



LETTER FROM TURKEY

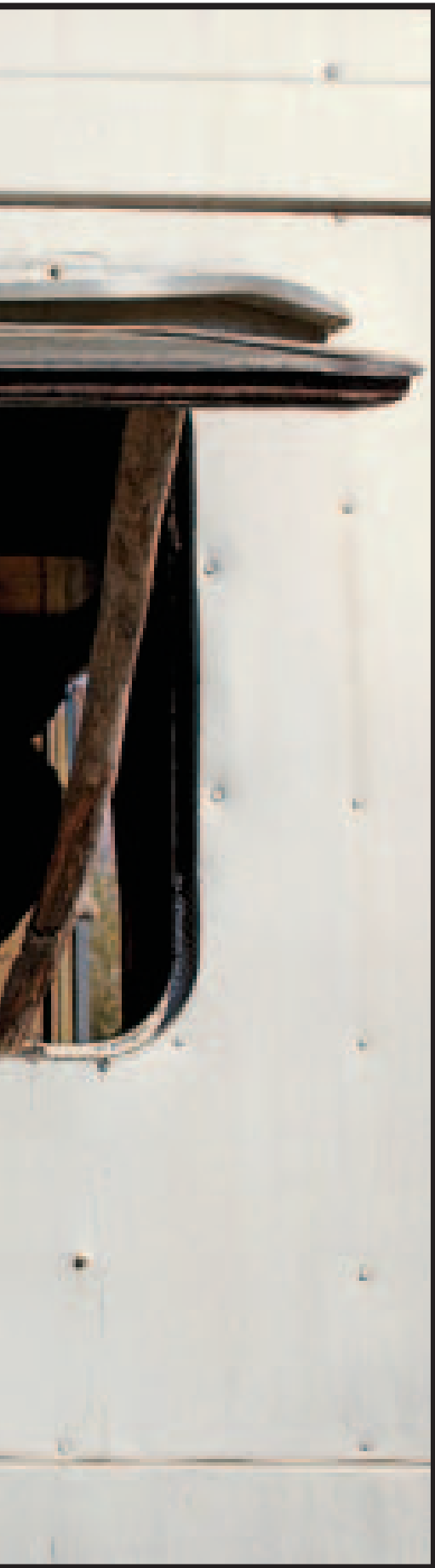
# NATURAL HISTORIES

*A journey in the shadow of Ararat.*

BY ELIF BATUMAN



*Çağan Şekercioğlu at a bird-banding station he set up in Aras, a small village near Turkey's closely monitored border with Armenia.*



Photograph by Carolyn Drake.

The flight from Istanbul to Kars took two hours. When the wheels touched ground and I turned on my cell phone, it was already ringing. The caller was my old friend Çağan, whose voice I hadn't heard in more than ten years. He had a grant deadline and couldn't make it to the airport. A colleague of his would pick me up in a Land Cruiser. I would have no trouble recognizing it, because it was the only Land Cruiser in Kars.

The airport was tiny, antiquated. You felt you had travelled in time as well as space. In Orhan Pamuk's novel "Snow," a writer called Ka returns to Turkey after twelve years in Frankfurt and, finding that his childhood home in Istanbul doesn't look decrepit enough, heads straight to Kars. Gazing at old teahouses and at shopwindows full of spirit stoves, black rubber overshoes, and a local cheese—"things you never saw in Istanbul anymore"—he finally feels at home.

Kars is a city in suspended animation, a museum of its more prosperous past. In the tenth century, it was the capital of the Armenian Bagratuni kingdom. Under the Ottomans, it became a military administrative center, a strategic fortress against the Russians, who besieged the city several times during the nineteenth century, and held it from 1878 to 1918. Kars reverted to Turkey in 1920, and the Soviet-Turkish border—now the Armenian-Turkish border—was set some forty miles away. Kars was the major railway hub for trade with the Soviet Union and with post-Soviet Armenia—until 1993, when the Turkish government shut down the border, in a show of solidarity with Azerbaijan, which was at war with Armenia. The war ended in 1994, but the border is still closed, leaving Kars one of the poorest and least developed regions in Turkey. The frozen atmosphere is heightened by the region's heavy snowfall, by the fact that *kar* is the Turkish word for "snow" (in early drafts, Pamuk titled his novel "Kars'ta Kar," or "Snow in Kars"), and by the fate of ninety thousand Ottoman soldiers who froze to death in a nearby forest during an ill-conceived operation against the Russian Army in the First World War.

The natural history of Kars shares with its human history a certain tumultuous, elegiac quality. Kars is at the meeting point of two of the world's

thirty-four biodiversity hot spots—regions where an unusually large number of species are threatened by unusually rapid habitat loss. Mt. Ararat—where, in Noah's time, the densest collection of biological variation once confronted the direst environmental peril—hulks symbolically in the distance. My friend Çağan, an ornithologist and conservation biologist, had specialized for years in tropical ecosystems, when he found himself drawn to Kars, sucked in by its melancholy ecology as surely as Pamuk was sucked in by those run-down teahouses and rubber galoshes.

