

Turkey's delights

Two recollections of rural life in the 1960s

I have seldom visited any place – in the Mediterranean at least – without wishing I had arrived at least fifty years earlier”, writes David Mason in his foreword to Michael Pereira’s *Mountains and a Shore*. “With this book, my wish is granted.” Both Pereira’s book and *Dinner of Herbs* by Carla Grissmann (who died in 2011) are freshly reprinted accounts of rural Turkey in the 1960s – a time separated from us by that magical half-century.

Some of the best travel writers lead us through new territories ever-observant but largely unobserved; we get to know them through their interactions with people and landscapes, and the chemistry that binds them together. Grissmann’s silence on the subject of herself in *Dinner of Herbs* is all the more intriguing given how unusual her experience was: a highly educated American woman in her late thirties living alone in a remote Anatolian village. We are given little insight into her decision to move there beyond the oblique explanation that she knew “how remote [a Turkish village] was from the classical splendours of Istanbul or the Ionian coast”. Her writing is full of simple details and deep empathy.

She is not unaware of the peculiarity of her experience. “Through all the months I was in Uzak Köy there was hardly a flicker of curiosity about who I myself was, where I had come from, what I had done before or was thinking of doing next”, she notes, neutrally. The reader, with more than a flicker of curiosity, realizes that Grissmann probably enjoyed this anonymity. “The hardest thing for me to get used to was the total lack of privacy . . . There was no lock on the door to my room and people came in at any time”; here she is referring to the home in which she lived for nearly

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Carla Grissmann

DINNER OF HERBS

Village life in Turkey in the 1960s
191pp. Eland. Paperback, £12.99 (US \$32).
978 1 78060 043 7

Michael Pereira

MOUNTAINS AND A SHORE

A journey through southern Turkey
224pp. Paul Dry Books. Paperback, \$16.95.
978 1 58988 104 4

a year before being brutally deported by bureaucrats in Turkey’s capital, Ankara, on a legal technicality which prevented foreigners from living in a hamlet.

Grissmann never tells us how long she would have stayed in Turkey had she not been forced to leave, but she writes with obvious heartbreak of leaving her adoptive family. She describes them in vivid terms: her matriarch hostess “wore men’s socks and her two dusty dry big toes stuck out of holes in the front, and the heels were gone. She cried easily, and often”. “The women smoked deliberately and slowly”, she writes elsewhere, “following the white curls of smoke with half-closed eyes, holding the cigarette pinched between the broken yellowed nails of their thumb and first finger in a very worldly fashion. They didn’t know about inhaling.”

But Grissmann keeps herself a dignified mystery – which is why it is a shock to read the afterword, a “biographical portrait” written by John Hopkins, with whom she had a relationship in Tangiers several years previously. Embarking on Hopkins’s erotic memoirs



Carla Grissmann (far right) in Uzak Köy; from *Dinner of Herbs*

after reading Grissmann’s story feels like voyeurism and betrayal – would she want details of her sex life exposed? At the same time, it is undeniably intriguing to read that, “For Carla, food was a way of life”; the woman who feasted on sardines and Spanish ham in Tangiers subsisted on a diet of potatoes and walnuts in wintry Anatolia. It is also interesting to reflect that the woman who appeared in red lipstick at gallery openings – “elegant, stylish” – wore black rubber slippers and flowered bloomers in humble Uzak Köy; and that the woman whose numerous European lovers travelled to Tangiers to see her (much to Hopkins’s chagrin) was – we presume – celibate while she slept under the noses of a sprawling Turkish family for a year.

Mountains and a Shore is a rollicking account of one man’s good-humoured journey through a country as yet unspoiled by excessive construction. It is an unwitting eulogy of the rural beauty now scarce in Turkey, “wooden houses, as though asleep, leaned one against the other, storks perched gravely on chimneys” – a eulogy peppered

with the historical detail that naturally crops up on the site of ancient empires. Pereira zig-zags from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea in an array of decrepit public vehicles, taking obvious joy in finding the path less travelled, in encountering the people usually hidden from tourists, in their smoky backgammon cafés. He records, affectionately, their behavioural quirks; at one point a chef dances for his depressed customer: “poor Süleyman had neither the figure nor the temperament for such abandon. Moving with ponderous dignity he swayed about the room, resembling an elderly dowager at a Charity Ball”.

