearly that there was one guitar for three hundred marks and one for five hundred. The salesman said you had to feel which guitar belonged to you and I convinced myself that I felt a deep connection to the 500 mark guitar. My father, who never spent a single pfennig more than necessary and whose

favorite saying was ‘Take care of the pence and the pounds will take care of themselves,’ took a deep breath and counted out the five bills on the counter in front of the salesman who wore a smile that my father found cunning, but I found benevolent. There my parents stood, amid musical instruments as if in a garden, looking around themselves as they were surrounded by unfamiliar plants they were cautiously pleased to see. I felt more at home there than in the toy shop, and would have liked to stay there. All I was missing was the ability to play all these instruments.

Actually, I can’t remember exactly if my father really did take a deep breath before counting out five rather than three bills; it could be that on that day, in that music store, he paid five hundred marks with love and joy and wouldn’t have hesitated to spend a thousand. He told me that he regretted never having learned to play an instrument, a musical instrument is something that will accompany you your entire life. A few years of lessons or a little effort to teach yourself a few notes is all it takes for music to accompany you your whole life long, sixty, seventy, eighty years. I imagined music as a companion who would never leave your side once you’d understood her. A language, a man; an instrument, a friend, Father would say.

Before my father fell, I learned to play two songs on the guitar. Actually, only one, since the first was simply the blues cadence, which was easy to play on open strings. The second and, in fact, only song was *When the Saints Go Marching In*. My father loved it—either the song or my playing, I never learned which. Both, I suppose because my attempt to learn the lullaby *Der Mond ist aufgegangen* left him cold. On the other hand, he also loved it when I slowly strummed all the strings and let them sound. I felt he was ridiculing me and just pretending to like my playing because, in my view, strumming guitar strings was neither an achievement nor an expression of talent. Today I think that the songs and the open strings I played for Father were effectively the only kind of music there ever was in our house—my open strings and the playlist of the *Köln Radyosu* radio show. But if listening to strumming on a guitar was so calming and such a pleasure for my father, why didn’t he ever put on a record or use the tape recorder that was as big as a television? Why did he never push the play button on the cassette recorder? Why did I only hear my mother sing when we spent the summer months in Turkey? The guitar that my parents bought me in the small music shop on Königstrasse arrived in a house almost completely devoid of music, almost devoid of sound. Maybe that’s how my mother arrived in this house so many—or rather, not so many, actually only twelve—years ago: like that guitar, which I accidentally banged against the door frame in our apartment the first day I had it and damaged the varnish—two small round dents, one slightly larger than the other, like a planet and its moon. Only after many years—just three, actually, but it felt like half a lifetime—so,

only after what felt like half my life, did the instrument become a friend, a reified part of my soul. It was summer, it smelled of the sea, and in the evenings an adolescent filled with insatiable desire walked along the shore; I was thirteen years old; my father had fallen; on the rooftop terrace of a café, called the Café Rain, strangers taught me how to play guitar.

[…]

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We, Mother and I, Waited on the Highway

A video, taken on a Camcorder that belonged to my father although I was the one who used it most, shows us on a trip. On the bottom right is the date in white digital script: 14 July 1996. Appearing alternately on the screen are my mother, my ten-year-old cousin, and her parents—my mother's other, younger sister and her husband, that is—along with Aunt Sema and me. My father isn't there, he hasn't arrived yet. There's no sign of Grandfather Sinan either, maybe he had already gone back to Ankara. We're in a harbor with concrete jetties, cutters, and a ferry in the background. You can hear the wind. That's what I remember most, the wind of those days. My mother appears least often, she's filming. Aunt Sema looks sullenly at the camera. She doesn't want to be filmed and says she's had enough. I'm struck by how young she is. Back then, I considered her a grown up, in the same range as my mother. Now, in the recording, she's closer to me. She's around thirty, but looks twenty, almost a teenager, rebellious, adolescent; my mother has to take charge of her, put up with her affectations and her coquettish sulks.

