

Choice
Gabrielle Reeves



Watercolor, 11 x 8 in, 2012

Fig Season: An Artist Statement

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When I remember Istanbul, I remember fig season. Never having seen or eaten a fresh fig in my life, I was fascinated by this strange and delicate fruit. My first encounter with them was not in Istanbul however, but in the seaside town of Kuşadası, on my way to catch a ferryboat to Greece. Walking at my side was a girl whom I had only known for a summer, but at that time, she was the most important person in my life. The girl was tall and beautiful like an Amazon, with shortly cropped hair and an elegant face. We had met in Istanbul on a sweltering summer night, two specks in a giant city, wandering the winding streets of Beyoğlu.

I was in the midst of the most tumultuous period of my life, and this girl had been witness to all of it. In my 25th summer, I had left the U.S without looking back and was working in a carpet shop owned by a pair of dysfunctional Turkish brothers. I lived on the top floor, in a small room stacked with carpets while the brothers occupied the floor below me. The elder brother was wiry, charismatic, and insidiously insane. To my great surprise, it was only a matter of weeks before I found myself caught by his aggressive charm, and fell into a secret love affair that both intrigued and terrified me. Our nights were turbulent, and I soon grew fearful of his mounting tempers, uncontrollable drinking and the ever-growing instability of my living situation.

I concealed my dysfunctional love affair from the world, and under the stress of this secret life, I became increasingly ill. I kept the illness to myself as well, hoping desperately that if I ignored it, my body might heal on its own. I treated my new relationship in the same way, ignorantly believing that at his very core, this man was good. I concentrated with intensity on this thought, although I seemed to know it would prove false in the end. The neglect to my health lead to extreme abdominal pain, sky rocketing fevers and eventually, a long night in the Alman Hastanesi, a German hospital in the heart of the Istanbul's European district.

I recovered, and in mid-August the Turkish man took my new female companion and I southward to celebrate my 26th birthday. He drove with ferocity through the Turkish countryside, filling the car with thick smoke as he puffed on a steady stream of cigarettes rolled up with hash and tobacco. We stopped in obscure towns to buy carpets or eat lunch, but never spent more than an hour in a place that my friend or I wished to explore. We watched the Turkish man while he bargained for piles of carpets, and sipped our tea quietly as he high-fived the business men,

making obvious references to us in rapid Turkish. On the second night of our trip, after getting wildly drunk, he deserted us in a hostel outside the small village of Selçuk. I had felt the tension building inside of him for days, and when I refused to share his room, we saw the rage surface at last in a flurry of drunken accusations and tears.

Knowing I would soon return to Istanbul with no place to live, and my companion departing for the United States in a few days' time, we bought the cheapest ticket to the nearest country we could and escaped on a dolmuş to a nearby seaport town. The air was thick and sweltering, our backpacks heavy, and my eyes burned from tears and lack of sleep. As we walked through the congested streets, I felt the perspiration beading up on my skin, and Plath kept close to my imagination: "drops of sweat crawled down her back, one by one, like slow insects" (120).

Halfway to the water, I stopped at the site of a woman crouching by the side of the road, a basket of fresh figs at her feet. Famished, we bought three liras worth and continued on our way, each with a large paper bag full of figs.

An hour later we were on a boat to Greece, rocking in the rough water, our skin covered in sea salt from the occasional splash on board. I examined the figs in their intricacy. They were plump and round, fitting nicely into the palm of my hand. Each one was a unique combination of deep purple, fading to bright green towards the stem. Small flecks of white covered their skin and as I looked closer, I found many other colors: blue, grey, pink, orange, red. I closed my eyes and indulged on their seeded insides, absorbing every detail of the strange and beautiful moment.

After our jaunt to Greece, my return to Istanbul and the departure of my summer friend, I watched the figs fill every market place. They quickly became my daily purchase, and subjects in my paintings, drawings and photographs. Every time I tore open the ethereal skin I remembered our salty escape from Turkey, how my head rested against the side of the rocking boat, sunglasses drifting gently down my nose with the wetness of tears.

My life had become that small boat, tossing about in a sea of rough waters. My companion was gone; I had fled from one strange living situation to another, and then another, desperately searching for happiness and peace. I felt my mind slowly slipping away, and with it the person I had formerly known as myself. The weight of Istanbul pressed down on me like a mysterious dark presence, and as I walked through the market place, I stared at the figs. They consumed my vision, and in my head I heard Sylvia Plath and my favorite passage from *The Bell*

Jar. It is a passage about choice, each fig representing a potential path in life. "I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked" (77).

Living in Istanbul, I felt a connection to this passage and concept of choice in an entirely new way. In that huge tumultuous city, I was overwhelmed with choice. I didn't know where to live, whom to trust, what to paint, what to write. I felt oppressed, displaced, unable to be myself, surrounded by stares from men and the consuming darkness that only comes from a grossly oversized city.

As summer drifted into the past, I felt myself yearning for the familiar, and the only place to find it was in my old room at the carpet shop, in the arms of a man who both loved me and abused me. He had come thundering back into my life, promising the path with him to be filled with travel, success, happiness, love and comfort. One fig was the life of a young American woman living with a Turkish man, another was that of an artist living alone in an alien city, another was a plane ticket back to the United States and the life I had left behind, another was graduate school and another was more travel and more searching. As I wandered the market place in late October, I saw all the figs begin to shrivel and diminish, just as Esther did. "I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet" (77).

Works Cited

Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*. New York: HarperCollins, 1971. Print.