I met Çağan in my first year of college, in the Turkish Student Association. He was the first Turkish monomaniac I met; Turkish culture doesn't produce a lot of them. As a small child, growing up in a residential suburb near the Istanbul airport, Çağan started bringing home animals—frogs, lizards, tortoises, hedgehogs, insects, anything he could catch. His mother, fearing nascent psychosis, took him to a child psychiatrist. Çağan later diagnosed his condition as what E. O. Wilson called "biophilia": an "innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes."

In high school, Çağan found a rare beetle specimen and donated it to the Harvard entomology collection. As an undergraduate, he later inventoried that very beetle. He spent the summer after his junior year counting birds in the jungle in Uganda, all alone except for a local guide. He was back at Harvard the next year, but nobody saw him—he was working really hard on his thesis. One night, I ran into him at a party. Tall, solidly built, ill-shaven, in all respects unbirdlike, he was holding a tiny plastic cup of red wine. He was just back from a bird-watching contest. Contestants drove around the wilderness with a list of birds; the winner was whoever checked off the most species. You didn't have to take pictures of the birds.

When I asked what prevented people from cheating, Çağan stared at me with ravaged eyes: "Who would cheat at a *bird-watching* contest?"

Çağan and I got back in touch last December, when the Turkish paper *Radikal* named us both in an end-of-the-year feature: he was the scientist of the year, and I was the "person of letters." I was so excited to see him there, wrangling



Victoria Roberts

*"I rearrange the furniture—he doesn't notice."*

with a large bird of prey! That was when I learned that Çağan—who was recently named a National Geographic Emerging Explorer, and who had spent his early career all over the globe, about as far from Turkey as he could get—now worked two months a year in Kars, running an N.G.O. to save the world's least glamorous swamp birds. In recognition of his achievements and idealism, he was awarded a Whitley Gold Award, England's highest honor for conservationists. Princess Anne presented him with the award and invited him to a reception in the garden of Buckingham Palace, where Çağan gave her a model of a ruddy shelduck.

Outside the airport, the sun was blazing. The only Land Cruiser in Kars pulled up at the curb. It bore the logo of KuzeyDoğa, the N.G.O. that Çağan set up in 2008 to protect regional biodiversity. The name is a play on the Turkish words *kuzeydoğu* ("northeast") and *doğa* ("nature"). Behind the wheel was KuzeyDoğa's science coordinator, Emrah, a young biologist whose beard, physique, and general demeanor put me in mind of Sancho Panza. Because

Çağan was still working on his grant proposal, Emrah took me on a detour to the ancient Armenian city of Ani. In the eleventh century, the city's population exceeded a hundred thousand, but by the eighteenth century Ani was completely deserted. The ruins were excavated at the turn of the twentieth century by a famous Russian crackpot, who believed he had traced the origin of all non-Indo-European languages to Noah's son Japheth. Excavations were discontinued after the Russian Revolution, and today you can't even reach Ani by bus.

We wandered among the ruins. In a thirteenth-century church, Emrah indicated a swallows' nest overhanging some frescoes of the life of Gregory the Illuminator, who converted Armenia to Christianity. In Ani's eleventh-century cathedral, we took turns looking through Emrah's enormous binoculars, which resembled two giant beer steins, at a red-billed chough feeding its chicks. I thought of E. O. Wilson, who, on a tour of the walls of Jerusalem, had been interested primarily in the harvester ants.

Night falls early in eastern Turkey, and it was past dark when we reached

the KuzeyDoğa headquarters, in an apartment in the back streets of Kars. Heaps of shoes and plastic slippers lay at the foot of a scarred chiffonier. In the living room, a documentary filmmaker and several volunteers were lounging on two long sofas, which were upholstered in that yellowish color peculiar to provincial sofas and stray dogs. A huge obsolete television was tuned to a political debate, the volume turned inaudibly low. In the kitchen, two volunteers were fixing dinner. One handed me an onion to mince: "Cut both dorsal *and* ventral."

"Dorsal and ventral?" the second volunteer repeated. "Why are you talking like that, brother?"

"We want her to feel at home. 'Dorsal' and 'ventral' are English words, right?"

The volunteers were both veterinary students at Kafkas University. "Kafkas" is the Turkish word for "Caucasus," and Kars is also home to Kafkas Medical Supplier, Kafkas News Agency, and the Kafkas warbler. It's easy to understand why Orhan Pamuk felt the spirit of Kafka in this city, which is dominated by a massive black medieval castle.

A door flew open at the end of a dark hallway and there was Çağan, well over six feet tall and perhaps a bit heavier than when I had last seen him, wearing tracksuit pants and plastic slippers. You could tell at once that he was the animating principle of the place. Even the furniture seemed to pull itself together. His proposal, for a grant to improve the condition of life on earth, was a couple of thousand words over the limit, and due in a few hours. "I hate to put you to work right when you get here," he said.