I look serious, maybe sad. I'm alone. Occasionally, I'm walking with Aunt Sema, but mostly I'm alone, unaware that I'm being filmed. Running along the pier. The wind blows in my face, blows back my shoulder length, blue-black hair with a hairline deep on my forehead. I'm wearing a blue T-shirt that the wind presses against my flat chest. Basketball shorts and black sneakers. I'm walking along a street, leaning against a large, boxy Mercedes from the 60s. I walk on the quay wall, kneel down, and look into the water. Fishermen sit next to me, drinking tea and talking, to me they're invisible. In general, I rarely notice what's around me. The Mercedes I'm leaning against is a Caucasian wingnut tree in the world I'm wandering through, the quay wall is the edge of the planet, the water I'm looking into, is an alley in a city that exists only in my mind, the street I'm crossing is a room in a large building in which I'm searching

for someone. Where am I? Who am I looking for? Come, my son, let's go, my mother says. She has to repeat it and only then does my body react by straightening, perhaps without having consciously heard her, merely following an instinct. There is something sad in my mother's view through the camera of my aunt, even in my cousin's excessive cheerfulness, something sad, and yet we couldn't know, no one could have known that in five to ten days, everything would change.

*

In 1996, my father was fifty-seven years old. He was born five months after the death of Atatürk, who died of cirrhosis at fifty-seven in 1938—exactly five months and nineteen days before my father's birth. His entire life, my father admired Atatürk, whose enlightened attitude towards Islam he found convincing and whose strategic military thinking fascinated him. His view of Atatürk as someone with the courage to resist the sultan and the occupiers single-handedly must have given my father direction in life. The resolve. The isolation. A man at odds with the conditions of his time, with the autorities' decisions. That is how I imagine Father's view of Atatürk: a man who, in rising up against everything, no longer has anyone to look up to, to ask for counsel, who has no one to confer with except himself and so must make all decisions alone. The sleeplessness, which isn't any kind of orientation, but is confirmation or, at least, a consequence of being thrown completely back on himself.

There was no picture of Atatürk in our apartments in Hanover and Kizkalesi, as was usual in the homes of his admirers and in schools, in public places, in kebab restaurants, and all government buildings in Turkey. But not in Father's home because the loneliness of a man who had nowhere to turn for advice except to his own understanding, did not allow for idols—in my father's view, admirers of Atatürk could not be his devotees, because whoever followed his example was subject only to his own understanding and his own conscience and someone like that had no leader. Someone like that did not even recognize a father.

I did not know then that two years later, in our kitchen in Hanover, a room my father no longer entered because he couldn't enter any place at all, I would scream at my mother because I wanted to be on the left, and so an internationalist, but Atatürk had said: How happy is the one who says I am a Turk! Everything gets twisted here in Germany, Mother exclaimed vehemently, though her reply was considerably calmer than my response that what Atatürk meant by his maxim was completely different, namely that Turkishness was to be understood inclusively. I could call myself German even though my parents came from Turkey, and anyone in Turkey

could be a Turk. What Atatürk meant was that all citizens there were entitled to civil rights. It's odd that he called them Turks, and besides, I'm not German, I said. What are you then? she asked. Communist, I shouted. She said: Sometimes I think you would have had terrible arguments with your father if he hadn't become sick. It wounded my mother that I'd have rather hung a black and red anarchist flag in our apartment than a picture of Atatürk, but she saw us as equal residents—which we weren't, of course, but mother was democratic—and didn't even display the decorative tile with Atatürk's portrait, which she had received as a gift from my cousin who worked as an engineer in a tile factory, but instead put it away in the closet.

