



Australasian
Association
of Writing
Programs

TEXT

Journal of writing and writing courses

ISSN: 1327-9556 | <https://www.textjournal.com.au/>

TEXT prose

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2 stories

Empty Space

Pot-plants with daisies run alongside the hotel's red balcony rail. It's March 26 but Istanbul reveals no other clues of spring. The streets – zapped of people – are no less grey than the sky. Leaves have migrated to some other planet where the season of growth is eternal, with no promise of a return. I'm dreaming of the 'fish bread' sandwich I got near Galata Bridge one time here years ago.

I'm walking to Sultanahmet Square. McDonald's is closed and the mosques' doors bolted – the corporate overlords laughing their Adam's apples out on Caribbean golf courses and the fire-breathing dragon Evren returning thousands of years later to climb the minarets, leaving a blaze trailing down and spreading across the city.

The Blue Mosque's muezzin must be in his house, practising his vocal cords for his Friday prayers alone in the mosque tomorrow. I imagine he wonders if the ghosts he'll call out to will open their windows and ears and hearts. If they'll bow in hope from home. If the haze above the Strait of Bosphorus will blow over to Russia.

The square is barricaded. I walk through anyway, no one else between the Blue Mosque and Hagia Sophia. The group of guards – just one face-masked –

doesn't seem to mind. This area got blocked off too the last time I was here in 2016, remnants of a bombing some sporadic spots of blood. This fencing makes me wonder if cross-cultural understanding is even possible – you can enter another society and even sit there a while but there's always barriers, ones that are detachable, movable, visible or not, but forever lingering.

Following the deserted tram tracks brings me to the Golden Horn inlet. Fishermen. *This virus that's killed only a few people in Turkey? We still got mouths to feed and ourselves to entertain – and these fish ain't hooking themselves.* After crossing the Galata I turn to the promenade where the pop-up fish bread stall should be. Empty space.

A man tosses crumbs from the rocks to the seagulls splashing on the edge of the Bosphorus. Down the promenade is a seafood market with a few adventurous customers and eventually a restaurant selling takeaway fish bread. As my kebab is being prepared, it's unclear whether the tension in the air is from the silence of the roads gasping incessantly without the usual pounding of wheels, or because I haven't eaten in hours and the teasing barbecued seafood is testing my patience. A restaurant worker offers me a handful of calamari from the plate he takes down the strip.

In an alley towards the main street, only two young women are passing. As the expanse between us narrows, the empty space enlarges – no eye contact, no salutations, just distance.

Still hungry, I find an indoor restaurant. Chairs are atop the tables. Some people waiting for takeaway and one man walking upstairs. The waiter takes my order of lentil soup and tea and, turning away from me first, says, 'This way, mister' and escorts me up. A group at a round table makes conversation only through the varying intensity of cutlery hitting plates – a man carelessly cutting his meal, sounds reverberating through the empty space of the room, his wife responding by progressing from a meticulously quiet scratching to a sudden knife thump to get his attention. I wait for forks to scrape down plates like fingernails on a chalkboard – *Why won't you listen to me? Why are you so selfish? Why don't you care?* – but it doesn't come.

Through the window is a road that'd lead me to Taksim Square. The idea all along was I'd come here for a week before flying out of the region. I'd hit up the Spoken Word Istanbul events. Which story would I read out? Something humorous or sad or possibly triggering? I'd meet writers and poets and musicians from all over. Over wine glasses that'd keep refilling, we'd try making sense of the mess of the world and life and each other – almost getting

there. Until the glasses deplete. Till the hangover kicks in. When I'd again navigate the empty space of a foreign place whose people I'll never truly know.

The waiter places a chair on top of my table-for-four, somewhat obstructing the view inside from street passers-by. He mutters something about police but I think the blocking chair makes no difference. Downstairs I go to pay. While I'm pulling out all my lira coins and handing them to the man, a young guy close at my side directly faces me. I'm about to abruptly ask what the hell he wants. Wallet back in my pocket and turn to the lad. He holds out a bottle. 'Sanitise?'

Up the hill. Who cares about a story I might've rambled about in a microphone in an alternative timeline? My migration is easy – jumping on a plane to Australia tomorrow. What about all the refugees here, in congested and unhygienic spaces, or trying to burst into Europe?

In the hotel I drink black tea near a man and woman who speak in Spanish. After she leaves, I make eye contact with the middle-aged guy with a thick moustache. Reminds me of how my dad looked.

