

The fourth annual short story competition

The Mogford Prize for Food & Drink Writing 2016

‘Çay’

by Martin Pevsner

...a huge success! Over 600 entries
were received for the 2016 prize...



old parsonage



‘Çay’

He wakes in darkness. Eyes still closed, he breathes in the cool dawn air, exhales, tries to remember where he is. Yes, that's it. Scrubland on the outskirts of Kartal, the last stop on the Metro heading east from the city.

He tends to spend the nights on the Asian side, he thinks there's less chance of hassle from the police. But this part of Istanbul is poorer. It's over on the European side amongst the tourists that he has more success scavenging. Discarded kebabs, punnets of chips, half-full coffees or Cokes. The thought sets him salivating.

He rubs his eyes, gets to his feet, checks his pockets. Two liras thirty-five. More or less the same as yesterday, the day before too. He realises he's been living in limbo these past months, the warm weather lulling his senses. He arrived last December from the south-east, crossing the border a few days

after his fourteenth birthday and making his way to Istanbul in fits and starts. Lorries, freight trains, bumming lifts where he could. The final section by bus with the last of his money when the temperature dipped and he feared for his life.

He'd been determined to keep going. West into Greece and beyond. But the weather was forbidding, he nearly froze on the road, he had to return to the city to see out the winter. And once he settled into this new life, all his energy was consumed in subsisting.

He kills a fruitless hour or two checking bins along the seafront, then heads to the Metro station. There's an attendant at the barrier. He waits until he's distracted then squeezes through the gates and runs down to the platform. It's still early but he's already sweating.

At Kadiköy, he joins a wave of foot passengers onto the ferry. Safety in numbers. He loves the journey across the water. He stands on deck pressed up to the railings, gazes out at the passing shipping, the gulls screeching and swooping, the sun glancing off the waves.

At Eminönü he pauses to check the dockside area for abandoned food. He walks over to the foot of Galata Bridge, to the balik ekmek stands that sell the grilled mackerel sandwiches. It's still early, the stallholders are just firing up their barbeques, there are no pickings yet. Back at the ferry port, the büfe cooks are loading the lamb and chicken spits, chopping salad garnish. He hovers close by, hoping that someone will take pity on him but today he's out of luck.

Instead he heads south towards the Spice Bazaar. There's a square where people like him gather, he's hoping he'll meet a more fortunate friend.

Now the sun's rising high, the temperature's crept into the thirties. The combination of heat, hunger and dehydration has left him weak and light-headed. He's suddenly struck by the realisation that this warmth will soon be gone and winter will return. The thought throws him into a panic.

He passes the Spice Bazaar, heads up Mahmutpaşa, the road already clogged with stalls and shoppers. He's passing a barrow boy selling football shirts when a wave of sickness engulfs him and he's forced to squat in the gutter. He's sweating heavily now, he can taste the bile at the back of his throat. When a child passes with a bucket of water bottles, he beckons him over, spends seventy-five kuruş on the smallest bottle. He takes small sips until the nausea passes.

He gets back to his feet and shuffles on. But the relief is short-lived, the throng builds, his strength ebbs and halfway up the street he runs out of steam. He turns down an alleyway, spots a small teashop a few metres away.

The café is little more than a hole in the wall with a few short stools and two knee-high tables on the alley paving. He squats down on a stool, closes his eyes and takes a few deep breaths. When he looks up again, he sees the shop owner staring out at him from his place behind the counter.

"Çay," he says. His voice is barely a croak.

The man nods and a minute later brings out the small filled

glass on a tray. The boy pulls out a handful of coins and holds them out. The man stares at them for a moment, then shakes his head. The boy picks up the glass and takes a first sip. It is strong and sweet. He takes a second sip, and third, pauses only when the glass is half empty. He feels his strength returning. Finish the tea, he thinks. A few minutes' rest. Then I'll be fine. Got to keep going. Find something to eat. Get organised. Make plans. Make sure I'm out of here before autumn sets in, I can't take another winter. Greece, Italy, Germany. I'm back on track, he thinks. I'm going to be OK.

