

C. JOHN BURK

REVIEW: ASLI ERDOĞAN, *THE STONE BUILDING AND OTHER PLACES*. TRANSLATED FROM THE TURKISH BY SEVINÇ TÜRKKAN. CITY LIGHTS BOOKS, SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94133. 2018

At around 5:00 on the afternoon of July 15, 2016, here in Northampton, Massachusetts, I turned to my computer for a quick check of the afternoon news headlines. I was startled to see that across the world, in Turkey, a coup was in progress against the government of then-president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. My wife Lâle, who is Turkish, turned on the television at once and from then until well past midnight we watched with a mingling of fascination, disbelief, astonishment, and horror. The coup had been in progress for several hours and it seemed to be losing momentum. Disturbing images appeared: troops in military uniforms herded together on a bridge and beaten by civilians using their belts as flails, military personnel, taken into custody, shirtless young men kneeling on the floor of what appeared to be a gymnasium and guarded by men holding automatic rifles. Mass arrests followed as government control reestablished itself, and within weeks more than 50,000 people were imprisoned, including the Turkish writer Aslı Erdoğan (1967 -) who is no relation to Turkey's leader and who was detained on August 16 of that year and released nearly six months later. Those who are not familiar with Aslı Erdoğan's work, seeing this book for the first time in translation, might assume that it directly reflects the 2016 coup and her recent incarceration. That is not the case however: *The Stone Building and Other Places* was first published in Turkish in Istanbul as *Tas Bina* in 2009 and the following year won the prestigious Sait Faik prize there. Aslı Erdoğan is surely responding to earlier circumstances and events—there has been no shortage of instances of repression in Turkey and elsewhere in that area—but those who have read *The City in Crimson Cloak*, the only novel by Aslı Erdoğan previously translated into English, may also recall a passage in which a young Turkish woman, living in Rio De Janeiro and writing a novel set in that city, finds herself writing of events before they have actually happened, whose story “instead of chasing breathlessly after the truth as it usually does, suddenly sprints ahead to take the lead...what was really frightening was the prescience of her imaginings. And how they claimed some sort of right over the future.”

This American edition of *The Stone Building and Other Places* is a handsome book—a paperback with marbled endpapers, a wash of deli-

cate shades of gray enclosing three short stories, “The Morning Visitor,” “Wooden Birds,” and “The Prisoner,” along with *The Stone Building*, a novella. The typeface is generous, as are the spacing of the lines and the page margins. *The Stone Building* is organized within seven chapters, each with its own title: The Beginning, The Humans, The Stones, The Dreams, The Laughter, The Stories, The Endings, and a final Epilogue. This scaffolding surrounds a text that is often bafflingly difficult to follow, with numerous repetitions and narratives that lead off for a time and are then dismissed. The first chapter, The Beginning, introduces the stone building, telling us “The facts are obvious, contradictory, coarse...And blaring. I leave the facts, like a mound of giant stones, to those who busy themselves with important matters. What interests me is the murmur among them. Indistinct, obsessive...Digging through the rock pile of facts, I’m after a handful of truths—or what used to be called that, these days it doesn’t have a name.” We then learn that

Constructed long before I was born, it’s five stories tall, if we don’t count the basement, and there are steps leading up to the entrance [...] Inside the building, a vast courtyard, surrounding the courtyard, staircases with wire mesh reaching high overhead [...] to keep people from jumping [...] and outside the building, spiraling up to the fifth floor, is a fire escape. At night under the pale moonlight, shadows appear, climbing up the stairs, but, to this day, no one has been seen climbing down.

One realizes that terrible things are happening there, but what things are done, by whom and to whom remains unclear. The building serves as a sort of labyrinth, a state of mind from which it is impossible to escape although there are attempts to do so, choruses of resistance, often with vivid and compelling imagery.

We see a man who, “like a relic from some forgotten era, is always here on the sidewalk...When he can find them, he sits on newspapers, cartons, cardboard boxes [...] Because you cannot dare ask for his name, you assign to him the first letter of the alphabet: A.” We soon learn that A may have been the lover of the book’s protagonist as well as a fallen angel. There is also a coffeehouse whose “regulars lead such simple, ordinary lives that any attempt to describe them ends up sounding artificial, forced, exaggerated...the regulars still believe that humans are naturally good, though they can’t quite explain why there is so much evil on this earth.” Across from the coffeehouse is a bar “where only an exclusive few are allowed en-

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try, where experienced bouncers stand at the door until dawn, showing the drunks and troublemakers to their taxicabs. For the bar's regulars, the lives across the street are stories they'd like to tell one day."

Vivid passages call up the events of the July 2016 coup and its aftermath. The narrator herself is within *the Stone Building* and she perceives her fellow prisoners:

They materialized as if in a dream, surrounded by tall wire mesh fences, bare walls, stones, in dimly lit underground corridors [...] Half-concealed in the shadows they seemed even more dream-like. Leaning on each other, they walked slowly, ponderously [...] pausing, stumbling, shuffling along." Occasionally an individual is brought into focus: "The oldest of them—he was sixteen or seventeen years old —had a broken leg, clumsily wrapped in a filthy cloth from the knee down. Without a cane to lean on, he held onto a boy who was close in height [...] A battalion of the wounded, approaching slowly, shouldering their dead [...] Guilty children who had taken over the crimes committed for generations [...]"

