

BLACK SEA

ARAS ÖZGÜN

I left my father's hometown on the Black Sea coast a few months after the military coup, not knowing that it would take so long to go back there. I was eleven years old when I left; so many things that you remember from childhood start to fit into their places and make sense only after you grow up. For example, as a kid I knew that "fascism" was a bad thing, but it was only much later that I figured out why, that year, all of a sudden, people stopped cursing it in public. I came from one of the "older", well-known families of the small town, and I used to play mostly with kids whose families my folks knew. "Children's playground" did not exist as a concept then; we used to play on the rocks at the seaside, in the backyards of country houses, in the narrow alleys separating them, and, preferably, in the old cemetery behind Demas's shabby corner store, which was turned into a weirdly terraced playing field after the gravestones were removed. Nobody knew or cared much about whose unmarked graves we were playing soccer on. We would stop by Demas' store before going back home after the match. He was an unshaven man who wore thick wool sweaters even in the summer; he would always greet us with a big smile and give us candies, "gazoz" (soda), and other kinds of forbidden foods. I was one of his favorite kids in the neighborhood. Perhaps he felt some affinity toward me because of my name, which was as strange as his. Or, at least, it must have been something easy for him to remember and utter out loud, joyfully, each

time I walked into his store. Against our parents' consent, on adventurous days we would extend our playground toward the ruins of the abandoned church, inside which the moldy air was thick with the smell of urine, shit, and dust. Ruins of abandoned churches were scattered throughout the central neighborhoods of the town, in the vicinity of large stone buildings and mansions that stood out among the indistinct modest country houses and newer concrete apartment blocks. Only one church was still intact and in use as a children's library, which became one of my favorite hangouts after I had learned to read. Some of the kids I played with lived in those stone mansions; they also came from the "older" families of the town. One of them was this chubby freckle-faced kid, with whom I shared my desk at school from time to time. His family owned a car dealership, but that wasn't their only source of prestige; he was the grandson of a national hero, "Topal Osman" (Osman the Hobbler). Topal Osman was buried on top of the citadel overlooking the city, his marble tomb stood next to the old cannon that pointed toward Russia across the sea. He was a hero of the national liberation war, he commanded his band of Black Sea militia and fought next to Atatürk against the Greeks, we were told. He was wounded in the war and walked with a limp, hence his nickname "Topal." After the liberation war, he was honored and decorated for his bravery and deeds, and subsequently became a high-ranking army commander. But then, we were also told, at some point in the early years of the Republic, he fell prey to a political conspiracy; he was executed without trial and his body was sent back to his hometown, which still embraced him by burying him in a place of honor on the highest ground in the town. Even a child would know that history has never been fair and just in this part of the world, especially to good people, so it all made sense and nobody asked what the conspiracy had been. Topal Osman's sword hung proudly on the wall at my friend's house, and no other kid, no other house had that kind of prestige. My great-grandfather was a veteran of the liberation war too, but all that was left to my grandmother was a small golden medallion attached to some silly red ribbon, something you could actually buy at the flea market because after the war most veterans sold them for their value in gold. But, Topal Osman's huge shiny sword hung spectacularly alone in the middle of the big empty stone wall, and it meant something. I ran into my friend years later once again in Istanbul, where he was studying law apparently. He told me that, unlike me, he was going back and forth to our hometown almost every week. He was taking the

overnight ferry; there was this university student working as a tour guide on the ferry, and she didn't mind fucking him during the trip to earn a few extra bucks. It was much later, when I worked with a German filmmaker who was tracing her Greek grandfather's deportation from the Black Sea to Greece, that I came across Topal Osman's name again. I had to translate an interview she made with a ninety-year old villager from the Black Sea who couldn't recall coherently anything related to the fighting between the Greek and Turkish gangs after the fall of the Ottoman central authority. In the middle of her incomprehensible murmurs the old woman paused for a moment, consumed with a terrifying image; she mumbled: "And then, there was Topal Osman, he was worse than the Greeks." I had to rewind the tape over and over to make sure that she was indeed mentioning the name of my hometown's local hero. After years of "schooling" in the history of the Republic, by then I was almost convinced that Topal Osman had been a small guy who was exaggerated out of proportions in his little town, since the books hardly ever mentioned his name. I figured out that it was indeed the same Topal Osman by bringing together bits and pieces of stories that never made it into the official history books. He was an *İttihat ve Terakki* (Union and Progress Party) officer, a veteran of the Balkan wars, which left him lame. After returning to his hometown, he commanded a small band of thugs in the mountains of the region. In the aftermath of World War I, with the British fueling their hopes, the predominantly Greek population of the region began to dream of reviving the Pontus Greek state in the Eastern Black Sea. That gave Topal Osman, who was still a nationalist *İttihat ve Terakki* member, carte blanche to attack the rich Greek families and pillage their properties. His fearful gang grew in numbers as he spread his operations from Samsun to Trabzon. Topal Osman's terror had political repercussions on an international scale: the Greeks' failed bid for independence, followed by terror between Greek and Turkish gangs, provided an excuse for the mass deportation of the former population. The Governor of Samsun, who still wanted to resolve the issue under state authority, declared Topal Osman an outlaw who would face the consequences if he and his gang entered the province. In retaliation, Topal Osman's gang laid siege to the deportation convoys exiting Samsun at the border and annihilated the deportee families en masse. By the time of the Independence War, the "Pontus problem" was resolved that way, and Topal Osman's small but reckless guerilla army was ready to be deployed first at the western











front, and after the war, to suppress the Kurdish rebellion in the south-east. *İttihat ve Terakki* became the sole governing power after the founding of the Republic. Topal Osman was appointed as the head of the elite army unit that served Atatürk directly—the Presidential Guards, who were composed of his Black Sea gang. Within the same year, as soon as the splits in the first parliament appeared, a vocal member of the opposition was found dead in Ankara. A few months later, when another representative opposing Atatürk’s power clique was found dead, such terror was deemed no longer tolerable for the new Republic. Topal Osman and his men were surrounded at Papaz’ın Bagi, a valley close to the Presidential Palace in the outskirts of Ankara. After an intense battle lasting four days, he was killed, and his body was sent back to the Black Sea. The town had changed a lot since I left. The abandoned churches that once smelled of piss, shit and dust had been restored, and opened to tourism as historical sites. Fancy apartment blocks had risen on the once empty cemetery. Topal Osman’s marble grave did not stand out quite as magnificently as before, within the newly restored walls of the citadel. I asked my uncle who was showing me around and telling me about the old days, “What happened to the Greeks?”—as if I didn’t know. His blue eyes looked away, “None are left, all went away” he said, as if he didn’t know. “What about Demas, isn’t he Greek?” I asked sincerely. He smiled, “Well, Demas is not his real name. He used to be a fisherman. Before you were born, he was selling at that little store the fish he caught. He called his store “Deniz Mahsulleri Satis” (Seafood Sales Store), but the tiny storefront didn’t have enough space for the whole title, so he shortened it to “De.Ma.S.” The fish store went out of business, but its name stuck to him. Even I don’t remember the poor sap’s real name, Ahmet or something?” I didn’t ask, then, why my Muslim mother would give me painted eggs at a certain time of the year.

Paul Klee, in order to dismiss the tired question “is art for the people, or for the sake of art?” from an avant-garde position, once said that “art is for the people who are not there yet.” In that case, photographs—always arrested somewhere between the past and the present—are for the people who are not there anymore.