Once Upon a Time in The Fertile Crescent: Two Girls and a Hat

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http://www.towntopics.com/wordpress/2012/10/03/once-upon-a...
Finally the moment arrives when the artist artfully and artlessly commands me to put the misshapen yellow blob on her head, a slapstick coronation, as she all but disappears under it. Then off she goes, a sudden gust of wind forcing her to hold the hat with one hand while wildly paddling with the other as she dances down the road followed by one of the older boys, who retrieves the hat, and solemnly returns it to me, like a diplomatic enforcer dealing with a potentially punishable indiscretion.

Meanwhile the sun has begun to set, giving the moment an aura of melancholy glory. So dazzled and disarmed am I by this time that I want her to have the hat, for good, forever, it's hers, she's given it a new life. I want to see her go dancing off with it again, and so she does, only to surrender it once more, tearlessly, bravely, wisely, to the relentless boy, who grimly brings it back to me. At this point Atalettie has had enough: she tears into the enforcer, punching and kicking him in a kind of ecstasy until he slinks off. A beautiful moment, and it's only the beginning now that both girls have the hat, and off they go, shouting and laughing down the road, passing the enchanted entity between them, until it seems to take flight on its own, glowing golden in the sunset light.

A truck is coming, it's a ride clear to Adana. I grab my pack, ready to leave the hat with them, but Gül hands it back with a wise old look that seems to say, "It's not for us, it won't ever be ours, that's how it is, that's life."

All the children are waving as the truck pulls off. I'm standing in the open back. Gül has stopped moving, it seems, for the first time since I got there. She's giving me a strong, steady look I can't help reading something into, perhaps some dawning awareness in her of the wider world at the other end of that road. Most children at her age still have a spark of genius in them but she's aglow with it, burning with it, and I'm thinking of the lounging men and laboring women I'd seen earlier and what it suggests about "gender and society," and I know, with a heavy, sinking certainty, that one day not that far in the future both these brilliant girls will be working in the fields while the grown-up boys sit drinking tea and talking politics and watching the women work.

Dream On

I'd like to think that the artists of the Fertile Crescent, Nezaket and Ebru, Negar and Sigalit, Shazia and Shirin, Farah and Parastou, are grown-up, productive, liberated versions of Atalettie and Gül. I thought as much four years ago when I met Arzu Komili, a Princeton senior from Turkey whose exhibit at the Lewis Center I visited at Communiversity 2008. Ed Greenblat's photograph of her has been cheering me up ever since. Arzu may have been born and raised in Istanbul, in a well-to-do household, but there's a hint of the roadside sprite in her smile.

The two Turkish artists in "The Fertile Crescent" website may be half a generation younger than Atalettie and Gül would be now, but the boldness of their themes and concepts suggests that they have fought the good fight against similar odds. Born in 1970 a half day's drive from the crossroads near Eregli, Nezaket Ekici lives in Germany now and will be at the Lewis Center tomorrow, Thursday, October 4, in a performance piece she calls "Lifting a Secret," in which she's drinking coffee and reading passages from an adolescent diary she kept about a forced marriage arranged by her father. As her anger mounts, she sputters the wall with coffee, which, as it drips down, reveals the passage from the journal she's been reading and that she'd written on the wall with petroleum jelly before beginning the performance. She refills her cup over and over again, slopping the coffee on the passage until all her words have emerged. Coffee makes the case nicely; it's a darker and more dramatic developing fluid than the tea the men in the cafe were drinking while watching the women work.

For 41-year-old Ebru Özseçen, who also lives in Germany, indulge me for a moment and imagine the sort of art Gül would produce if by some miracle she'd run off to Europe to become a dancer or singer or sculptor or filmmaker, lured by the glow of the roadside sprite in her smile. You can see Ebru Özseçen's brief video Jawbreaker on YouTube, as well as a four-part conversation apparently taking place in the proximity of the White Cliffs of Dover. In her proposal for a competition on "New Forms of Remembering and Remembrance," she writes of a "memoir kindergarten" that "will be visible in the evening after the children go home …. The other phase will be seen in the morning, when the walls are lowered, and the children enter the kindergarten. When the children sleep, the work … stands guard"

Princeton Venues

Nezaket Ekici will also take part in the Arts Council of Princeton's portion of The Fertile Crescent, from October 4 to November 21, along with seven other Fertile Crescent artists, including, as mentioned, Shiva Ahmadi, whose work can be seen on page 15. For full details about other venues, including the Princeton Public Library and the Princeton University Art Museum, visit http://fertile-crescent.org/signatureartists.html.

Note: In the unlikely event that readers of this column have read or may read my book Indian Action: A Journey to the Great Fair of the East, they will find an expanded version of the scene in the clearing with additional players and a different focus.

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