Mason, in his foreword, reveals that he wrote to Pereira asking “for personal information I had not been able to track down via the Internet” – a far cry from the intimacies provided by Hopkins. We also hear about Pereira’s army career, which first drew him to Turkey during the Cold War, when he was trained as an interpreter. This explains his attachment to Turkey, and adds to our appreciation for a military man drawn to a country at peace. What Pereira would make of Turkey today – a country not at war, but hardly at peace – is another question.

Tom Lutz, the author, scholar and founder of the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, has a problem: he can’t stop travelling. In his latest book he chronicles three decades of non-stop journeys around the globe, from Azerbaijan and Moldova to Tajikistan, Tehran and Ukraine – these are just a handful of the more than twenty destinations he writes about in *Drinking Mare’s Milk on the Roof of the World*.

Besides a fascination with the 2D map of the Parker Brothers *Wide World* board game, there is no ready explanation for Lutz’s wanderlust (a key word for him). He rarely travels for work. He simply must keep moving forward. His is an inquisitive and self-deprecating mind reminiscent of Geoff Dyer’s. Airports don’t count in Lutz’s globetrotting game, and he confesses to cheating by trekking beyond the loading and unloading zones of a few of them, just long enough to be “a thirty-second Magellan”. His frugal travelling style (a \$2 meal here, \$13 room there) matches his economical prose: “Carcasses hung unrefrigerated at the butcher shop”, he writes of *eski shakkar*, an old Uzbek city.

A significant portion of the book is made up of dialogue with the people he meets along the way. He says himself that the book is less about the countries than it is about the people: “the

Collecting countries

An elegant account of one man’s wanderlust

CHRISTOPHER URBAN

Tom Lutz

DRINKING MARE’S MILK ON THE
ROOF OF THE WORLD
254pp. OR Books. £14 (US \$20).
978 1 682190 56 2

Amidov family in Tashkent, my driver in Mandalay, Francine the housekeeper in Pretoria, an old man in Albania, a young one in Jordan, my hapless guide in Sri Lanka”. Since many conversations concern people from countries that have yet to recover from the fall of the Soviet Union, or “Bush-era politics” (or both), the book reads at times as a document of global grievances, and at others a record of encounters as “random on the page as they occurred in real time – unpredictable, brief, incomplete, true, and for me, as profound as they are quotidian”.

As a result, readers may not find as comprehensive a portrait as, say, the oral histories of Svetlana Alexievich’s “Soviet soul”, but the sketches of the individuals in *Drinking Mare’s Milk* nevertheless offer an eye-opening account of these people’s everyday lives.

Lutz is aware that exploring the planet also means destroying it. “The Bourgeois traveler literally consumes the world’s diversity”, and his “horrible carbon footprint” does not go unacknowledged. “Indeed I often think I’m enacting some bizarre psychological imperialism: I run around collecting countries like a European monarch amassing colonies, and I may as well admit it, I keep count”. The opening section details Lutz’s earliest adventures and misadventures on the road, hitch-hiking across the United States, exploring Europe with a girlfriend in a beaten-up delivery van; nostalgic but never sentimental, it features some of the most moving passages in the book.

At one point, Lutz, who is also a literary professor at UC Riverside, can’t help comparing a young Kurd he meets on the metro in Tehran to Lambert Strether, the “renunciative hero” of Henry James’s *The Ambassadors*, because he won’t accept a tip, not even a bottle of water. Lutz wears a few other hats besides lit prof in the book: journalist (interviewing Ukrainian nationalists and Russian supporters in Kyiv); historian (visiting archeological excavations in Boğazkale); adventurer (encountering large lizards and giant bats on a raft in Dodanduw). Not that the adventures always go as hoped; he fends off a dozen tour guides at the gates of medina in Fez, insisting he can navigate the maze-like markets alone, only to end up back at the gates where he started.

It is testimony to Tom Lutz’s deep curiosity that he goes far outside his comfort zone, avoiding whatever local tourist industry there is with mixed results. He gets stoned on hashish with his new Moroccan friends, but then later gets stoned again – quite literally, with pebbles – by a group of boys on an off-the-guidebook pathway. The young intellectuals he passes sitting at a picnic table? They don’t offer to save him. He is left “to stand alone on the wrong side of history”.