I followed him to his room and sat at the computer, and we began consolidating paragraphs and eliminating passive constructions. Çağan was proposing to build Turkey's first transborder wildlife corridor. Running along the Kura River watershed, it would enable a brown bear someday to stroll clear from the Sarikamış Allahüekber Mountains, where the Ottoman soldiers froze to death, to the forests of Akhaltsikhe, in Georgia.

Sometime past midnight, I made my way to one of the surplus bunk beds that Çağan had appropriated from a government warehouse. Of the apartment's two dormitory-style bedrooms, one was occupied by an injured baby long-eared

owl; someone had rescued this perpetually astonished-looking creature from under a tree outside a municipal building. I found a spare bed in the other room. In the adjacent bunks, two visiting biologists were already fast asleep, stacked peacefully one on top of the other.

I found the city of Kars much as Pamuk described: “the old decrepit Russian buildings with stovepipes sticking out of every window, the thousand-year-old Armenian church towering over the wood depots and electric generators.” The Armenian church is now a mosque. So is the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral, from which the gilded onion domes and spires have long been removed. Local detractors liken the ex-cathedral to the stork in the tale of the folk hero Nasreddin Hodja and the stork. Unable to fathom the stork, Nasreddin Hodja takes a pair of scissors and cuts off its long beak and legs. “Now,” he says with pride, “you look like a bird.”

I climbed the hill to the Kars Castle: an ancient fortress of such forbidding and impregnable aspect that Pushkin, who visited the city during the Russian campaign of 1829, later dubbed his mother-in-law Mama Kars. Nearbystood the remains of a Monument to Humanity, commissioned in 2009 to commemorate Turkish-Armenian friendship. (More than a million Armenians were massacred in Turkey in 1915; Kars’s Armenian community was driven out of the city when the Turks took over, in 1920.) This past January, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan declared the incomplete hundred-foot monument a “monstrosity,” a “weird thing” that was overshadowing the nearby mausoleum of the tenth-century Islamic mystic Hasan el-Harakani. A two-hundred-ton machine was brought from Istanbul just to dismantle the Monument to Humanity. A sculptor who protested the dismantling got stabbed in the stomach.

The monument had originally consisted of two blocklike human figures, whose relatively small bevelled heads resembled drawer knobs. The figures were intended—in an interesting iconographic choice for a friendship monument—to represent Cain and Abel, or Habil and Kabil, as they are known in

the Koran, although the story of the demolition might equally have been called Abel and Cable, because the construction cable broke four times before Abel’s nineteen-ton head could be lowered to the cargo truck. The removal process had begun more than a month earlier, but two pairs of rectangular stone feet still stood proudly on the intact plinth.

In the Russian part of the city, long, straight avenues were lined by basalt houses with gingerbread trim and carved wooden doors. Several shops were dedicated to *kaşar*, Kars’s famous yellow sheep’s-milk cheese, and to *gravyer*, a local Gruyère. It was early June, and Turkey’s general election was less than two weeks away. Campaign vans were blaring propaganda songs: Erdoğan’s Islamic conservative party was playing a dance track called “One More Time”; the Republican opposition countered with a folk ballad about how the people had been deceived. The nationalists had a rap about how nobody had enough money to buy an onion. Kurdish-language banners in the Kurdish colors promoted the pro-Kurdish candidate, a woman with the remarkable name Mülkiye Birtane (“Civil Only-One”).

I first read about Kars in Pushkin’s Turkish travelogue, “Journey to Arzurum” (1836). I had been very excited to discover this book in college, back when I was a student of Russian literature and

a member of the Turkish Student Association. Travel to Turkey never had been a particularly dear dream for Pushkin: he would have greatly preferred to see Paris, but he was barred for political reasons from travel to the West. In 1829, he accepted an invitation to visit the Russian encampment in the Caucasus, and although his motivation was apparently a simple desire to set foot, for once in his life, on foreign soil, some have suspected that he was plotting to escape Russia for good.

Pushkin eagerly spurs his horse across the Turkish border—only to learn that the border has moved and he is still in Russia. At the military base in Kars, he enjoys a seemingly lighthearted reunion with some old school friends, many of whom had been banished to the Caucasus for political reasons. An undercurrent of political menace pursues him throughout his travels. When he visits an underground cottage near Kars, it blows up fifteen minutes after he leaves. He strikes up a conversation with some cart drivers, and discovers that the cart contains the mutilated corpse of Alexander Griboyedov, author of the play “Woe from Wit,” who had been lynched in Tehran. In my favorite scene, a Turkish dignitary bows to Pushkin, saluting him as “brother to the dervish”; minutes later, a half-naked man turns up in a sheepskin cap, waving a cudgel and



shouting at the top of his lungs. "I was told that this was my brother, a dervish," Pushkin writes. "He was driven away by force."

