

ONAT KUTLAR

New Year 1995

Translated by
Fred Stark

Dear Cumhuriyet readers...*

In all likelihood, as you read this piece I will be sipping my first coffee of the year from a vantage point over the Golden Horn, up on the slopes of Eyüp at the Pierre Loti café. For some years now (I think it is all of fifteen) I have always seen in the new year at this quiet, pleasant café. Down below is the Eyüp Sultan Mosque, filled with a crowd whose dress alters slightly more with each passing year; the vast graveyards with their leaning cypress trees; the dark waters of the Horn and the ever-growing island of waste in their midst; and further on, a great village seen ever less distinctly each year as its air darkens with pollution: Istanbul.

On the bench next to me, legs awkwardly crossed in the oriental fashion, a young naval officer with a curled, luxuriant mustache speaks to a far-off friend in the somewhat ornate French of a century ago, as if reciting a letter:

My dear William Brown,

The year 1877 is coming in almost on a mild spring day.

This is to let you know I'm still alive, living under the name Arif Efendi on Kurucheshme Street in Eyüp. I would be delighted if you wrote me a few lines.

Coming into Istanbul on the European side, after four kilometres of mosques and bazaars you will reach the sacred district of Eyüp, where the children will find our hat very peculiar and try to stone it with little pebbles. There you ask for Kurucheshme Street, which will immediately be shown you. At the end of the street, beneath almond trees that blossom

* This article is the last one that the author wrote before he died following the explosion of a devise placed in the café of the Marmara Hôtel on December 31 1994.

snow-white in the springtime, you'll see a marble fountain – and my house is right beside it.

Here I live with the young woman from Salonika whom I mentioned to you previously, and whom I love. In this house I have forgotten the past and all the ingrates. I am happy.

I will not attempt to explain what events have drawn me to this corner of the mysterious east, nor how I came to adopt not only this silk and gold-thread costume but also a name and even the customs of the orient.

But I will tell you my situation on this new year's evening:

Outside the air is clear but crisp. Somewhere near at hand there are dervishes slowly chanting. By now I am used to this monotonous sound.

On the bench with its covering of carpet and cushions my darling Aziyade is seated exactly as an oriental girl should be, and is quietly polishing her nails.

Even though you may have surmised so at the start of this writing, I am not yet to be counted quite a Muslim. But I am living two identities at once. And at ever shorter intervals, I remain, yours, Naval Officer Pierre Loti.

I turn to look, but the voice has no owner.

The sky, the Horn and the city are all more polluted.

1995 is not beginning with the light of spring.

Our city, our country and our world are full of death, slaughter, war, injustice, primitive thinking, deception, vileness, ugliness.

But our country has, I feel, witnessed something even more terrible these past few years:

The mirror is becoming fouled – the media.

It's like language clouding, rusting, losing its permeability to become no longer transparent.

A schizophrenic field.

As pointed up (and down) by Behiç Ak in his appealing "Who Cares," for a long time now the media has been worrying about the media.

But I think we're on the right track here. If we're going to say a little something about the world, first our glasses need to be wiped clean. Otherwise we'll be able to say nothing about 1995, much less the years after 2000.

Recently I got a letter from a dear friend, the journalist

Nemika Tuğcu. She says:

For a long time I've had the same thoughts. The journalistic profession – as with all areas of life – is divorced from principle, and operating in parallel to interest groups is outside, even far removed from, society. Mercenary concerns and the obsession with popularity have driven not just objective reporting but news itself off the page. Now that journalists who owned the papers have been replaced by businessmen who speak with Their Bosses' Voice, even would-be artists have a column where they pontificate to their heart's content. Newspapers, television screens and the radio have all been invaded by eager beavers who can't speak or write our beautiful language. Honest journalists find that, because it runs counter to the general policy of their papers, or conflicts with the current line, their work is either totally blacked out, or else gutted of content, robbed of its telling headlines – in a word, neutralised. Worst of all, they have lost the labour union rights it had taken so many years of struggle to gain. Lost them without a fight. Very few among them resisted – and many surrendered up those rights with their own hands.

Did freedom of the press vanish, I wonder, just because of the squeeze exerted by political authority? Did they alone cramp the free circulation of ideas? What about those who ran full-spread ads claiming 'My rag is better' or 'Such-and-such a paper is lying'? They had a large share in the problems which they now organise panels to discuss – but not in Le Monde's style of candidness and objectivity.

During my years with Milliyet I attended meetings where the chief topics of discussion were theatre, cinema, opera and ballet, but where other real issues were also dealt with. Then all the give-and-take was collected in a little book and consigned to the shelf. The panels and debates are still being held. But the problems are still with us.

Yes, like you I have asked myself: What is it we seek? And I think the answer is, languor. The majority can't even bear to see some far-off massacre on their tv screens. They'd rather relieve the day's stress by watching a belly-dancer shimmy, or learn who's doing it with whom, how much a singer's nightgown cost, or other matters of absolute urgency.

Who does these programmes? How do they get the go-ahead? Why do so many people watch them? The media has given up its whole educational mission. We've done away with the last socialist regime. While we're at it why don't we privatise state television too? Give the news in flashes between programmes like Top Secret, and just live easy. Every day I feel a little more hopeless. And yet I know there are still

honest people out there who love their country and are trying to shape a future.

That's right, dear Nemika. Believe me, there still are.

But what power do we have? I suppose we can emulate Loti to peer down eagle-wise on time like Tevfik Fikret and, approaching 1995, share that poet's stubborn mist, with all its thoughts and feelings – perhaps rebel.

Still, though, in spite of everything, Onat sends you New Year's greetings.*

* An untranslatable pun. The sentence is rigged so that "Onat Kutlar" means "Onat sends greetings"; or, taken literally, "Onat celebrates."