In our apartments there were also no pictures of our forebears. Only photographs of our immediate family: mother, father, and son. Only once did I see a picture of my father's father, Şeyhmus, because I'd asked my father if he, too, was someone's son, like I was his. Of course, Father said and pulled a black and white photograph from the drawer of the large wooden cabinet in our living room. It showed an unshaven man, photographed shortly after waking up, still in his pajamas, leaning against a pillow, his hands on his bent knees, and his face bore a smile that had a certain hardness to it. Şeyhmus was born nineteen years after Atatürk and died ten years before I was born. Only years later did my father bring my grandfather's prayer beads back from a visit to Mardin. A few of the amber beads were missing. Father said: You have to rub the stones and smell them. They smell like honey. He hung the tespih on a nail in the hallway of our apartment and that was the only object from our forebears that I knew of.

Once I asked Father what kader meant since the Turkish word for fate came up often. Used alone as an expression: Kader! Fate! My father answered that each of us is a book written by God. What's in this book? I asked him. Everything, he replied. Everything, every word you say, every thought you think, every single act, even what we're talking about right now. I asked: But does God write down what I do, or do I do what God writes? That I don't know, my son, Father said. My entire life I've insisted that everyone writes his own destiny book—perhaps everything has already been written. But how can I know what's right? You have to ask Him, no one can help you with the answer. But how? In your heart.

*

After one of our hospital visits in Mersin, I went out looking for my friends in the evening. I didn't find anyone outside the building next door and went on to Café Rain. I said that I wanted to be a musician too and the guitar players taught me the song about Mediterranean evenings. One of them sang with a smoky voice. The other could also reach high notes. He was the one

who told me my fingers were perfect for playing the guitar—he said: Practice every day, play all the time, hold on to music, it won't drop you.

Four days after my father fell the first time, he unexpectedly appeared at our door. He had woken from the coma and had left the hospital against medical advice.

*

07. 19. 1996 tarihinde yapılan nörolojik muayene ve tetkik sonunda vetrebra basiler arter yetmezliği tanısı konulmuş olup, hasta yoğun bakım ünitesine yatırılarak tedavisi yapılmıştır. Hasta 07. 23. 1996 tarihinde 15 gün yatak istirahati önerilerek salah ile taburcu edilmiştir. Durumu bildirir rapordur.
Dr. Cemal, Nöroloji Uzmanı

*

We, Mother and I, waited on the highway for the bus. Overloaded trucks thundered past. Their cargo areas were filled with meter-high stacks of tree trunks or garbage or whatever else they were transporting. They looked ready to tip over at any moment. Motorcycles and cars raced by. Mother flagged down a bus. The attendant sprayed eau de cologne on our hands. The trip lasted an hour. For the first three days, my father lay in a coma. In the evenings, I met my friends, the teenage boys on my street, or I went to see the guitar players in the Café Rain.

According to the doctor's report, my father was in the hospital from the 19th to 23rd July 1996. Thirty-four years after his arrival in Germany in the Hamburg port. Thirty-four years during which he was a construction and factory worker in Germany, a soldier in Turkey. Thirty-four years in which he did studies a second time and started a new life, this time as an engineer, in which he was abandoned, in which his father died and he lived alone for eight years until he met my mother in the time of curfew in Ankara and, two years later in Hanover, had a son with her, me. Thirty-four years, during fifteen of which he was in a second marriage, built a guest house in the place where he and my mother spent their honeymoon, years in which he and my mother argued, and in which he was abandoned again by her, too, in his second marriage. Years in which he had to fight for her and me and, after we spent a year with Grandfather Sinan in

Ankara, finally persuaded my mother to return to him. Thirty-four years, at the end of which he fell in front of that Yörüken tent in Kizkalesi.

I imagine writing a story for Father for those years of late trouble, a lullaby that could have calmed him. His death came ten years later, in 2006, after I'd been living in Berlin for a while and returned to Hanover to read to him from the Koran at the end of his life.