Pamuk's "Snow" shares certain thematic elements with Pushkin's "Journey." Like Pushkin, Pamuk's hero is a poet and travels under police surveillance. He, too, narrowly avoids an explosion, meets old school friends, and sees a mutilated corpse. A political figure salutes him as "a modern-day dervish." As a modern-day dervish, he is beaten by the police and driven from town.

Pamuk, unlike Pushkin, was not a formative writer for me. For many years, I even thought that, despite being a writer of Turkish descent, I might live my whole life without reading any of his novels. My first inkling that this would not be possible came in 2008, when I was interviewed for the first time by a Turkish newspaper. The interview was about the band Vampire Weekend, but the reporter still required my opinions on Turkey's only Nobelist. My answer appeared as a subhead, in

all caps: "I WAS UNABLE TO FINISH PAMUK."

In subsequent interviews, I was asked not only about Pamuk but about my inability to finish Pamuk. "You know, everyone always asks about this," I told one journalist this spring. "Why don't we talk about something else?"

"I'll tell you why," she said. "None of us can finish Pamuk, but you're the only one who says so openly."

I never had set out to become a national spokesperson for the inability to finish Orhan Pamuk. So I went to the library and checked out Pamuk's most Russian book—the one he conceived as a "Dostoyevskian political novel" and set in the shadow of the gigantic architectural emanation of Pushkin's mother-in-law.

"Snow" opens with Ka's arrival in Kars, where, pretending to be a journalist, he starts investigating a mysterious suicide epidemic among young girls. On hearing the girls' stories, Ka is most struck by the offhand manner in which the suicides have taken place. One teen-

ager, forced into an engagement with an elderly teahouse owner, got up from the dinner table to fetch dessert, went to her parents' bedroom, and shot herself.

Pamuk didn't invent this epidemic. Beginning in the late nineties, a disproportionate number of women have killed themselves in Batman, a city a couple of hundred miles south of Kars. Most were very young, and many departed this world in just the offhand manner described by Pamuk. Some had been forced to marry against their will. Others—the so-called "honor suicides"—were bullied into self-annihilation in order to cleanse their families' honor of stains they had incurred by, say, wearing jeans or holding hands with a boy. You couldn't always tell the honor suicides from the other suicides. One teen jumped out of a seventh-floor window after her father said her skirt was too tight. Many of the real-life "suicide girls" belonged to rural Kurdish families who had been displaced to Batman earlier in the decade, when the Turkish Army was practicing scorched-earth tactics against militant Kurdish separatists throughout southeastern Anatolia. Kurdish village girls, exposed to television for the first time, were said to have been driven to despair by the discovery of a world in which women studied in universities, drove cars, and dated handsome men.

Interestingly, although the suicide girls in "Snow" initially seem like a major plot element, they soon cede their importance to the "head-scarf girls," a group of Muslim girls barred from school for refusing to bare their heads. One head-scarf girl, threatened with expulsion, strangles herself with her head scarf—neatly transforming the debate about suicide into a debate about head scarves. So successful is this transformation that—although Ka actually remarks, toward the end of the book, "There was only one suicide who was involved in the head-scarf protest"—many reviewers misremember "Snow" as a book about "the suicides of a number of young girls forced by their schools to remove their headscarves" (Margaret Atwood), or "an epidemic of suicide by young girls thwarted in their desire to take the Muslim veil" (Christopher Hitchens). There is something unsettling about the replacement of the "sui-



*"Listen up and listen up good, 'cause I'm only going to say this a million times."*

cide girls” by the “head-scarf girls”—the replacement of domestic drama by political spectacle, patriarchal repression by secularist repression, real suicides by fake suicides. There really are jeans suicides in Turkey, but I have heard of only one head-scarf suicide, attempted, unsuccessfully, by a fourteen-year-old girl in 2002, shortly after the publication of Pamuk’s novel. “THE SUICIDE IN THE NOVEL ‘SNOW’ CAME TRUE,” one paper said.

In 2008, the mayor of Batman tried to sue the producers of “The Dark Knight,” citing, among other complaints, his theory that the psychological effects of the superhero’s success were contributing to his city’s high rate of female suicides. Everyone made fun of this mayor, but I felt sorry for him. Was it because of my surname—because I know, at least a little bit, what it’s like to be confused with Batman? In any case, I had no trouble imagining how I would feel seeing one Batman raking in a billion dollars while my Batman had nothing.

Pamuk’s novel reminded me, in some ways, of Çağan’s life in Kars: a long sequence of political conversations, in an array of melancholy venues. On the first day we spent together, Çağan was meeting with the president of Kafkas University, to work out some kinks in the ornithology program. Because there are no ornithologists on the faculty, the Kafkas Ornithology Program is run by an entomologist. The final exam for the ornithology course, composed by the entomologist, had six questions. As Çağan recalls (though the entomologist denies it), one question was “Which parts of a bird are edible?”

