ESSAY

An Elegy

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"The Altar of the Past" by Sophie Pasheva

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Acknowledging the fear of losing someone close to us is a trial of sorrow and surrender, where eloquent words rise gracefully from the heart but soon stall, turning to dust in the mouth. But back then I had not yet acknowledged that fear. I was still whole, living an easy and uncomplicated life in a single world with most of my loved ones.

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Have you ever cried on a long flight? I have. I was flying from Istanbul to Washington, DC, after visiting Cyprus for a few days. I had bidden farewell to my brother ?smail, knowing there was little chance I would see him again. He had been diagnosed with cancer and was receiving chemotherapy. On the first leg of my flight from Cyprus to Istanbul, I had controlled my feelings of sadness well, but once my plane took off for the US, my broken heart got the better of me. I completely lost control.

Perhaps it was the in-flight music I was listening to. I had selected *The Essential Pavarotti* music program, hoping it would distract me. The opposite happened. It was painful to listen to the music, but when Pavarotti began to sing *Caruso* in Italian, I burst into tears. It was not the lyrics of the song, as I had not learned their English translations yet and understood none of them, but rather the music itself, which, in that moment, I found incredibly sad. I listened to it over and over, sobbing quietly. Much later, I learned that the song had been written as a tribute to the famous Italian opera singer Enrico Caruso as he was dying from throat cancer. Was it serendipity?

But the coincidences didn't end there. I also learned that the lyrics involved the bizarre notion of looking from the shores of Italy toward the west and mistaking the fishing lights seen in the far distance for those in the US. I must have had something in common with Lucio Dalla, who wrote the song, although I don't know what specifically, because the first few years after moving to the US, my homesickness was so severe that I too would look from the shores of Maryland, where I lived, to the east, wondering if it was possible to see the lights on the other side of the Atlantic.

The night before my flight, after dinner, ?smail and I had sat next to one another on the couch to watch a television program. It was a music show in which they were singing Turkish folk songs. ?smail was feeling well enough to enjoy them. At one point, he told me how he wished he could visit Istanbul again. I lied to him, saying we would go together. He looked at me, and I knew he didn't believe me. Our goodbye the next morning was short and plain. We are not a touchy-feely family, so we just hugged and casually said goodbye.

On June 1, 2020, when news of ?smail's death came in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, I was devastated, especially as the crisis had prevented me from visiting him once

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again or attending his funeral. During the first few moments after I heard about his death, I was totally numb, unable to move, talk, or think as various images passed before my eyes; visions of our youth together and later years too. It was as though I had watched a film and the film had ended, leaving only patchy images in my head but nothing else.

After those first few moments, I was compelled to look and touch a burn mark on my right forefinger. When ?smail was five and I was four, we had decided to help my mother cook. She briefly stepped away from the stove to do something else, and the two of us stepped in to stir the pot. The pot fell, and its hot contents burned our hands. ?smail's burns were minor, but mine required a doctor's attention and some time to heal. Eventually, all the burns healed except for the spot on my forefinger.



?smail and I in Potamia, Cyprus (1958) © private

I gazed at my finger as other images paraded through my mind. When ?smail and I were in elementary school, my parents insisted that we hold hands while walking to and from school. We didn't like this rule, so we made a deal: We would hold hands only while still in view of our home. However, our path to school passed in front of our grandfather's grocery store, who was supposed to keep an eye on us. Whenever we approached his store in the village square, we would check to see if Grandfather Hakk? could see us; if so, we would quickly hold hands. Knowing when we passed by, Grandfather Hakk? was very rarely absent from the front of his store.

By the time we were in middle school we had become refugees and were living in Nicosia under fairly harsh conditions. ?smail attended a British school, where most classes were taught in English, while I studied at a lycée taught in Turkish. ?smail would borrow my Turkish textbooks to read while I would borrow his English textbooks, which I could barely read. One time, I wrote so many translated words (from English to Turkish) on the pages of his textbook that he became upset with me and threatened not to lend me his textbooks again. Of course, he did not follow up on that threat.



?smail and I in Nicosia, Cyprus (1967) © private

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We both loved reading. ?smail liked to read history books while I would read anything I could find, especially the world classics (translated into Turkish). He read at home and concentrated hard on what he was reading, even taking notes. I preferred to read at the public library where, unlike the small basement in which we lived, it was nice, cool, and spacious. I still remember the high ceilings and off-white marble floors of that library. After a while, ?smail ran out of space to store his books. My mother, casually — almost jokingly — mentioned this to our neighbor Vildan Han?m, a very gracious woman, who gave ?smail the key to a small stand-alone room in her large garden the next day. She said her family had no use for it and he could use it as he wished. ?smail was thrilled and turned the room into his hideout. He moved his books there and spent much of his free time in that room. His school friends often came and visited him there while us younger siblings were not allowed to go in.

