

MENEKŞE TOPRAK

The Letter in the Suitcase

Translated from Turkish by Yasemin Yildiz

TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

MENEKŞE TOPRAK is a rising voice of Turkish literature with a decidedly transnational outlook. Born in 1970 in Turkey and alternately raised there and in Germany, she lives in Istanbul and Berlin. Although fully bilingual in both German and Turkish, and a close follower of contemporary German literature, she writes only in Turkish. In this language, though, she frequently tells stories with multiple homes. To date, she has published two story collections and two novels, all with prestigious Turkish presses. Her first novel, *Temmuz Çocukları* (*July Children*, 2011), explores the long-term impact on a family of the parents' decision to leave their children behind in Turkey when they move to Germany for work. Her most recent novel, *Ağıtın Sonu* (*The End of the Elegy*, 2014), which explores an unsettled woman's life, won the Duygu Asena Ödülü, a major feminist literary prize in Turkey. She has been translated into French, German, and English.

In "The Letter in the Suitcase," Toprak's literary debut and the title story of her 2007 collection *Valizdeki Mektup*, Turkey barely figures. Instead, this Turkish-language story intimately engages with, but also transgresses, contemporary German cultural and literary preoccupations. In a present-day German city, a Turkish-German woman visits a bunker museum that showcases life under the bombs of World War II. Already with this premise, Toprak deftly brings together the legacies of two large histories that are not generally imagined jointly, either in Germany or in Turkey: that of the war, Nazism, and the Holocaust on the one hand, and that of postwar labor migration to Germany on the other. While the legacy of Nazi crimes has been at the heart of struggles over what post-Holocaust Germany and German culture could be, the transformative impact of immigration on that same country has long been downplayed. Immigrants themselves have been seen as disconnected from and most likely ignorant of the Nazi era and the Holocaust. Particularly those from majority Muslim countries like Turkey have even been cast as a potential threat to Germany's attempts to come to terms with this history.

“The Letter in the Suitcase” takes on these weighty issues but does so on its own terms. Here, immigrants are not just visitors to the conflicted national archives of their new country, but are shown as intricately interwoven in transmitting, negotiating, and expanding this history. In the bunker museum she visits, the protagonist unexpectedly encounters items that once belonged to her and that trigger memories of her own childhood. The grown woman’s flashbacks to her younger self take us to the domestic, familial, and female spheres as sites where multiple histories and memories are navigated in mundane but consequential ways. These interactions also reveal the protagonist to be a carrier—albeit an ambivalent one—of “German” memory. Rather than a celebratory account of immigrant memory, “The Letter in the Suitcase” stresses the forces of forgetting and the accidental and contingent nature of all that is retained from the past.

THE LETTER IN THE SUITCASE

AS I DESCEND the narrow staircase, I suddenly sense the fear of the people who once fled to these confined, half-dark corridors amidst the deafening sound of sirens. But this sensation lasts only a moment. The sixty-year-old propaganda poster on the staircase wall, *Shhh!—The Enemy Is Among Us*, irritates me, and my feelings change sides. The gas masks of different sizes and colors mercilessly remind me of gas chambers where naked and emaciated bodies are left defenseless. The horror told by the broken backs, distorted mouths, and punctured curves of the bodies of drinking glasses that melt only in eight-hundred-degree heat is not sufficient to sway me. Now, if I force my imagination and begin with these drinking glasses, which were part of a table setting, and these burnt and then rusted, distorted spoons and forks next to them, I could conjure up one of the forks as it is raised to the mouth between the fingers that held it, while the other hand was maybe just then caressing the glass. It should be enough to say that they were caught by gunpowder and fire at the same time as the owner of the fingers that touched them. Yet neither the resistance displayed by glasses, forks, and knives, which have changed their shape while retaining their essence, nor the images that flood my mind of ashen buildings rising like dark skeletons, are sufficient to make me change sides again.

Yet other things that trigger memory also appear in front of me: the suitcases and bags of all sizes lying on the floor take me back, first to the

black-and-white frames of documentaries. There, people keep rushing down the streets with suitcases in their hands. But apparently these people were not bustling about before departing for long train journeys. Instead, it turns out, they were carrying their most valuable belongings with them to save them from gunpowder and fire, from houses that they might never be able to enter again. Now this seems tragic to me, in part because I am also caught by surprise, as if I had grasped the mystery behind something that had been stuck in my head for years but for which I had just never been able to find an answer. Only now, slowly, do I comprehend and even feel something, too. But no, these are not the feelings, not the stories I am looking for. There must be something else. My search is also not tied to my passion for a period when rosy, colorful images were just beginning to dominate the world and engulf everyone, a period in which even black-and-white frames had long abandoned the rapid movements of Charlie Chaplin and returned him to true gravity, a period that had ended an imposed muteness and begun to make voices heard.