Shortly after the summer when my father fell twice, the Republic of Turkey as many knew it ended, the republic in which my father had grown up. In February 1997, came the so-called Post-modern coup, of which I was completely unaware, because I was in my eighth grade year, the year my grades in all subjects plummeted, when boys lay in wait for me who were my enemies since their friends beat me up, at the same time my mother was fighting to get my father into the rehabilitation clinic because she believed in the fairy tales about the miracle of life, in which people suddenly woke up after years in a coma or stood up after years of paralysis. I didn't notice a thing and in any case wouldn't have been interested in the fact that the Turkish military had ordered the government to return to Kemalist principles. A few months later, the government was forced to step down and five years later, Erdoğan's young party won the election, and a new era began.

Not long after my father's death France and Germany objected to Turkey's admittance into the European Union. In the summer of 2015, the government lost the election, but didn't accept the results. Instead, they ordered a new election in November 2015, and won after months of violence. I don't know if I had the feeling that I should hurry my research into my father's past because I was afraid I might lose access to it, or at least to part of it, with the fall of the republic. On the night when tanks rolled across the Bosphorus Bridge and bombs fell on Ankara because jets of the Turkish armed forces attacked the parliament, I was in Berlin. I followed the riots in the streets until dawn on the internet. I was worried about the people I loved. My cousin Esra later told me that she held her hands over her daughter's ears because the jets had flown so close to the apartment buildings. Something perished that night or long before—in the people, in the world. One year later, the government initiated a constitutional referendum through which they took power away from parliament and named the president the sole head of the government.

I had just moved into a new apartment. Mother was visiting. Her iPad lay on the still-unpacked dishwasher and from it rang out the president's victory speech, in which he promised his followers that he would introduce the death penalty. I'm too old to bear this any longer,

Mother said. On a stool in the kitchen corner, her body shrank as she sat huddled. I wasn't sure if she meant my move to a new apartment or Turkey, which was in the process of disappearing, at least the republic in which my parents, my father, had grown up. I am searching for my father in myself above all.

*

A man's silhouette gradually emerged from the gloom. The chirring of the cicadas buzzed in my ears. The stars above this earthly darkness glittered like my tear-filled eyes. They were full and blazing, but at the same time delicate as if they were about to crack.

A bag dangled from his right hand—it hung like a large drop, almost touching the ground. He was also carrying something in his left arm. His right leg dragged, not a limp, a nocturnal walk. His held his torso upright, a tired but erect, vigorous gait. He finally reached the lanterns between us on the path, a bat circled in the light, and maybe it was due to the depth of the darkness or to my senses being muddled by exhaustion and the cicadas' chirring: where light and shadows met, I saw a razor-sharp line. First the man's legs entered the cone of light and next to them a thin white plastic bag drawn earthward with the weight of a melon, then I saw his torso and a second melon in his left arm. With bated breath, on this night full of danger and salvation under a weeping sky, I recognized the broad forehead, the prominent nose and severe mouth, as well as the eyes that had seen so much they often seemed inaccessible and yet intimately close—my father's face. The bat vanished into the darkness once again. I heard its fluttering above my head as I looked into Father's eyes. He approached and said: Come, son, let's go home. I ran to him, took the bag from his hand, and draped it over my shoulder. We walked slowly, with even steps, past the boys sitting on the edge of the wall in front of the apartment building and staring at us. We turned onto the path between our house and the neighbors'. I was afraid of this narrow path because it was dark and so close to the garden that you couldn't tell if street dogs or snakes were lurking there. My father walked heedlessly. We climbed the two floors to our apartment and rang the bell. After a while I heard my mother's steps. She blanched when she saw us. She looked from my father to me and back to him, stared incredulously at us, standing before her, each of us holding a melon. She put her hand to her mouth in a gesture of shock at something unheard-of or incredible. Then she whispered my father's name: Zeki.