Gitta dawdles over her third cup of coffee. She's sitting up on the rooftop restaurant of her hotel, idling over the lavish breakfast buffet, watching the other residents plan the day's sightseeing to come: Topkapi, the Blue Mosque, the Aya Sofya. It's her sixth and final day here. She herself has worked her way through the tourist itinerary. Her flight is early tomorrow morning, back to the empty flat in Leipzig.

Empty, yes, she'll have to get used to that. She takes a sip of lukewarm coffee and recalls once again the shock of Lothar's revelation two days before the start of the holiday. I need some distance from what we have in order to understand its true value, he'd said at first. What the hell did that even mean? It was only much later, after hours of tortured talk late into the night, that he'd come clean about the woman at his yoga class.

She needs to stop thinking about him, it's like picking a scab. But he's trailed her throughout the last week, the phantom itch

from her severed limb. Every new sight and experience she's found herself imagining Lothar's reaction, had he been here to share it with her.

They'd booked the trip two months before. It was his idea but she'd paid for it, after all she was working, he was still finishing his doctorate, that was the unspoken agreement. She hadn't resented it, that's what couples did.

And so he'd disappeared with his bloody yoga partner while she'd been saddled with the holiday. Too late to cancel, she'd lose the flights, the hotel deposit. She'd asked her friends but they were all busy. Her sister would have loved a free holiday but she was pregnant, well into her final trimester, it was out of the question. Nothing for it, she'd have to travel alone. It'd been hard at first, but she'd bullied herself to keep active, refused to surrender to self-pity.

God, it was awkward at the beginning, explaining to the receptionist when she checked in, eating alone in restaurants, the sorry singleton queuing for the sights. She's got into the habit of keeping a low profile, arranging her day to minimise contact with others. She's the first at the breakfast table, first in line for the museums. She eats lunch on the hoof, takes her dinner at six, long before the restaurants fill up. She'd feared the unwanted attentions of men but it hasn't been too bad. That's not the hardest part. No, it's the stigma she carries, the sense of rejection that follows her like the reek of cheap perfume.

Well, she can't sit here all day. She swigs the remainder of

her coffee, heads down to her room to ready herself for her final trip, a visit to the Istanbul Modern. She'll begin the day with a walk, pass through the Grand Bazaar one last time, then down to Eminönü. She'll catch the tram to the museum from there.

An hour later, she sets off, follows the signs for the Bazaar. Shop owners call out to her to examine their goods. As always, she's underestimated the heat, curses herself for forgetting her straw hat. A headache insinuates itself from nowhere. Her earlier brightness has melted away. She feels uncomfortable, harassed and very alone.

She passes through the Bazaar, ignores the endless soliciting, manages to find her way out to the streets beyond. Now she's on a long busy road, the pavements clogged with stalls selling clothing and cheap jewellery, toys and toiletries, sunglasses and shoes.

Her stomach is churning. What if she's got a gypsy tummy? Caught short away from her hotel room, it's her worst nightmare. A man blocks her way, holds up a handful of necklaces. Another takes the opportunity to thrust a display of watches in her face. She feels overwhelmed, the courage she's slowly garnered over the last week has now deserted her. Desperate to escape the street vendors, she ducks down an alleyway.

The passage is gloomy, narrow, cobbled. Halfway down she spots a teashop, two low tables and several short stools. A boy sits at the furthest table, a cup of tea before him, his head

lowered so she cannot see his face. She's soaked in sweat, feels a monumental weariness. A glass of sweet tea, she thinks. Just the ticket.

At the door of the café she peers around dubiously, trying to assess the standard of hygiene. The man behind the counter meets her gaze, his face impassive. She takes in his prominent Adam's apple, the gentle eyes.

"Çay?" she asks, her voice a whisper. She squats down on a stool at the empty table, her back to the boy. Her plans for the day seem more daunting than before, the thought of navigating her way through the city too intimidating. The man brings her tea. She hands him a five-lira note and takes the change. The glass is brimming with golden liquid. She lifts it to her mouth, takes a cautious slurp. A heady sweet potion. She takes a second sip, feels her strength returning, her spirits rising. She's come this far, she thinks.