'Hola,' I say.

'Hola. ¿Cómo estás?'

'Bien, bien. ¿Y tú?'

'Muy bien. ¿Hablas español?' He grins.

'Solamente un poco.' I search my brain for the words. 'No recuerdo mucho español... ¿De donde eres?'

'Bolivia.'

Our conversation in his mother tongue doesn't get much further. I refill our tea glasses. We talk in English.

Citadel Eyes

People sipping cold drinks crowd a Tehran café – an airconditioned haven from the forty-degree cocktail of heat from the sky and exhausts. No vehicle's horns are heard from up these three levels though, only the cheery chatter of women's groups, and young lovers romancing, and men in lengthy dialogues.

I wonder what all their stories are: if the ladies are gossiping about neighbours or discussing literature; whether the couples look at ease because they've been together a long time or superbly hiding the tension, clutching onto the next topic like free-climbers to outstretched rocks; if the gents are talking about the country's progress in allowing women to attend men's national soccer matches, or some other business or politics I know nothing about.

But my main motivation for coming to this café isn't to contemplate strangers' private narratives. I open my laptop to start writing about my past six weeks in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Unsure where to start. Chronologically? No. Throw dot points or fragments into a pool of chance and wait till something floats? Also no, the daily journaling I should've done but rarely seem to – the stuff of *real* writers, whatever that is.

The waitress hands over my iced chocolate mocha, garnishing my dead-blank Word document. I gaze at a smiling couple again, twirling their straws that collide ice against the glasses like rafts in rocky rapids, a wild ride they might not know they've signed up to yet.

Entering the open-air part of the citadel in Shiraz, two guys and I check the sign detailing the fortress' history. 18th century. Behind us are two young women. I look at the one with chocolate hair trailing from her blue hijab and now I forget what year this place was built in. I say hello as we walk off but she doesn't realise I'm speaking to her, probably.

The interior between the walls. Geometric patterns on stain-glassed windows. Bright orange and green flowers. Red. Blue like the hijab. The girls have caught up. I walk over.

'Hey, how are you?'

'I'm fine.'

I look at her white dress with a blue pattern. ‘You matched your hijab with your dress.’

‘Yeah, I did.’ She smiles.

‘Intentional?’

She nods and says yes.

I smirk. ‘Cool. You look good. Visiting from Tehran?’

‘No, I’m from Shiraz.’

‘Really? A tourist in your own city.’

‘I go to university in Kerman but I’m home for the week.’

After introducing myself, I take Ava’s Instagram which is full of her origami.

Outside a cafe later in the day. Already a date with a stunning Persian. I don’t know if hugging in public is appropriate so I stand still as she approaches. She holds out her fist to bump. Inside at a table. At her university the guys are shy or scared of girls, apparently. One classmate, faced with the terrifying prospect of having to sit at the only vacant desk, next to Ava, went to the extent of picking up the desk and moving it across the room to avert such danger. The ice in my iced latte is melting. The rattling fan above is futile and she’s nineteen and never been with a guy before.

What would you do if you had ten million dollars tomorrow?

Open an institution to educate poor kids.

Make some origami with this serviette.

A butterfly.

What would you do if you were a butterfly?

What kind of question is that?

Fuck, that was dumb. Her nights spent watching Korean drama.

No! Not Korean drama.

My hand on hers on the table. If somebody says they like something belonging to someone else, it's supposedly a Persian saying to have 'jealous eyes.' She liked her friends watch, who then gave Ava the watch, and asked for it back the next day. Don't have jealous eyes. But hers aren't jealous. I don't know what they are. Wary yet innocent. Not the kind of innocence that some men project onto women without understanding the complexity of female sexuality. But citadel eyes, protected from the world's dark forces. From me.

The same cafe the next day. Having two identical first dates is dumb. How to move our dance forward? We're sitting outside. Watermelon juice. An hour or two.

Ava takes me to her mum's shop. Her mum wears bright colours and round hanging earrings. I say Ava got her fashion sense from her. Ava translates my words into Persian and her mum giggles. Black tea. Selfies. Her mum gifts me two soft toys of an elderly man and woman. The man looks like the character in the animated film *Up*, the old man who lives in a flying house held up by a hot air balloon. What's the symbolism? She wants me to marry her daughter and grow old together in a hot air balloon and fly off into the stratosphere? I'm reading into this too much.

We walk around the city. The sun in the bare blue sky traps heat under my black jeans. Taking photos with a statue of a photographer-explorer, we look natural and happy and her loose headscarf has fallen off.