All of a sudden, though, the black-and-white images return to their true colors, and the many scales of gray and white in which beautiful women with curled short hair appear are tinted anew. A small suitcase, which entered my life when fairy tales still surrounded me and whose existence I later forgot when reality took over, appears right in front of me once again.

IT IS A WOODEN SUITCASE.

At that time, I may not have been old enough to distinguish between simple, cheap pine and walnut, but I seem to have been able to notice the beauty of an oak suitcase whose corners were frayed, and whose dark brown color had worn off with time, leaving black spots in places.

I had absolutely wanted to possess it. And that at first sight. Against all of the efforts of my mother. She tried to convince me that it was nonsense to want to hold on to the suitcase of a poor old woman who had lived all alone for many years and had died all alone; her dead body had been found accidentally a week later, only because the noise of her TV running nonstop had bothered her downstairs neighbors. But my mother's efforts were in vain; after all, I had fallen in love with it. . . . To this day, my interest in old things has still not waned: in black-and-white movies, in the women of these movies, with their bobbed curls, who drown in tears for love, in little wooden boxes with decorated lids, old figurines whose value I could never judge, velvet chairs with carved frames, swan-shaped porcelain teapots, and in so many other such things. . .

I noticed it the first time I went with my mother to our newly rented, one-bedroom apartment with the huge kitchen. By chance. Because if I had come one week later, nothing would have remained of the old woman who had lived there, save for a picture on the kitchen wall in which a little freckled boy kisses a little blond girl on her cheek in the midst of a park decked out in bright red fall leaves.

That evening I had stayed at most an hour in this apartment crammed full of stuff. I'd accompanied my mother, who had gone there, dead tired after work, just to let my father know in no uncertain terms that he could not touch any of the things and that instead he had to find a garbage dump and arrange for a truck. The landlord would rent the place to us only on this condition. The dead old woman did not have any relatives, and nobody had shown up to claim her belongings.

I remember that my mother kept huffing exasperatedly that night about who would take such shabby old things. And where could we get rid of this, she kept saying, getting more and more upset as she opened the interminably creaking doors of the heavy old cabinet in the living room, pulling open its drawers as well. I, on the other hand, had so liked the yellow-and-brown velvet armchair, in front of the window with the tightly drawn heavy velvet curtains, and I admired the lamp beside it, with its faded dusky pink shade and its wooden stand. Objects I had known from movies in black and white and scales of gray, I encountered for the first time in their actual colors in that house.

While my mother was going through the kitchen cupboards, continuously grumbling to herself, my father had arrived. I, meanwhile, made my own discoveries in the bedroom in the back of the apartment. At the moment when I noticed the small suitcase, leaning against the wall next to the iron bed, my parents had gone over into the living room.

My father: "Dear, look at this table, do you know that this is real walnut? Can you really throw away something like this? These are antiques, dear, antiques. Look, I swear, this little armchair over there, one just like it caught my eye in a store recently, it was unaffordable."

My mother, however, continues to be annoyed.

"Antique, shmantique. I don't care. I will not let my children live with some old woman's junk from who knows when, and I refuse to use it. I'd rather go buy something cheap but new. And what do I have my own things for? They will all fit in here very nicely."

I sense that my father wants to insist but also that he doesn't have the courage to do so.

My father was a somewhat passive man. At least I thought so then. But much later, when we went to the homeland (“homeland” was what they called that place where they had been born and raised but that I knew only from vacations and that didn’t mean much to me), did I realize that it was actually because he could not make himself understood in a language he did not speak. Only once I was grown up did I grasp that there were reasons other than passivity for the fact that a man who, upon his return from one month in the homeland, where he was constantly out and about, spent his days almost entirely between work and home, and, apart from occasional visits with relatives and friends, rarely went out. In this country, whose language he did not speak and which he resisted learning with great passion, he had always remained a foreigner. With this foreignness, he cloaked himself in the identity of an introverted, inept man. Because she was an unflinching woman not afraid of making mistakes, my mother had almost no language problems. Comfortable in any setting, she had learned the language enough to enjoy gossiping in it with the other women at the factory where she worked. As I picked up this small suitcase, which seemed to be made for me, I remember thinking that it was surely going to be my mother who would roll up her sleeves and get rid of the things that the dead woman had left behind.