I joined Çağan at several of his meetings. We drank tea with a provincial governor, with a giant mustached carter agent, and with the head of the Kafkas News Agency, who shared with us a piece of breaking news: the Monument to Humanity was going to be replaced by a monument to Kars’s sheep’s-milk cheese. Later, we drank tea with numerous representatives of the Ministry of Environment and Forestry. A few hours after we had met a certain official for tea, that same official called Çağan and began berating him for not having stayed for tea on some other occasion, even though that other occasion had



“This one has the most friends.”

been inconvenient for both parties. I could hear him clearly through Çağan’s cell phone. “You’ve broken my heart!” he kept shouting.

Çağan and I later debated the purpose of this phone call, which had lasted several minutes and activated a tic in his eyelid. I thought that the official had really wanted to have tea, but Çağan said the whole thing was an ancient form of folk theatre, a cultural relic of times when people had no access to drama.

“I should just put on an adult diaper and drink tea all day long,” Çağan reflected, rubbing his eye. “They’ll be like, ‘That Çağan, he’s a really good guy—the other day he had tea with us for *five hours*. Let’s declare this a protected habitat.’”

In certain respects, the lives of birders resemble the lives of the saints: the early portents, the moments of revelation, the physical mortifications, the miraculous apparitions and violent ends. Çağan realized he was a birder at the age of fourteen, the moment he saw his first field guide. His father bought him a pair of Russian-made military binoculars; their extravagant weight caused him terrible neck pain, but he carried them around everywhere. While birding, Çağan has narrowly escaped being taken out by a Turkish military sniper and losing his legs to a lymphatic infection in Papua New Guinea. In

Ethiopia, he was carjacked by Afar tribesmen wielding AK-47s, minutes before spotting two regal, three-foot-tall Arabian bustards. He once pursued a plain leaf warbler into the middle of a military operation against Kurdish terrorists. A nine-centimetre-long brown songbird with no distinctive features or markings, the plain leaf warbler looks almost exactly like the willow warbler, except the willow warbler is eleven centimetres long. On another excursion in the same region, Çağan helped discover seven “cryptic species” of butterflies: species visually identical to but genetically different from some other butterflies. Because he spends a lot of time hiding behind trees and rocks in politically unstable countries, Çağan is often mistaken for a spy. He says that birding and spying aren’t really all that different. Ian Fleming, both a secret agent and a bird-watcher, borrowed the name James Bond from the author of a manual called “Birds of the West Indies.”

KuzeyDoğa runs two bird-banding stations: one at a Kars-area lake called Kuyucuk, the other in Aras village, close to Mt. Ararat. At Lake Kuyucuk, Çağan has documented more than two hundred bird species. He successfully petitioned the Ministry of Environment and Forestry to declare the lake a protected wetland, built an island there for bird

nesting, helped run seminars to educate local villagers in ecotourism, and converted an abandoned teachers' dormitory into an ecotourist hostel—although, when we visited the village, we found the hostel boarded up and the windows broken. It was hard to get villagers to keep up the hostel, because they didn't especially need the money. They had government health care, and plenty of cows. In a pinch, they could always sell a cow for two or three thousand dollars, and who needed more than that? The growth of village-based ecotourism was essentially being inhibited by a lack of consumerist mind-set. In their own way, of course, the villagers were just as acquisitive as anyone else. It was difficult to signpost ecologically important areas, because the minute you put up a sign large enough to be seen from a car someone might take it down and use it for roofing.

One day, Çağan took me to visit the Aras station, an hour's drive south-east of Kars, near the Armenian border. Merging onto the highway, we passed a flatbed truck carrying away the feet from the Monument to Humanity. These last remnants of Kabil and Habil were on their way to a government warehouse outside the city.

At the edge of a swamp about half an hour into our journey, Çağan pulled over, got out with his binoculars, and was soon deeply absorbed in the contemplation of waterfowl. He had been petitioning for years to have this area declared a protected wetland; it's a breeding ground of the endangered white-headed duck, which has one of the longest penis-to-body ratios of all vertebrates. Its pliant, corkscrew-shaped penis is longer than its body, with a spiny base and brushlike tip. The first time Çağan observed one of these outgrowths, he thought the duck had been disembowelled.

A couple of hundred yards away from us were a handful of pink plaster houses: a settlement formed thirty years ago by refugees from a Kurdish village feud. Some small boys came out of the houses and stood a short distance away. Looking through the binoculars, Çağan reeled off the names of the duck species he could see: "Gadwall, mallard, garganey, pochard." The children edged closer, gazing up into our faces. After

several minutes, Çağan lowered his binoculars and engaged the boys in seemingly effortless conversation—about how their settlement managed its water supply and when their uncles hunted geese. I realized that although an obsession with birds can isolate you from people, a more intense obsession with birds can do exactly the opposite. Çağan seemed driven to talk to everyone he met. Like Don Quixote, he never had to cast about for a subject. He just had to tell everyone about their role in the big story.

"Only eat the geese you raise yourselves," he told the boys. "Don't eat the wild ones. It's bad. It's a *sin*."

"The wild ones taste better!" one boy declared.