Father said: Are you going to leave me standing here outside the door? Mother quickly took the melon from him and said: How is this possible? What is going on? Why are you here

and not in hospital? What happened? Father and I stepped inside. Grandfather Sinan and Aunt Sema ran to us. My aunt wept: Zeki enişte, welcome back, we died of fright. I've already died a thousand times, Father laughed. You don't need to worry, I know the way home. My grandfather looked relieved, but grave, not like someone who has seen a ghost but a sign from God. Praise be to God, Lord of all worlds, he said. The house was in an uproar. My mother led my father to a chair, Aunt Sema immediately handed him a glass of water. Mother didn't know what to do with herself, she turned left and right, too stunned to feel relieved. Finally she said: Zeki, what are you doing here? You need to be in hospital, how could they have released you? Father replied: They didn't release me. You escaped from the hospital? Aunt Sema cried. Father enjoyed this pleasure: I confirmed and signed, against medical advice, my own release. What am I supposed to do in hospital? I can die anywhere if it comes to it. I just don't understand, my mother said, having finally taken a seat at the kitchen table. How could you do this, do you know how dangerous it is? You don't just wake up from a coma and walk home just like that. How did you even get here? With a taxi, but I got out at the market. The merchants were taking down their stands and I thought I'll never get melons. So I persuaded them to take me to their village and give me their two best melons. Since I was there, I stayed for dinner, of course. Could you cut them open. I'm sure they're bright red.

I knew that on the tip of mother's tongue was the question of whether the doctor said he was allowed to eat melons. But it was just as clear to me as to her that such a question would only elicit the spiteful answer that he didn't give a shit what that squirt of a doctor said, he wanted to eat his melon now, when it was still fresh, and he could just as well die afterwards. So mother cut the melon, which was, as my father had promised, as red as the sea at sunset—Father had very different similes, but he didn't want to say them in front of my grandfather. Aunt Sema cut the feta into cubes, I got plates from the cupboard, and we ate melon salad together as if Father hadn't been in a coma only yesterday. My father shoveled the first serving into his mouth and handed the plate back to my aunt before she had even sat down. Everyone burst into laughter. Oh man, enişte, Aunt Sema said with a laugh, we missed you so much. Tears filled my mother's eyes and she held them back or dabbed them from her cheeks with a napkin when it was to late. She said that God had protected my father, but it was best not to provoke Him.

My memories of Father's return are not reliable. I have an image in my mind of him sitting on the sofa with the melons between his feet, laughing about my mother's shock that yesterday he was still in a coma and today he just signed himself out of the hospital against medical advice—

it’s still light outside. That’s about all I know. He laughed, that much I know, or believe I do. Like a child who has given his parents a fright by jumping into the sea from a cutter, even though he has been told that it’s dangerous, but he trusts his abilities. Euphoria in the apartment, although I can’t say how it was expressed other than in my father’s laughter: certainly in my racing heartbeat—my father’s second arrival, our waking from a nightmare.

*

I remember that evening. The night after his return. I sat at the kitchen table in our second floor apartment in dim light. My mother was already in her bedroom or in the bath. Aunt Sema and Grandfather Sinan were in their apartment on the ground floor or back in Ankara.

I sat there alone.

I was trying to write my first song. Or reading a book. Or drawing. Drawing without being aware of what I was doing, like the patterns that appear on the note pads next to telephones all over the world.

My father came into the kitchen. He stood before me in his underwear, a white undershirt, white underpants, in the clothing he was about to lie down in to sleep, on the last night when he could still talk.

I sat at the head of the table, facing the door to the balcony. Across from me, Father stood behind a chair, leaning on it back.

Why was I so furious?

Why just then, on that evening. On the last night.

Night.

Last night.

Almost night, I sat at the kitchen table in our apartment. Father came into the kitchen to say goodnight and stood across from me behind a chair and leaned on the back. He didn’t sit down. He wanted to say one more thing before he went to sleep. Before. He. Slept. I had a piece of paper in front of me, trying to write a song or draw meaningless lines. Father said: Goodnight,

my boy. Goodnight Baba, iyi geceler, I said without looking up, because I was caught up with the words or the drawing. Then Father said: Son, why do you spend so much time out in the evening? I've noticed that your friends are older than you.

Yes and?

I only want, my son, I only want you to be careful, he said.

Don't worry.