'I feel like I've known you for two years,' she says. 'But it's only been two days.'

She wraps her arms around the statue, leans her head on his shoulder, melting into him and I imagine her cheering me up after a bad day.

In an old bathhouse, now a museum, lifelike-sized human figurines line the room's perimeter. These workers, masseurs, barbers and clients give an impression of the bathhouse before the time of post-history and museums. Once every minute, through a speaker sounds a man screaming with descending volume as if spiralling down a black hole. How this relates to the bathhouse escapes me. My arm is around Ava's lower back and I tell her to scream when the sound plays next. Shy, she asks me to do it together. We scream.

Ahhh!

I smile and look straight ahead, while she looks right to a middle-aged lady peering at us with disapproval. We giggle. In another room the walls create some privacy. We sit on a ledge, embracing one another.

Would you like company in Kerman next week?

Sure, why not?

Lips that may never have been kissed. They stay that way as she tilts her head to my chin. I kiss her forehead.

Through the bustling bazaar she grabs my sweaty hand, and speeding past vendors of spices and clothing and manchester, I want to wipe my hand on my pants or change sides but she moves with the swiftness of a hawk, so I try to stay slightly ahead as I don't want her leading me, but she grips tighter, a woman who wouldn't take any of your shit, weaving around customers and passers-by and children playing as we emerge through a gate to a brightly lit square, stopping to hug goodbye she says she's proud to meet me, and to tell her when I'll be in Kerman, then she kisses the corner of my lips and nervously skips away into the crowd.

Having moved to the café's courtyard, I've ordered a second chocolate mocha, evaporating fast like the collective perspiration blown by heavy-duty fans. I scroll through the story about Ava and me. Ending it there seems fitting, when our rafts are still tethered, before I cut the rope and the rapids drift us to disparate fates. I shut my laptop.

A showreel of thoughts.

In Yazd a traveller asking why I'm leaving for Kerman after only one day.

More glee on Ava's face to see me than anyone I can ever recall, waving from a taxi backseat, picking me up for dinner.

Our secret magic powers, gesturing our hands out like the rising sun to open the restaurant's (automatic) doors.

A fifteen-minute goodbye hug making her arrive home past her university's curfew.

Colouring her hair red during school and classmates calling her the cartoon character Anne Shirley.

Intertwined fingers walking through the contemporary art museum. A painting of a red-haired woman. 'Anne Shirley, there's you!'

After a dinner date Ava withholding her prized lips and refusing my taxi money.

A walk through the bazaar.

My first and only Persian language lesson, in an underground café with live music, Ava strict against my inattentiveness but it's not my fault how beautiful she looks with glasses.

Her origami boat earrings.

The green stone ring I buy but don't present to her, realising she already has the same one or similar.

Sharing my idea of living in Shiraz for six months next year. Ava willing to transfer university and city to be together, but afraid people 'would start to ask questions' of me as a foreigner.

The origami crane on a card she gives me; inside it, '*La vie est belle!*' Life is beautiful.

The five-dollar Australian note as a souvenir for her that I paid five euros to some other Australian to obtain.

Sending her a photo of butterfly wall-graffiti.

Lying on the lawn of a central roundabout park, staring at the stars, Ava confiding how her brother's aloofness breaks her heart, asking if I still love my ex. But love isn't so fixed like the stars, a torrent whose itinerary is guided by the ineffable.

‘Seventeen days later’ she’ll be finished her exams and we’ll rendezvous in Shiraz.

But I don’t go back.

In Tehran I meet others with more interest in the moment than romance. Sin.

Ava’s waiting till marriage for sex, otherwise how could she be sure the guy really loves her and not just her body?

Five more years of her studies in Iran. At least five trips of touching wood and finding a god to pray to.

Asking me why I want to end this relationship. Relationship. Shit.

I want her citadel eyes to stay intact.

A serviette is on my table, I wonder what Ava might transform it into if she were here, and what we would turn into. The napkin soaks up the dark liquid mess, I pay the cashier, and the couple’s empty chairs are left at outward angles.

Dean Kerrison’s work often focuses on the (dis)connection of the outsider in a foreign place. He’s had a playscript, fiction, nonfiction and poetry published in TEXT Journal, Meniscus, The Bangalore Review, Allegory Ridge, Global Hobo, and more. He’s working on his first novel in 2020 as part of a PhD at Griffith University.