"Well, now, you know that's not true," Çağan said. "They're tougher, they have less meat." The boys seemed enraptured. They didn't want to let him go. Çağan promised to come back next week, bringing bird posters.

Farther along the road, we came upon some piles of gravel and lengths of blue PVC piping. I barely registered them at first, but they caused immediate, personal grief to Çağan. He parked the car and went over to two men sitting in an excavating tractor at a turn in the road. He wanted to know if they were getting E.U. funding. A few minutes later, he headed back, wearing a fixed smile. When he got in the driver's seat, a black expression fell over his face. The men were digging a channel, part of the national program of hydraulic development: Erdoğan had recently vowed to build two thousand new dams by the centenary of the republic, in 2023. Under existing guidelines, rivers could be diverted up to ninety per cent and still be considered "environmentally intact." The Minister of Environment and Forestry, who had once publicly declared, "My job is to build dams," was not someone you could count on for oversight. "He keeps talking about water 'running in vain,'" Çağan said. "By which he means rivers reaching the sea."

Çağan was on edge, having stayed up till six in the morning several days running, revising an article about threats to Turkish biodiversity. The deadline was long past, but every time Çağan thought he was finished some new environmen-

tal outrage occurred and had to be incorporated. First, someone decided to build a cement factory in the habitat of a globally threatened gazelle. Then a dam broke near a silver mine, flooding the closest town with arsenic-laced water. Meanwhile, Erdoğan announced his intention to dig a forty-mile canal linking the Black Sea to the Sea of Marmara, destroying acres of forestland and transforming European Istanbul into an island.

"This is Africa!" Çağan fumed. "It's worse than Africa." There was more environmental awareness in Africa, and it got more international funding, because who doesn't love lions, giraffes, and elephants? "Look around," he said. "Do you see any charismatic animals?" I looked around. I saw a brown bird sitting on a pile of rocks.

We drove on. Clouds cast huge shadows on the rolling hills. We passed white yurts, beehives, an armored vehicle with a machine-gun turret. A shepherd was driving his flock across the road. Around dusk, we came in view of the border. Through the trees we glimpsed houses—Armenian houses. "It's obvious this used to be one community," Çağan said. "Of course, in the Mesozoic Era this whole area was part of the Tethys Sea." The mountains here were exposed seabed. There might be dinosaur bones, but nobody could excavate them because of border politics.

Behind gathering clouds, the shape of Ararat began to emerge. Thunder boomed and echoed around us. A pink flash at the horizon lit up the mountains. When Pushkin first saw Ararat, he had a vision of Noah's Ark poised at its peak and "the raven and the dove flying off, symbols of retribution and reconciliation." The vision was consonant with Pushkin's over-all experience in the Caucasus: reconciliation may be flying out toward you on beautiful white wings, but retribution is never far behind.

The Aras bird-banding station was housed in a government-surplus trailer surrounded by swamp vegetation. Water swished and sucked around our tires. A girl in jeans and rubber galoshes ran out to meet us, beaming, her hair pulled back from her pale bright face. We followed her into the trailer. At a worktable, illuminated by a floodlight, sat a wiry, tanned

young man with sunken eyes, long hair, and a beard: this was KuzeyDoğa's chief field officer, a Kurdish biologist named Sedat. Along the wall beside him hung a row of small white sacks, quivering and thrashing in the gloom, making a soft, eerie sound against the wood panelling. Sedat opened one of the sacks and drew out a songbird, lightly grasping its neck between his index and middle fingers. Angling the bird head first into a small cardboard cone, he placed it on a scale. Around its twiglike ankle he fixed an aluminum band imprinted with letters and numbers, which he copied into a giant book.

It was nine, time for the nightly rounds of the bird-catching nets. Borrowing galoshes and a headlamp, I went out with Ayşe, the bright-faced girl. In places, we waded through water, and in others the cool mud gripped our ankles. All around us, nameless birds and insects chirped, hooted, and whirred, like parts of a giant machine. Groping in the mesh, Ayşe plucked out a warbler. She put it in a white cloth sack tied to her belt, to be measured, weighed, and banded. All kinds of birds turned up in these nets: a barn swallow banded in Durban, a hawk

from Tel Aviv University. Çağan had heard back about the first bird banded at Aras, a song thrush. A hunter in Cyprus had roasted and eaten it as an appetizer with raki.

We spent the night in the village, and the next morning we headed toward the highlands near Mt. Ararat, where Çağan hoped to spot some high-altitude bird species undocumented in Turkey. Field work had been nearly impossible in this region for decades, because of Kurdish guerrillas operating from the caves. Some picnickers had recently been killed by one of their land mines. Birds, however, often flourish in geopolitical conflict zones. The demilitarized zone between North and South Korea is home to two of the world's rarest cranes.

As we drove down the shimmering highway, I noticed an elderly man walking along the side of the road, under the blazing sun, wearing a navy suit and tie.

