

Istanbul 1983

By Sheila Black

In the frozen square, the student asks me if I will sell him the books from my backpack. He hides them under his winter coat. Steam rises from the whole wheat rolls we break open at the breakfast table. We drink hot apple tea and pronounce the skyline “charming.” In a jail a man counts the visible bones, and recounts them in the blaze of morning. To turn a self to light proves painful — each piece must be dissected in turn; you pass through every feeling imaginable, so many you might make a dictionary — dread to disgust, delight to degradation. The prisoner remembers wanting only to read as if in a fever — running fingers over pyramids of words as if he might translate himself from this life to a more vivid existence in which he cuts open the pages with a knife in plain sight of everyone like a man eating meat and potatoes at the dinner table. Not that world; this one where blue light and sharpened files, where identikit and stamps on passports, where the book in his backpack is a crime, and I have sold him down the river for ideas I barely value — the volumes flung carelessly across my hotel room, while he picks mushrooms on the edge of dread, pallid ghosts of what won’t speak or be spoken. Or where I remember what it is to be present in the world, and I turn away, unable to bear it — so much light and dread, so much in the darkness growing or simply how hard to ever remain in place.

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