I don't want them to take advantage of your age difference and maybe make fun of you or, worse, act as if they're joking and grab you here or there in a way you don't want.

What is that supposed to mean? I exclaimed.

I just want to say, my son, that you should be careful because you have a pure heart, but many people out there don't have a pure heart. You don't know this yet, you can't know it yet, and I truly hope that you won't have to experience it, but please, be careful. Maybe don't stay out so late. Look, your mother is worried about you. She always worries until you get home.

You want to tell me this now? You're not here half the summer. I'm here alone and then you show up and say that you have something to tell me?

I'm your father.

You have nothing to say to me, you hear? Everything was fine here before you came. You should just disappear again and leave us in peace.

Then there was silence.

Then there was a pencil in my hand at night.

A kitchen table at which I sat.

A father across from me.

Something was wrong with his tongue.

It must have been heavy in his mouth. When he spoke, it moved too slowly, and the words were drawn out. And maybe he was leaning on the chair because he needed support, because gravity was getting stronger, because he was swaying.

A mountain of a man.
A mountain of a man.

I was still up, sitting at the kitchen table alone that evening. My father came into the kitchen to say goodnight. He stood across from me and leaned on the back of the chair. He said that I stayed out late in the evenings, sometimes very late in the night, and that I should be careful because my friends were much older than I was. They shouldn't do things to me that I didn't want. This made me furious, and I said to my father than he had no business meddling in my life, that he had never really been there for me and so had no reason to comment. I said that things were better for us here before he showed up and that we did just fine without him. I said: Why did you come. Things would be better here if you left. Alright, my son, my father said and then he said, goodnight, my son. He walked around the kitchen table and past me into his bedroom. That night, my father lost his ability to speak.

The next morning, he didn't recognize me.

In the night my mother had called the village doctor, who had come when my father fell the first time. I watched from the hallway as he opened his bag and gave my father an injection. I heard the doctor say that it would all be fine in the morning.

We turned off the lights. My mother in my parents' bedroom. Me in my bedroom.

She woke me early in the morning. Get up, Yunus, she said. The ambulance will be here any minute. We're taking your father back to Mersin.

It was early in the morning, the quietest hour of the day. The first light shone through my window. It was the coolest hour of the day, and I was freezing. My mother left the door open while she prepared things in the kitchen for the trip, quickly making sandwiches. My body felt heavy. I had the feeling I hadn't slept at all. My mother glanced into my bedroom from the sitting room. Let's go, Yunus, why are you still in bed! She woke me the way she did on a regular school day.

But then she added: Hurry up, Yunus, you have to be ready when the ambulance gets here. We can't lose a single second.

They carried my father downstairs on a stretcher. It was cold out on the street. I wanted the world to wake up. To see. But the world kept sleeping.

In the ambulance, my mother stroked my father's head. I sat across from her, my eyes following her hands. Then my father lifted his arm for the last time in his life. He pointed at me with a crooked finger. Asked: Who is that? Mother said: That's your son.

On that day my father fell into a coma for the second time. I paced up and down the black corridor of the blue hospital. Mother didn't say that everything would be fine. She made no such claim. She was grave and knew exactly what needed to be done and when she should speak with which doctor, whom she had to inform. She gave me the feeling that I didn't have to worry anymore, not because there might be a good ending to this story, but despite the high likelihood that this time the catastrophe was definitive.

We spent days in that hospital. In the evening we returned to Kizkalesi. The guitar players said that I should concentrate on the music, on playing guitar. I should express everything that was happening inside me in melodies and lyrics. If I did that, I would never be alone; no matter what happened or where I was, music would be there.

Alright in Turkish is peki.
Alright, my child is peki, yavrum.
Peki yavrum means: I'm sending you a kiss, my child, since you won't allow a hug, and I'll drop the subject even though it's painful to me. I heard you, I can't go on.