"Globally endangered Egyptian vulture!" shouted Çağan, slamming on the brakes. Glancing skyward, I caught a glimpse of something brown flapping away. The body of the Egyptian vulture

is brown and off-white, but its face is bright yellow. "They get that color from eating shit, which is full of yellow carotenoid pigments," Çağan explained. In males, the bright-yellow face is an indicator of fitness and virility, signalling a capacity to eat enormous quantities of shit without getting sick.

On behalf of the Egyptian vulture, as well as the region's other vulture species, Çağan had recently opened a "vulture restaurant"—a project uniquely illustrative of the human, biological, and political complexity surrounding his work. A fund set up by Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, had donated five thousand dollars to this restaurant, which in its pilot phase had served mostly dead dog. Emrah, Çağan's science coördinator, was charged with retrieving dog carcasses from the city dumps and depositing them in random locations around Aras, to see how the vultures reacted. The vultures reacted well. You bring the dead dog, it turns out, and the vulture takes care of the rest. The one problem was that a lot of the dogs in the dumps had been poisoned as part of a stray-dog reduction program. In fact, one study



*"I expected it to be awful, but not eternal Zumba."*





*"Instead of creating life, I've decided just to establish an online persona."*

has suggested that, because dogs and vultures both eat carrion, a better way of getting rid of your stray dogs might simply be to nurture your vultures; in India, declining vulture populations once contributed to a rabies epidemic. Viewed in this light, there was a certain cosmic justice in the prospect of Egyptian vultures eating the stray dogs—but not, of course, if the dogs were full of poison.

Thus began a phase of Emrah's life that might have been called "C.S.I.: Dog Dump": did this dog die of natural causes, or was it poisoned? He started bribing the staff at the dumps, a pack of cigarettes for every clean carcass. It was a good system, although Emrah inevitably began asking himself certain questions. Was it for this that he had completed his master's in biology? Furthermore, workers at the dumps clearly thought he was some kind of pervert. One of them once remarked that Emrah might not find that day's dog suitable: "The thing is, this one is *male*."

The vulture restaurant now has its own plot of government land and is supplied with free offal by a local butcher. Emrah no longer drives dead dogs around the countryside. But Çağan's stories never

end simply; the consequences sprout consequences, each trailing its own inexplicable tendrils. Now there is the problem of how to keep dogs from eating the free offal intended for vultures. It turns out you need a fence with a two-foot concrete foundation—otherwise the dogs can dig under it.

"I never thought, as a Harvard-trained biologist, I would be calculating how many feet of concrete you need to put under a dog-proof fence," Çağan mused. He is trying to get thirty thousand dollars from the government to pay for the fence.

The road grew narrower as it wound into the mountains, and the sun disappeared. Ararat periodically showed through the clouds to our left, a swirling black-and-white shoulder, suggestive of a giant hidden zebra. Oryx had lived here until the fifteenth century. Nutria were introduced by Russian furriers; known in Turkish as "water monkeys," they now bred only in the Edirne and Kars regions. People didn't know what they were, and killed them. You read about them in the news: "GIANT RAT FOUND IN EDIRNE." At seventeen hundred feet, we saw a shepherd helping a

ewe give birth, and an empty armored personnel carrier. A corn bunting emitted its distinctive cry, which resembles jangling keys. I became fascinated by a green caterpillar that was inching along Çağan's leg. It raised its head, seeming to look around, then hurled itself forward in the most exaggerated manner, as if making fun of someone.

Çağan pointed out a Kafkas warbler, which I had wanted to see because of its name. Çağan's favorite bird name was Caucasian black grouse: "I'm like, 'Make up your mind—are you Caucasian or are you black?'" Caucasian black grouse are beautiful jet-black birds with white armpits. In spring, they gather among rhododendron bushes, and the males dance. The women—Çağan called them "the women"—sit in the bushes, choose the best dancers, and mate with them. I thought it sounded marvellous.

We came to a military checkpoint. Two soldiers approached the car. "Çağan Şekercioğlu, docent doctor," Çağan said, thrusting his hand out the window. Torrential rain began pouring from the sky. Çağan explained the nature and purpose of our excursion. The soldiers shifted their weight and squinted in the rain.

"There's an operation in progress," one of them said finally. "We have men on the field, men in the mountains. We've received a communiqué of activity. We've seen images."

Although things here were far quieter than they had been six or seven years earlier, a small number of Kurdish guerrillas were still said to be hiding out in these mountains.

"Can we drive through?" Çağan said. The soldiers didn't answer. "Will we encounter any annoyances?" he persisted.

"Well, you might encounter some annoyances."

"Do you mean land mines?" A clap of thunder sounded.

"We don't know anything about land mines."

Rain streamed down the faces of the soldiers, who made no move either to let us go or to make us turn back.

"You guys are wet by now—we've inconvenienced you," Çağan observed.

"It's no inconvenience. We're on duty. We often get wet."

"Well," Çağan said after a pause, "I

guess we'll be heading along then." The soldiers nodded and returned to their barracks, and we drove through the checkpoint.