Despite its small size, it was a rather heavy suitcase. Maybe the old woman had planned to go on a trip before she died, or maybe she had just returned from one but did not have the time to empty it. I was filled with curiosity and apprehension as I reached for the old iron lock. Strange, it felt as if the moment I opened it the old woman would balloon out of it and hover over me like the giant from Aladdin’s magic lamp. Aside from the dream world of childhood, my hesitation of course also stemmed from real-life anxieties. Wasn’t secretly going through other people’s things something like stealing from them? But when I remembered that my mother was also just then rummaging through drawers and was going to empty them and throw out their contents, I relaxed.

With one ear listening to my father taking deep drags from his cigarette, I quietly opened the lock of the suitcase. A quick click. Maybe it was precisely this clicking sound that mesmerized me. For years, I would reach the things that I had hidden from everyone and did not want anyone to touch accompanied by the sound of this click. Then I would part from them again, with the same click.

For all of its heaviness, it was not even that full. A lot of cloth handkerchiefs, some small, some large. The lace borders of the at times fraying hand-

kerchiefs whose whiteness had turned gray; the raised motifs on the corners of some of them; and especially the mothball smell—it all seemed so familiar to me. It was the same smell as my grandmother’s heavy chest back home, the one no one dared to touch. My grandmother, and for a time my mother as well, used to have cloth handkerchiefs. I only ever had paper tissues.

Notebooks. I remember that I opened a notebook and tried to read the handwritten words; although they were carefully executed, I could not decipher the entangled, rightward leaning hand. So I tossed aside that notebook as well as two more, filled with the same handwriting. Envelopes stuffed with letters, receipts, some documents. On black-and-white photographs, a young woman with curled hair down to her shoulders is smiling, sometimes posing with other young women and sometimes in the arms of a young man in military uniform. They are all black and white. Notebooks, photographs, letters, letters. I put them all aside, having my eye on the small suitcase and on one cream-colored handkerchief with faded white lace edges.

Now, however, I cannot believe that I was able to throw away these things. Feeling acutely distressed that I destroyed a slice of history, I am overcome with pangs of guilt. Yet at the time when I was stuffing the black-and-white photographs, the letters, a few books, and decades-old handkerchiefs, threadbare from having been washed over and over, into the trash bag, to be discarded at most a week later together with all the other things, I was oblivious to such feelings.

I placed the bag by the entrance, into one of the boxes that my mother had packed with stuff. My father, who was slouching on the sofa and lighting his umpteenth cigarette with a tired and sour face, looking willfully lost in thought as if he was trying to get away from the duties awaiting him, did not even notice me. When I walked by him a second time, now with the suitcase, he lifted his head and smiled with the same sour face, still as if he didn’t see his surroundings. My mother, meanwhile, was busy emptying the cabinets in the kitchen.

She didn’t look like she intended to keep anything that had belonged to the old woman. When she spotted me, she was breathing through her nose.

“Girl, don’t idle around like your dad.” Whenever my mother complained about us children, she would refer to my father. According to her, our inertia, self-indulgence, and any kind of pathological state we might be in had been passed on to us from his genes. She wanted me to empty the lower cabinets. When she noticed the suitcase in my hand, she said, “And take that dirty thing and throw it in the hallway. Is it empty inside?”

She grabbed the suitcase from me, and when she discovered that it was indeed empty, she tossed it aside and went back to work.

“What a pity, the old woman’s stuff rotted away just like she did. Who knows when these pots and pans are from? But these spoons look like silver. Stuff like this you can neither throw away nor use. What if a relative or the state arrives some day and asks about these silver spoons? It’s best not to throw these away. Girl, why are you still standing around there?”

I had just stood there. I have to negotiate. I am long past the age when I could have gotten something from my mother by crying. At most I can sulk. But my mother has no patience for either crying or sulking.

In the end, only her strained state, which left her too tired and weary to argue, allowed me to get away with keeping the suitcase. But I suppose she let me keep it because this way she no longer had to spend money on the little chest at the toy store that she had promised me months ago.