Then came high school. In those years, high school included a civil defense class that required memorizing a lot of material. It was one of only two classes ?smail was taught in Turkish. I recall my mother always helping him prepare for his civil defense exams by asking him questions about all the information he had memorized. To ensure that he did not forget anything, my mother and ?smail would get up early and go over the material again. From my own little corner, I would listen to these preparations so many times that by the time ?smail's civil defense examination was over, I had learned the material by heart.

In 1974, Greece ousted the president of Cyprus, Archbishop Makarios, through a coup d'état and attempted to unite Cyprus with Greece. At the time, ?smail was only days away from completing his mandatory two-year military service. Four days after that bloody coup, which killed hundreds, Turkey intervened in Cyprus as a guarantor nation, resulting in a full-scale war breaking out. Hours later, ?smail was assigned to translate and facilitate communications between the UN peacekeeping forces north of Nicosia and the Turkish Cypriot police headquarters in the center of the city. He was translating and carrying vital communications back and forth, making several trips on his bicycle each day. The most direct route during these dangerous missions was Dereboyu, but that road was under constant Greek fire, so instead he used a route that passed by where my family and some neighbors had taken shelter in an underground garage in Kö?klüçiftlik. For several days, my mother didn't move her eyes away from a small hole in the metal door of that garage, hoping to see ?smail. Each time he passed by, she was convinced that it was the last time we would see him.

Time was of the essence, so ?smail could not stop to talk to us. During the whole first phase of the war, which lasted only a few days, he stopped by only twice. On his first trip, he stopped to tell us — from behind the metal garage door — why he was on his bicycle, riding like mad, while bullets were whizzing over his head. He also stopped during his final trip, at

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the end of the first phase of the war, to tell us that his assignment as a translator was complete and that he would not be passing by again; he bade us farewell. As he cycled away, my mother fainted.

After three days of fierce fighting, there was a ceasefire, but it did not last long. About three weeks later, the second phase of the war began and the fighting continued for two more weeks. Then, with the help of the international community a new and more permanent ceasefire agreement was put in place. The island was divided into two parts, with Greek Cypriots living in the south and the Turkish Cypriots living in the north. This arrangement is still in place today.

Later that year, ?smail and I both traveled to Istanbul and enrolled in universities there as first-year students: he in Istanbul University, and I in Bosphorus University. On the weekends, ?smail would visit me on our campus. When he discovered that the famous Turkish folk singer Ruhi Su regularly came to our campus on weekends to sing with the university's folk-dance troupes, he visited more frequently. The two of us became a fixture at those performances, sitting side by side on two stools, listening intently to Ruhi Su sing and play his *saz*. Little did I know that those experiences would become incredibly special to me in the years ahead.

In 2010, after having lived in the US for about 35 years, I received a call from ?smail. His voice was full of concern as he said, "If we don't intervene, our mother will die." Our mother was 87 years old and had a growth in her throat that prevented her from breathing properly. Something had to be done, but the doctors in Cyprus were not willing to operate on her because of her advanced age. All of this was news to me as my family never told me about any of the bad things happening in Cyprus. That day, with that call, ?smail got the ball rolling, and we searched for a solution. After some difficulty and many setbacks, we found a doctor in Istanbul who was willing to perform the necessary procedure. As a result, my mother lived eight more years. Those years were a beloved son's gift to her.



?smail and I in Kyrenia, Cyprus (2017) © private

In 2019, ?smail was diagnosed with stage 4 melanoma, shocking and devastating me and my entire family. After learning of this horrible news, I could not function for many months. I had a lot of difficulty believing, let alone accepting, this cruel reality. I kept hoping it was a dream (a nightmare, really) and that, when I woke up, it would go away. But it wasn't a dream, and it didn't go away.

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In early 2020, while he was receiving immunotherapy, I had a sad telephone conversation with ?smail. I had called to ask how his treatment was going. He was still in the hospital's waiting room, which he described in detail:

"I have to wait in this room for many hours so the medication used before and after the treatment can take full effect. Each time, I spend at least four hours waiting — sometimes longer. There are only old and sick people here. I look around and feel strange among them. Luckily, I have my iPad with me and I am working on my Spanish lessons. At this rate, I will make good progress in Spanish."

Thank goodness he could not see the tears rolling down my cheeks. ?smail was a lifelong student. Although already fluent in five languages, he was determined to learn a sixth one, practicing diligently as he waited to receive his therapy.

?smail didn't die on June 1. He had been dying a little every day for months. June 1 was only the last day of his death. On that day, the process that had begun months earlier was complete. When he died, he took a significant part of me with him. I am no longer whole. I never will be.

Today, ?smail lies a few meters from my mother at the foot of a mound providing some shade in a cemetery in Lefke. After her death in 2018, my mother was buried there so she could be close to her own mother, who had been laid to rest there in 1967. It was also ?smail's wish to be buried near our mother and grandmother. My mother's grave is located a few meters behind ?smail's so that she can look directly over to her beloved son for all eternity. May both their souls rest in peace.

In the two years since his passing, I have been living in two worlds: my old world, which ?smail and I shared, and a new one without ?smail. I often travel from one to the other.

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