

# Aras Ören, Poems (1978)

## Abstract

Aras Ören's first volume in his Berlin trilogy, published by Rotbuch Verlag, catapulted the Turkish Berliner-by-choice onto the German and European literary stage. Ören's poetic imagination of encounters between new and old residents in the Berlin-Kreuzberg district inscribes the migrants into the text of the city. Born in Istanbul in 1939, Ören has been shaping Turkish-German life in Berlin since the late 1960s: as an author, editor, and head of the Turkish editorial staff at Sender Freies Berlin (SFB).

Ören, who writes his works in Turkish and has them translated into German, was the first recipient of the Adelbert von Chamisso Prize. From 1985 to 2017, the Robert Bosch Foundation used the prize to honor "authors whose native language and cultural background is not German and whose work makes an important contribution to German-language literature." The prize aimed to recognize "writing on the move" that draws from more than one language and brings places beyond national borders into the German-language horizon.

## Source

### Germany, a Turkish *Märchen*

They fed our hope  
with secrets:  
even the roads are fitted out  
with central heating underneath –  
so they told us, we believed it.

The snow's white as it falls from the sky  
and grey with soot as it reaches the ground.  
So sublime the technology is,  
so much does it beautify nature –  
so they told us, we believed it.

The days melt away,  
things too.  
Is that a pain stitched into your face? –  
so they told us, we didn't see it.

Turn levers, press buttons,  
that's how you earn money.  
And the government there, imagine,  
it'll never be ousted –  
so they told us – and in no time you're rich!

Is that a pain stitched into your face? –  
so they told us, we didn't see it.

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I

*Ali spoke:*

Forever this terrible scramble  
From June to June – which June actually?  
No, not lately, *gnädige Frau*, Madam,  
I mean the post-war years.

I saw you clearing the last rubble away.  
Back then you didn't trail a cloud  
of Madame Rochas scent,  
you were also less corpulent.

The beauty of southern seas that so enraptures you.  
No, eating (yes well, there's too little of that there)  
became your purpose in life.

You see, I became somebody too.  
Once I was a snail,  
now I carry a sword in my hand,  
three feather plumes on my head.

Yes true, you're right, better not mention the old days.  
At any rate you were less corpulent.  
Oh and why is this fat dog standing guard,  
Madam, over your loneliness?

II

*Aunt Emma spoke:*

What's my corpulence to you?  
Anyway, I'm not all that fat, pal.  
What are you getting at? Am I meant  
to lay out my most secret feelings – aye, fears –  
here, while I'm eating?

Look, let me tell you something,  
not to defend myself:  
the bureaucracy-missionaries  
led me along their path to abstract love,  
each morning we fused like  
two lovers: my alarm clock and me.

I see my surroundings, oh yes, I see them.  
Certain things are not right.  
You spoke of southern seas,

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of eating – yes well, there is too little of that there –  
maybe you're right,  
I was also less corpulent.

### III

*Ali spoke:*

I walked slowly and arrived late:  
– I was a snail –  
now at last I carry a sword in my hand,  
three feather plumes on my head.  
I've bought a business, bought a whole  
storey.  
I've got money.

When I came here – I remember –  
my face wasn't  
like this,  
it was different,  
but still it was  
my face.  
It was as motionless  
as a row of wooden boats on a stretch of dead water.

### IV

*Aunt Emma spoke:*

Wilted moonlight shines from my eyes.  
What should there be else?  
Take nature, put it on your balcony,  
three square yards of purple African violets  
and these vulgar pelargoniums,  
as if scratched off the surface  
of a blue-patterned porcelain plate.

The beaming smiles of the faces in adverts –  
is that LIFE?

### V

*Ali spoke:*

When the moon too is shining on the houses,  
the houses are like girls  
whose hair has been shorn by force.  
The houses stand each alone,

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the bridges have been torn down,  
no one can get across the river.

Once

I woke up each morning with a nightmare:  
an old neighbour had died,  
the mourners were still in the garden.

Overcome by a feeling of tenderness,  
'Cry,' I told myself,  
'to cry is to love,  
and love is a bird  
who settles on our beard, for all it's white.'

Yes, hope never left me in life,  
but now what can I do here with  
the withered poplars –  
and do the green ones still  
stand where they stood?

## **What's Going On in Naunynstraße**

Fragment

You look outside and suddenly  
Naunynstrasse's turned into a steppe,  
thick with thorn bushes,  
in the bellies of the thorn bushes  
purple suns blossoming.  
You walk, the bounding earth  
smells bitter. The homesickness of your feet  
is bread now and makes you strong.

Before you in shadowy valleys a Fata Morgana.  
A dark giant billows from the factory chimneys  
and dissolves over your head into smoke.  
A little later an asphalt road  
with droning cars.

When you've forgotten to set your alarm  
and sleep in  
the day's not yet begun.  
But an unbegin day's  
unforeseen  
in your pay contract.  
Unbearable, each such payless day,  
even if what makes it agreeable  
were never to end.

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You step out of your house on Naunynstrasse,  
look at the bare tree in the courtyard,  
whose long since wilted fallen leaves  
they've swept into a corner of the yard,  
look at this damp, rotting pile in the corner,  
at bins, at onion-skins, hanging  
out of plastic bags, tin cans, behind them  
a couch with broken springs hanging  
out of it, a torn lampshade, see children  
playing hopscotch, cross  
the yard half dark in broad daylight  
to be standing outside at last and walking  
away down the whole length of the street  
past old people walking their dogs  
at gentle pace upon the broad pavements.

[...]

Source: Aras Ören, *Poems*. Forthcoming translation from the German by Tom Cheesman.

Recommended Citation: Aras Ören, *Poems* (1978), published in: German History Intersections,  
<<https://germanhistory-intersections.org/en/migration/ghis:document-106>> [July 08, 2025].