After I returned to our old apartment that night, which we were going to leave two weeks later, she didn’t take me back to the new one again until she had whipped it into shape. Once again she was the one who found people to take the stuff to the trash. Before that, she was also the one who’d given the old woman’s somewhat acceptable furniture— including the walnut table that my father had not managed to convince her to keep despite all his efforts—to an Arab dealer in secondhand furniture.

When we moved into the apartment a couple of weeks later, there was no trace left of the old woman whatsoever. The heavy, yellowing wallpaper with the green flowers gone, we entered a sunny apartment with bright white walls. Only that picture of the little boy kissing the girl had stayed in place, probably because my mother liked it. And of course the suitcase, which I opened and closed a few times a day and in which I kept hidden my little baby doll, since I was worried they would chide me about it because I was too old, as well as the books that I began to buy for myself, my perfumed erasers and pencils, and the cream-colored handkerchief with the lace trim. I now called it a chest. That handkerchief, meanwhile, I spread over my things before I closed the chest.

Around the time I moved from third to fourth grade in primary school, I began to think more often of the old woman whenever I opened the chest. When had she used it? Was it a leftover from her childhood as well? Though there had not been any childhood pictures among the photographs I had thrown out. Also, I couldn’t imagine her as either a child or as an old person. For me, she was the smiling, beautiful young woman of the black-and-white photos.

One day, I was trying to follow a conversation between my mother and Aunt Meryem from across the hallway—who had become close friends—while they were having tea in the large kitchen. My mother always scolded me for listening in on the adults. And especially when she got together with Aunt Meryem, she didn't even let me stick around.

My mother was a resourceful woman. After throwing out the old woman's large and heavy furniture, she divided the living room, using a display cabinet from our previous apartment decorated with crystal vases and family photographs, and placed her own bed behind it. She closed the empty space between the cabinet and the wall with a white floor-length, lace-trimmed, pleated curtain and in this manner separated her own bedroom from the living area. For my brother, who was two years younger, and me she set up a bunk bed in the small former bedroom and put a table next to the window. By moving the old sofa from our previous apartment and the table and chairs from the old living room into the kitchen, she had turned that space into another living area as well.

So this was one of those moments when my mother and Aunt Meryem spread out on the kitchen sofa laughing and enjoying themselves. The sort of moments that, as a small child, I always wanted to share and later, as I grew up, I always tried to escape. Their conversations never lacked nut and seed snacks, brought by the pound from Turkey every summer, nor tea and cigarettes, which my mother rarely smoked otherwise. On the stovetop the steam-filled murmur of the simmering tea, its steeped smell licking my nose; blood-red tea in the narrow-waisted glasses that my mother had also brought from Turkey the previous year. Their conversation rising and falling between the sounds they made while cracking open sunflower seeds.

My mother either did not notice me sitting at the table in front of an open book or else she finally thought I was old enough to listen to their conversation. They had started talking about this apartment and the dead woman.

Aunt Meryem was one of those who had come to Germany in 1961, even before her husband. She spoke excellent German. Her husband had died years earlier of cancer and she never remarried. She had single-handedly raised her son Mehmet, whom I called Memo Abi, and her two daughters, one of whom had married in Turkey and stayed there, and the other—rarely talked about but known by everyone—who lived with her German boyfriend. Always lively, upbeat, and a great teller of stories, she was a bright-faced, roundish woman.

“You know, when the Russian soldiers first entered this city during the Second World War, there were apparently only women, old people, and children here. Any man who could hold a weapon was at the front. An old Polish woman who used to live here told me. According to her, the soldiers raped the women for months and made them work like slaves. Both the children of that old woman who used to live in your apartment apparently died under the bombs. And her husband never returned from the front. Even almost forty years later, the woman still didn’t open her door to anyone. Back then my Mehmet was just a little boy, and from time to time he helped her carry her shopping bag up; even with him she would speak only fearfully and nervously. She was my neighbor for fifteen years, but only once did she invite me in. It was probably a way to say thank you for Mehmet’s help. I went together with him. For the kid she had put a piece of cheese between two slices of bread; under the cheese, she smeared a layer of butter, check this out, as thick as a finger. It had made the kid feel queasy. ‘Ach,’ the poor woman had lamented, ‘you should have seen us after the war—for years I dreamt of a sandwich with this much butter on it.’