Çağan said that if there had been a real danger they would have made us turn back. But the higher we climbed the more nervous he seemed. He remembered a story about some Germans who had been kidnapped somewhere around here and held hostage for a week.

The rain stopped as abruptly as it had started. A blond Kurdish girl came walking along the road toward us. "Take it easy," Çağan called out the window. The girl evidently hadn't expected to be spoken to by unknown people in an unknown car, and the most dramatic expressions passed over her face—she looked aghast, terrified, surprised, and then began to giggle. A bit farther down the road, we waved at three surly children who were sitting on top of a ruined wall. They waved back, suddenly wreathed in smiles. We waved at a little boy carrying a stick; he pointed the stick at Çağan like a gun and shot him. Of course, kids do things like that everywhere.

As we drove, Çağan occasionally called out the names of the songbirds he spotted—finches, warblers, wheatears—but for once his mind didn't seem to be on birds. The road grew narrower and wound around the flanks of the mountains. On a hill above us appeared the silhouettes of two men with rifles. We stiffened. The light changed, and they became shepherds with staffs. One staff was a broken umbrella.

"There's probably two guys total in these whole mountains, and two *hundred* soldiers hunting them down," Çağan said. "That's why it's called terrorism." He explained the biological concept of the "landscape of fear," and talked about how a small number of predators could combine with certain features of the terrain to inhibit animals' behavior and mess up their eating. We came to a white van broken down at the side of the road. Two men were waving at us to stop. We didn't stop. We came to a settlement with a sign that said "Kolikent": Cardboard Box City. The rectangular gray plaster buildings did in fact resemble cardboard boxes. The road began to wind downhill. Soon we were

back in the flatlands, jouncing along a narrow rutted road through a marsh, and we headed back to Aras.

Çağan and I stayed that night with a well-to-do farmer and his wife who lived near the field station. On learning that I was a writer, the wife gave me a volume of poetry written by her uncle during the end stages of his struggle with cancer. I opened it with some trepidation. The poems were about how interesting it is to be alive, about how you're never sure what nature is telling you, but it's definitely telling you something. There was a poem about the Aras River in spring, when the black stones tumble over like ghosts, and another about street vendors. The vendors shout, "There are tomatoes!" and "There are carrots!" They shout about the existence of many vegetables, and this annoys a woman in a late-model car.

I knew how to categorize these poems: they were eco-poetry. I had never heard of eco-poetry before last year, when I took up a post at an Istanbul university. As soon as I arrived on campus, I started hearing about the closet poets: shadowy figures from all departments who had long been waiting for a writer with whom to discuss their work.

"What kind of poetry are we talking about?" I asked one professor.

"Speaking for myself," she said, in an urgent near-whisper, "my current tendency is toward eco-poetry."

I did some research, and learned that, according to one of its most quoted definitions, eco-poetry tends to represent humans and nature as "a dynamic, inter-related series of cyclic feedback systems," in contrast to traditional nature poetry, in which nature is merely a kind of backdrop to human activity. In fact, the very idea of "nature"—implying something exterior to humanity and human culture—may be inimical to true ecological thinking, which presupposes the interconnectedness of all things. In the eco-

poetry of the future, we may, in the words of one eco-theorist, "have lost nature, but gained ecology."

Lying on a sofa bed in Aras, I tried to imagine the landscape of ecology without nature. You wouldn't have to choose between the walls of Jerusalem and the harvester ants. Neither would be the backdrop, neither the subject. You wouldn't have to choose between the Turkish-Armenian border and the Tethys Sea—both would be part of the same story. I thought about Kars, and about weather. It still snows in Kars, but not the way it used to—not ceaselessly, for weeks. In his Kars journal, Pamuk contemplates this loss, wondering what went wrong: "the ozone layer, the nearby Çıldır dam, global warming"? Meteorologically speaking, in any case, he has written "a historical novel": "Much like the bourgeois who used to trade with Russia, who used to skate on the frozen Kars River, travel by sleigh, and stage plays at the theatres, the snow, too, has vanished." Did the lack of Russians dry up the snow, or did the absence of snow drive away the Russians? Did the gilded church domes simply evaporate when there was no snow to weigh them down? What would survive here—the Armenians or cheese? The raven or the dove? Would we ever again see the nine-centimetre bird that looks almost identical to the eleven-centimetre bird, or the seventh butterfly outwardly indistinguishable from the eighth, to which it is not related?

Early the next morning, we stopped at the banding station before heading back to the city. Sedat was suffering from some allergic reaction—his skin was bright red. Nevertheless, he sat at the worktable, banding a great reed warbler. He looked like a figure in a stained-glass window.

"Do you want to hold it?" Sedat asked, holding the warbler toward me. When I took it in my hand, the bird turned its little head and bit my thumb, but it was such an ineffectual, weightless creature that I scarcely felt anything. It was like holding pure motion, pure life, in barely enough physical mass to keep it together. When I went outside and opened my hand, there was a rapid beating and a gray blur, and the bird was gone. ♦