Eventually, Uncle Seyyid came. At the time he was on vacation with his family on the Aegean coast. We sat and stood in a wood-paneled room in the hospital or in a government building. My grandfather probably sat in an upholstered chair, my mother stood. Seyyid leaned against one wall of the room, I against another. A decision had to be made. The men were silent. Mother was thinking. She made up her mind. She said: we're going to take him back to Germany. Everyone knew this would use up a large part of the family money. No one contradicted my mother. She looked into my eyes to let me know that I was the only one allowed to enter the discussion if I wanted to but that I didn't have to say anything. I nodded to her.

*

Maybe on that last night, after the village doctor had left I said one more thing: Goodnight, Father. Maybe my voice was loving and tender. I said: İyi geceler, baba.

Maybe.

*

Dear Sirs and Madams: on 07.26.1996, I had my brother transported by air ambulance with the company Alarm Assistance, Ltd. from Adana to Hanover. For this service I paid 23,200 (twenty-three thousand two hundred) Deutsch Marks. The company has still not sent a receipt. Despite repeated written requests, I have not received a receipt.
Could you please assist me in this matter? Attached, please find the confirmation of payment signed by Dr. Mansur. Sincerely yours.

*

After my mother had Father transported back to Germany by air ambulance, she soon paid Uncle Seyyid back the 23,200 Marks. She ran from one doctor to another. I rented ice skates at the ice disco or practiced songs on my guitar. We traveled to Kizkalesi the following year and again in the autumn three years later. After that, the next time was only after my father's death. I drove the car, my mother's childhood friend was with us. We stopped only for a short time. Kizkalesi was on the way. My parents' garden was overgrown. The housepaint was peeling. Rust from the screws that attached the guest house sign to the façade had left spots on the name, on our name. Weeds had grown into the apartment on the ground floor. We didn't go in. My mother had heard that someone had sold all the furniture my parents had bought and left garbage inside. There were even rumors that at times, it had been used as an hourly hotel. I looked at the hotel across the way, where as a child I'd always hoped for a glimpse of the manager's daughter. Sometimes she had smiled at me and once even took me along to visit the fortress of Corycos and I'd heard from her that Kiskalesi was falling apart. Maybe she was there, it was in season, but that was all a long time ago. I wouldn't try to find her, that's not why we were here. After a few minutes, we got back in the car and left the place that was once ours and never would be again. Over the next few years, my mother tried to sell the apartments. It was difficult. She sold all five apartments into which and my father had put so much work, in which I'd spent part of my childhood, for less than 10,000 Euros each. We needed the money. We didn't need the apartments anymore. After that last, short visit to Kizkalesi, I drove all the way to Mardin, where I met my cousin Munir for two hours before my mother's childhood friend picked me up from

Republic Square and led me back to the car, where Mother was waiting for us. This was also her first time in Mardin since she was a child. She said, as a woman you can't sit here alone in a car for more than ten minutes, we should leave right now and get away from this place. She started the car.

We drove down a street, ever father into nowhere. The headlights didn't have a chance against the darkness, which swallowed up the light a few centimeters in front of the hood. Only by the sound of the tires, the gravel that hit the metal and the bumps, and the jolting of the tires over the uneven road surface, did we know we were moving over solid ground and not on the open water or through the universe. Mardin was a golden glow, a shining meteor that belonged more to the cosmos than to the earth.

In Turkish, sağ means healthy, although in a much more fundamental sense. To be sağ also means to be alive.

The dust dissipates from the street, the asphalt cracks open, turns to sand, liquifies, flows away, all the water, even the fluid in the body, flows together, becomes once again the first sea, and finally becomes ice, cosmic ice, buildings, streets, every object, long disintegrated, ore returns to the earth, but the earth, too, gives up its spherical shape, consists of different parts that crumble in turn, turn to cosmic dust and in one movement all the elements are drawn into a single point into which all the particles in the universe condense, a great homecoming to the singularity, while the two of us, bodiless in the great dark night, have an eternity together, you, larger than I, standing very straight with a white fisherman's cap, I, feeling the heat of the sun—although the sun is long gone—next to you, always here.