“Anyway, when the Russians entered the city and opened all the doors, just to poke around and see what was behind them, our woman here hid for weeks on end under her bed. According to the Polish woman, many of the young Russian soldiers had come from the country, and they shied away from going up beyond the third floor. They were probably not used to climbing up to such heights. Also the staircase had apparently partially collapsed, and thinking surely no one was there, nobody had come up to this floor.”

My mother was listening with interest, from time to time interjecting comments like “Oh no! Really?”

“Never mind that they are rich now, their people apparently suffered from real poverty. They say there was no running water for months, and God knows, no food. Who knows how this poor woman survived here for weeks, hungry and thirsty. Maybe because of that, for years she just peered at us fearfully through her barely opened door. You know how they say that the old people here hate foreigners and are racist. I think with this woman it was not hatred or the like, it was just fear that someone would suddenly enter her house. Poor soul, at the end she barely went outdoors at all anymore.”

At this point, I couldn’t help myself anymore and jumped into the conversation. I remembered an old woman in our previous building, whose hard and hateful glare made my hair stand on end. Always on

guard, she would keep her walking stick upright as if she was about to hit someone in the face. “Mommy, you remember our old neighbor, Frau Schiffer, you know the one with the white dog. She was like that, too. She always called me a *Türkengör*.”¹

As if she had just noticed me, my mother started scolding me, *Girl, have you been listening to us*, and sent me to my room.

Outside, the pouring rain; inside, my brother lying at my father’s knees, under the pretense of watching soccer on TV, dozing. So I did not yet belong to the world of the grown-ups after all. When I went to our room and put the suitcase on my lap once again, for the first time I thought with regret, if only I had not thrown away her things. Maybe in those notebooks the woman had written about how she had hidden from the Russians.

AS THE YEARS PASSED, we forgot about the woman who had once lived in this house. Neither Aunt Meryem, nor my mother, nor anyone else ever mentioned her again. As for me, I remembered her occasionally when I opened my chest, with its contents that kept changing constantly over the years. But with time, I too forgot her. After a wardrobe with mirrors and drawers entered our room, she fully left my life, just like the suitcase that had by then lost its magic. As I got older, it had become just another aging, fraying item, something one replaced with something else, an old suitcase stashed away above the wardrobe. News about an old woman who had been found dead in her apartment also did not mean much anymore. Life quickly changed its face. Growing up, by then my excitement and my curiosity regarding the outside world had changed, my interests turned in different forms toward myself, my own body. Or perhaps the pity I felt for that woman was extinguished in the face of what I learned much later about history. I had never consciously thought about what her role in history had been, that her little personal delirium also constituted part of the larger mass delirium, a delirium that led to a great slaughter. It had also not occurred to me that the way she looked at foreigners through the crack in her door may not have been with fear but rather with disgust, a disgust stemming from a collective crime and representing an entire worldview, which, locked into its own spell, caused that crime. Evidently, you believe most readily what you hear from the lips of those closest to you, what you see from the greatest proximity.

But to an eight-year-old child who had lost her belief in fairy tales, yet who could not part from a magical world hidden in chests, closed boxes, and lamps, what couldn’t be promised by a small suitcase with a

dark brown bottom, fine ivy pattern around the edges, and green lining on the inside? When all good and bad deeds came about through magic and disappeared through it as well, history itself, it seemed, was contained solely in the good hearts of beautiful princesses with long, curly hair and in the sorcery of misshapen wizards with big black moles and long noses.

I must have fully lost my relationship to the small suitcase around the time I was fifteen or sixteen. It is interesting that while I remember so clearly the first day I put my hands on it and the emotional effect it had on me, I don't know its later fate. How it came to this shelter-turned-museum that documents life in the city between 1940 and 1945 when it was being bombed, meanwhile, I really have no idea.

THE TALL BLOND GUIDE had just now moved on, after talking about the cups surviving from a bombed-out restaurant and the stories of sixty-something-year-olds who had been born here, with birth certificates that listed this shelter as their birthplace; he turned to the air ventilation system.

“A shelter at this depth was meant for one hundred people and had at most two hours of oxygen. But during the last days of the war more than five hundred people had to hold their breath here for hours on end.”

Yet I cannot listen. In this shelter, which I had delved into out of curiosity, in order to see from a different side a dark period that had already been the subject of so much scholarship, so many stories, so many movies, so many black-and-white documentaries, I end up finding, of all things, my own childhood. I have forgotten entirely the twenty-five other people who like me bought tickets and who descended into this shelter located next to a subway stop; I remain alone with my little suitcase that has not lost any of its shape or color. I can hear the bubbling of the simmering tea in the kitchen and smell the aroma of its steam.