Adem, full-bladdered, wakes to the Güneş call of the muezzin and staggers from his room to the communal toilet across the yard. When he's finished, he dresses quickly, fills a bowl of water, washes his hands and feet, then pulls out his prayer mat and kneels facing Mecca. Afterwards, he fills the giant urn behind the counter, flicks on the power, begins his daily preparations. He sweeps the floor, cleans down the work surfaces, refills the chill fridge with soft drinks. He never returns to his sleeping quarters once he's up. It's too depressing, little more than a stockroom accessed from behind

the counter of the café, a space barely large enough to contain the thin foam mattress supplied by his boss, Mister Kagan, when he started the job six months ago.

Mister Kagan has many businesses, he's picked that up from gossiping neighbours and local tradesmen. Another café, a mobile phone shop, a couple of restaurants, several taxis. One of Adem's cousins from back home in Şanlıurfa works in Mister Kagan's other café, that's how he himself got the job. He'd been working as a labourer back home, they'd made him redundant, there'd been a sticky few months. But his cousin had phoned from the big city, told him to jump on a bus, this was an opportunity too good to miss.

And at first it seemed that way. He's never travelled away from his home town. The secrets of the big city to discover, the job responsibilities to master, the prospect was exciting. He gets free meals and accommodation so he can send almost all of his meagre salary home to Fatma, can feel safe that she and Halil will not starve.

But increasingly he feels the limitations of his work. The teashop is tucked away, gloomy, there's almost no passing trade. Throughout the day at set times he prepares large quantities of tea, fills trays a dozen glasses at a time. A delivery boy appears to take the çay to some of the local stallholders, the ones who have daily standing orders arranged with Mister Kagan. He envies the boy his freedom, resents his own lonely posting.

He's only had five or six days off since he began the job.

He's spent those times walking the streets, trying to learn his way around. It relieves the tedium but reminds him of his own isolation. What money he doesn't send home he uses to pay for telephone calls to Fatma. Hearing his wife's voice, his son's, fills him with an exquisite sadness he hungers for in spite of the pain. Six more months, he tells himself. Then Mister Kagan has promised him two weeks' holiday, a chance to see his loved ones.

He busies himself with his chores – it's the best way to combat his homesickness – and soon the delivery boy appears to take the first tray of tea out to the local tradesmen. He works steadily until the last tray is collected. Now there is a break, more than an hour before the Öğle midday prayers.

The late morning stretches ahead, a dull blank. In a couple of hours the delivery boy will return with his lunch, usually a stew and half a loaf. He wishes there was a television in the shop. At least a radio. He feels himself grow heavy with sleep, decides not to fight it, is sliding into reverie when he's roused by the sound of footsteps approaching.

Opening his eyes, he looks out through the café door, sees a boy squatting on a stool, head bowed. He watches as the child turns and looks up at him. A youngster, hardly a teenager. He thinks of his own son, feels a protective surge for this boy.

“Çay,”

His voice just a rasp. Adem pours the tea, brings it out. When the child offers his coins, he finds himself refusing. He returns to his place behind the counter, watches the boy take

sips from his glass. A little later, a foreign woman enters. She too asks for tea. He serves her, takes payment, returns inside.

Later, when they have left, he pours himself a glass of çay. At first he doesn't drink it, sits it down on the counter, contemplates the amber liquid filled to the brim. He can imagine the taste, sweet and fragrant. He stares at the glass, thinks of his home, Fatma fetching him a cup. It's late afternoon, he's sitting in the old armchair, Halil's on his lap telling him stories from his day at school, classroom tales and playground episodes. Fatma, bringing a lingering scent of lemon cologne, joins the pair. She's spent the day at her sister's house, she fills him in on her family's news. It's silly idle gossip that he usually only listens to with half an ear. But now, here, today, he misses it with an intensity that leaves him dry-mouthed and sandpaper raw.