This is painful stuff to read and it continues for several pages. The prisoners pass through and "out of the blue, one of them began to sing, his voice barely audible." The rest of the prisoners join in and "the song swelled up, overflowing, renewing itself in all things, re-creating the skies even among the stones. Wave after wave it spread, filling every heart in its path with the melancholy of night, the pull of infinity." The procession passes. The woman asks "What was I doing there?" and then finds herself plunging into an abyss as though "whatever it was that had kept me on my feet, on this earth, in this body until this day had suddenly released me from its grip." She lands on the stone floor, and at this point, the faithful reader of this book may be in danger of losing patience. The style seems evasive, precious and deliberately difficult. One tries to find a way through it and may eventually give up. The moments of exaltation, when repeated, seem deliberate and contrived: the prisoners' chorus from *Fidelio* becomes too rapidly the "Ode to Joy."

Two of the three short stories pursue similar themes. In "The Morning Visitor," a woman lives in exile in a coastal city in northern Europe. In the early morning she is regularly visited by a grotesque who reminds her of a "faraway land" and "a building that cloaked itself in darkness as soon as the sun fell below the horizon. One of the stone buildings

that are found everywhere.” The visitor is an executioner who goes to that stone building at night and who brings her letters from the dead, which she refuses for the time to open. In “The Prisoner,” a pregnant woman makes her way across an unnamed city to a stone building for a glimpse of a man we assume is the baby’s father as he is being transferred elsewhere in a prison van. She calls out “COME. Show yourself to me even for a second, even just once! I cannot go back to that long painful waiting. To that emptiness...I cannot bear it any longer.” She sees in “the brief light in the man’s eyes—bewilderment, joy, gratitude or love, or none of these...” as he is taken away.

Finally one returns to the second story, “Wooden Birds,” with some relief. There is a building possibly built of stone, but it is a hospital, a sanitarium deep in the Black Forest in Germany, and the patients are not anonymous prisoners but young women recovering from various ailments. We’re in Thomas Mann territory of course and indeed this story, published separately, won first prize in a Deutsche Welle radio competition in 1997. One of the women, Filiz, a political refugee imprisoned for two years in Turkey, is now recuperating from double pneumonia and chronic asthma to the extent that she has been released for the first time from the sanitarium grounds on a two hour Saturday afternoon pass. She is joined by five other women, all veterans of such outings: three Germans, Gerde, Martha and Beatrice; Dijana, a Croatian; and Graciela. Graciela—“Evita”—from Argentina, is a political refugee and had experienced “Prison, torture, all the rest” to shield her diplomat husband who had abandoned her and fled the country. Filiz learns that the other women are looking forward to something called the Amazon Express, but contents herself with enjoying the surrounding forest, which she feels she is truly seeing for the first time. She perceives that “The forest had a wild, vibrant, pulsing rhythm. It was cloaked in strange shadows, contradictions, tremors, its secrets revealed by a quivering gauzy mist. Trees, trees, trees...Ancient, solemn, imposing... Imperturbable, as if they had seen all the miracles and crimes on earth. Older than time itself...” The women stop for a time to talk, first to gossip and then of more serious matters. The veterans of such expeditions realize that time is running short and that they will need to take a shortcut if they are not to miss the Amazon Express. They urge Filiz to fall in and join them, and she thinks “Good God! The hysteria! What a farce! ... So now we’re playing soldiers. A half-crazy caravan of tubercular women. All we need are the bells on our saddles!” Nonetheless she joins in a scramble through the forest, cursing “herself for having joined this adventure, for senselessly jeopardizing the health that had cost her untold trouble to re-

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gain.” Finally the women arrive at the edge of the river in a world where “all traces of life had vanished; here there were only rocks, terrible cold rocks... Much larger than they appeared from above, they rose to the sky like shiny black daggers. And then there was the terrifying roar of the river, its blind, aimless anger...” To her great surprise, Filiz sees that her companions are arranging themselves on the rocks as sirens; Dijuna “had assumed a pose common to cheap erotic magazines.” The others behave similarly, even Graciela: “like a statue of a goddess, she stood on a sail-shaped rock—alone, unmoving, half-naked.” The women wait,

almost without breathing, in those ridiculous, absurd poses. Then, a canoe appeared among the rocks. The four young men, as was made clear by the badges on their life-jackets, were members of the rowing team of H. University, located seventy kilometers away; strapping, healthy and strong, these athletes were rowing with all their might, exerting superhuman effort to avoid crashing into the towering rocks along the narrowest and most dangerous passage of the river. They spotted the women. Where they had seen them every Saturday.” The women remain silent and the men begin to call out “Whistles, catcalls, jokes about what’s ‘down there’ but nothing too vulgar...At last, as the canoe was about to disappear from view, Filiz’s arms slowly lifted to the sky. They spread out rigidly, haltingly, like the wings of a wooden bird that had never learned how to take to the sky, but then they fell exhausted, collapsing upon her head. One atop the other, like broken wings. Graciela’s otherworldly voice rose, wavering above the river’s roar and the receding shouts: “*Vida e bonita...*”

As the story ends, Filiz begins to weep, the canoe has disappeared down-river, and the women are left “alone again in the middle of the forest.”

It is difficult to discuss *The Stone Building and Other Places* outside the context of the failed July 15, 2016 coup and the June 14, 2018 Turkish election that has strengthened and extended the powers of the current regime in Ankara. Within the collection itself one sees a transition from the pre-Millennium story “Wooden Birds,” with its lively young women who possess names, personal histories, boyfriends, a sense of humor, to the shadowy anonymous figures moving through the nightmare world of *The Stone Building*, which appeared little more than a decade later. Much has happened in Turkey since that time, and one anticipates hearing more of Aslı Erdoğan’s continuing response to it.