



Source: Sabrina Tavernise, 'In Turkey, fear and discomfort about religious lifestyle', *New York Times online*, 30/04/07.

Tags: [discomfort](#), [intimacy](#), [sex](#), [water](#)

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I didn't have much, for most of that year in the city, but I liked what I had. I could look up from my worktable and see a wooden chair, a small chest of drawers painted green, some paper flowers full of dust. Each of these objects became valuable because it crystallised a feeling, an event, a memory of my time there; I allowed them space into which they could comfortably leak their meanings.

But towards the end of my assignment I became involved with a local woman who immediately began filling my rooms with things of her own. She dragged bits of furniture across the city—tables, sidetables, occasional tables, folding tables. Cardboard boxes of old clothes, old records, old books. Childhood books, and books from other people's childhoods. I put them behind a folding screen. Piles of newspapers and magazines gathered on the tables, then underneath them. She brought me these things but she wouldn't stay with me. Sometimes I didn't see her for days. Instead she sent email.

'Fear of hostas,' she wrote. 'Fear of goats, roots, motors. Fear of being caught fat and old in the bath by your upstairs neighbour. Fear of buckets. Fear of fire. Fear of having to fear only fear itself. Fear of milts and seasons.'

I telephoned her.

'This list,' I said. 'I don't understand it.'

'It's a joke.'

'I see that. But what are 'milts'?'

'Blah, blah, blah,' she said. 'I'm ringing off now.'

She gave me a chess set. She gave me an old shirt of her father's; it came down to my knees but the collar wouldn't fasten. I couldn't help trying to interpret these gifts. When I asked, 'Why have you brought me this?' or, 'What part of your life do these things come from?', she would look confused for a moment then carry on doing whatever she was doing. She wanted to answer but here was a check between what she knew about herself and what she wanted me to know.

Once or twice a week I was compelled to take one of the city's dilapidated taxis across town to the harbour where she lived. When I got out to pay the driver, I found only the usual tangled mess of receipts, keys, change and low-denomination notes in the narrow upper pockets of my jacket. Half-sunken warships lay rusting in the hot evening light. The harbour streets, wide and empty yet at the same time maze-like, stretched into the dusty hinterland in a confused dream of sagging telephone wires and heatstruck dogs. That was where I visited her, in a long house in the local style, with a single corridor running past every room. The corridor had no windows; the rooms overlooked the harbour. Some were dilapidated, with holes in the floors, collapsed ceilings and an air of abandonment. Others were traditionally occupied by western journalists. She had lived there three years, she said, but it was always like the first day of college or university. 'I can never find my room.' We walked up and down the corridor for fifteen minutes,

trying door after door. We stepped over the caretakers who sprawled unconcernedly on the floor, drinking and smoking, involved in their own conversation.

When we found it her room was almost empty of furniture. It was empty of almost everything except a pile of newspapers, a mattress, a Turkish Van cat asleep on the computer keyboard. 'We should have some tea,' she said. She read to me from the newspapers. "These people are from poor areas; they just don't know what the government stands for—" blah, blah blah, then it goes, 'They're only being manipulated. We are here for their good also.'" Immediately outside her window lay a slough of black mud-thickened water, the remains of a system of sluices and culverts which had once conducted the river to the harbour. It looked rusty and poisonous. When I tried to embrace her she pointed out of the window and said—

'We can go swimming if I get the caretakers to open the sluice!'

'I'm not swimming in that,' I said.

The caretakers opened the sluice. She jumped in vertically, her arms stiff by her sides, and went straight under. When she bobbed up again the water looked clearer and shallower and fresher, with sunshine falling on to it; but it remained cold, and I was still reluctant. My friend seemed to have forgotten me. She was off! She was sliding down a sort of steep shallow pebbly stream like a waterslide, towards the main body of water. The harbour, such a feature of the view, had receded to the horizon, where I caught glimpses of its massive stone moles and cranes like a tiny heat mirage. My friend was already in the distance, shouting and laughing.

'Come on,' she called. 'Come on!'

Sometimes we had sex on the mattress, but not today. I picked up the cat and put it down. When I looked out of the window again, she was already out of sight. I didn't know what would happen next, so I left. The following day I received an email which read: 'Fear of current affairs. Fear of the slippage between what is and what isn't. Fear of toast. Fear of Carson McCullers. Fear of Gravity Probe B. Fear of being crushed up in a small space on the right hand side.'

I thought of phoning her to explain how I felt.

Instead I looked around my room and typed, 'If you don't want to live with me, why are you bringing me all your furniture?' Sometimes she would place five or six newspapers in a plastic bag, twist the ends of the bag together in a loose knot, and put that under a table. 'I feel you are weighing me down with things,' I typed. 'I'm leaving soon, anyway.'

She knocked at my door late that night and said: 'We often swim in there, I don't know why you're making such a fuss.'

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by M John Harrison.*