When the voice of the guide says to please not touch, I come to. “We have worked diligently for years in order to collect these objects. They are all important historical documents.”

I quickly retract my hand from the lock whose clicking sound I hear, even though it didn't open when my fingers touched it.

“What about these suitcases? For example, do you know who this belonged to?”

“No, some of these suitcases were found in attics and thrown away and some sold to the junk dealer; most sat around in shelters like these to this day. You may notice how small this one is. During the last years

of the war, the people who lived on alert due to the air raids left their indispensable items in such suitcases and carried them to work during the day. That suitcase you touched, which looks like a small chest, also has a particular feature. It is the smallest of a 1920s four-suitcase set, made from oak for overseas trips. It is very practical, designed for children or for a woman's small personal items. Looks nice, doesn't it? It's actually a very special antique piece. It must have belonged to a young woman. I myself discovered it at a junk dealer, an Arab store, I think. The store owner knew only that it had once belonged to an old woman who had died alone in her apartment."

Pointing to a wall filled with framed and numbered pictures, photographs, documents, and newspaper clippings, the guide said, "Look, this beige handkerchief in frame 136 also came from there."

I approach the wall. I immediately recognize my handkerchief. There is its old lace. And the rose motif along with the little green leaves that I first learned and embroidered on—that has faded a bit. The rose itself had not been so difficult, but attaching a gridded canvas onto the handkerchief and then, once the motif was finished, pulling the canvas fibers out of the handkerchief thread by thread—that had given me a hard time.

"I believe that this suitcase and the handkerchief belong to the same period and person. Do you see the motif that resembles a rose embroidered in the corner? The handkerchief, its cloth, and the lace stem from the nineteen thirties or forties, but that motif has been added more recently." The man paused for a moment. "Also, there were a few letters wrapped into this handkerchief. I remember this very well, because the handkerchief was wrapped around some letters and then placed under the lining. Or should I say, hidden there, since the lining's stitches appeared to have been deliberately undone just to put the letters there."

Letters?

I thought I was speaking to myself. But I must have spoken out loud for the guide continues.

"Yes. In fact, love letters, I believe. But they had nothing to do with the history of the suitcase and its period. We threw them out."

They threw them out. Well, what's the difference between forgetting and throwing out?

Suddenly the past filters through and is illuminated. My first painful, frightened, yet also pleasurable discoveries from the period in which I cared less about the objects around me and turned instead toward my own body. The love letters Peter wrote to me when I was fifteen—when

I remembered them years later, I couldn't find them anywhere. So I had hidden them here? I had hidden the letters from everyone in a panic, shuddering that my mother would see them, but I did not want to throw them out. My first passion, my first love letters, finally stuck inside the green lining after tearing it open on one side, I had apparently forgotten it all, just like that.

Are they looking at me? Could they have noticed that I've just remembered my first fearful, frantic love from nearly twenty years ago? That I'm overflowing with the melancholy and elation of having returned to my childhood and the past? I dry my eyes with the paper tissue I fish out of my bag and look around. The group has gathered around a crib with a gas mask for a newborn. Their expressions are embarrassed and still. If I were to say that that suitcase and handkerchief once also belonged to me, would I disappoint these people? Who knows, after all, maybe they too are searching for their own dark, painful history among these objects, a history that—as it keeps being opened up and discussed—reveals a horror in which they may be implicated, a potential complicity they feel the need to escape. But nobody cares or shows any interest, either in me or in the faded pink rose embroidered by my amateurish hands.

THROUGH THE NARROW staircase we come back up outside to the daylight. Faces pale, eyes foggy. People lost in thought disperse in all directions. I notice that some of them take a relieved breath, wearing the expression of people who have just made it dutifully through a museum visit. I, on the other hand, am still stunned; I don't know where to go from here. But after all, it's just the price of a ticket; until it loses all meaning, I can come back here thousands of times, to start anew a journey to my own past.

NOTES:

¹ “Turk brat” (in German in the original).

This translation is based on Menekşe Toprak, “Valizdeki Mektup,” *Valizdeki Mektup*. İstanbul: İletişim, 2016, 7–21, a slightly revised version of the initial publication in *Valizdeki Mektup*, İstanbul: YKY, 2007, 7–19.