

◇ TURTLE MAN ◇

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The Yürüks called it the Turtle Man, but their visitor was no turtle, and decidedly not a man.

Twice a year it visited them in their summer pasture on the eagle-haunted heights in the Taurus; that unearthly realm devoid of level ground or straight lines; where warped landscapes of bare rock rolled overhead like wind-thrown clouds of green, brown and ochre. The Turtle Man dwelled in the vicinity of that one peak, and visited that one tribe only...

How to best describe this implausible entity? Most glimpsed it only from afar. Its form was warped, like a tall evening shadow. It resembled person in standing on two legs and having two hands; but its legs were crude pillars, and its arms, while enormous, were comparatively short. These stood folded against its chest - oddly like the wings of a plucked chicken...

Beyond its arms and legs, the thing's similarity to a person ended. The Turtle Man had no shoulders, chest, neck or head. Instead, its upper torso gradually tapered to a hose-like extremity, terminating in a tiny, beak-like mouth beset with two small, glimmering eyes at the level the mouth parted... The hose-head could swivel disconcertingly in every direction; reach up taller than the great mountain cedars, or bow down to ground to peer at people... Most strikingly, the Turtle Man stood tall. Three people could stand on each other's shoulders, and only reach the section where Turtle Man's hose-like "head" began to taper off above its folded arms.

Why the name? No one knew clearly. Some said that its "face" perversely recalled that of a tortoise - except even a tortoise's face had a sense of self awareness - whereas the Turtle Man's proboscis-like extremity had more in common with the soulless masks of insects, or organ-like nonentities such as worms, leeches and liver flukes...

Surely, not even the most deformed human had looked anything like it. But like humans and virtually unlike anything else alive on God's creation, Turtle Man could fashion crude tools and make music - after a fashion...

It always carried a drum of sorts. The thing resembled a gigantic parody of a shaman's drum - similar to those owned by the Yürüks' oldest ancestors... An entire cow's skin was stretched taut across a frame consisting of two semicircular boughs of red pine. The contraption was as wide as one of the Yürüks' tents, yet Turtle Man could carry it easily. Tassels of skin, rope and sinew dangled around the frame, and flailed as Turtle Man hit it with a crude baton fashioned out of a twisted pine sapling. As Turtle Man walked down from the heights, it would beat its monstrous shaman drum thrice, and punctuate its eerie song with a guttural sound from its obscene, hose-like head.

Pang... pang... pang... "Ö!" Pang... pang... pang... "Ö!" Pang... pang... pang... "Ö!"

Turtle Man's first visit took place close to the beginning of their stay. One night, before the *Hidrellez* and immediately after the full moon it would descend from its lair. The Yürüks' camels, goats and sheep grew restless as the divine monster approached their encampment. Its great padded feet plodded softly among the Yürüks' angular felt tents, sounding like leather bags of grain as it walked about... As it walked, the Turtle Man left them gifts; strangely-twisted branches of age-old cedars, dried snakes and tortoise shells, bundles of sinew from dead animals, crude rag dolls in the form of snake-headed men, polished obsidian rocks, among others...

The Yürüks had no use for its perplexing gifts, but out of respect left offerings of goat milk and meat by their tents in return. None would remain in the morning. Their own arcane presents the Yürüks would keep, believing them to be good-luck charms until their return to the lowlands, where they would be quietly disposed of in wells.

The Turtle Man's second visit, the one that took place towards the end of the Yürüks' mountaintop stay, was the one that mattered. Once more, the Yürüks' camels, goats and sheep would grow restless; dogs would stop barking in fear; and Turtle Man's drum would sound from the eagle-haunted heights: Pang... pang... pang... "Ö!" Pang... pang... pang... "Ö!"

This time, Turtle Man would attend each tent individually, like an improbable bee tending a flower-field of human hearths. Its hose-like neck would bow down and softly thrust itself into

the folds of black felt. The terrifying, inhuman face would then speak in a sibilant, hushing voice of the future. It would tell pregnant women if their children would be boys or girls; it would tell young men if bounty or catastrophe was to befall them next year; it would foretell marriages and death; childbirth and disease; romance and feuds; upcoming times of felicity and famine... Every prophesy would be correct.

Thus, the Yürüks had avoided many pitfalls and calamities that had struck other tribes in the region. Turtle Man's particular tribe of Yürüks were silently thankful to the Almighty for the benefits of this unearthly guardian, and were careful about its secrets. Some considered it to be a manifestation of Khidr, the immortal servant of God who walked the Earth at the time of *Hidrellez*. Others called it merely "the herald of Khidr"; but others - to the protest of the more pious elders - thought it to be a manifestation of God himself. Certainly, they all agreed that Turtle Man, *Tosbağa Adam* - was not something of this Earth, and they considered themselves blessed to have existed alongside it.

Eventually, however, there was a final year of its visit. Once more the crooked giant's drum sounded from the heights: Pang... pang... pang... "Ö!" Pang... pang... pang... "Ö!" Pang... pang... pang... "Ö!"

It was the end-summer visit, the visit of idiot-savant prophesy. This time, the Turtle Man had only one, ominous message: "Ö... *Dünya yanacak, Cihan çökecek... ... Dünya solacak, devran dönecek*" - The World will burn, the World will collapse... the World will wilt, and a new age will turn...

The Turtle Man never came to visit them again. And just as it said, the World changed. Wars came and with them came new ways of seeing that stabilised reality through their sheer existence. Rules of thought gripped the universe, and it shrank in possibilities. In the past, outcast groups such as the Yürüks could entertain the concept of beings like the Turtle Man. The settled Moslems had their *jinn*s and *peris*. Even the Christian infidels in lowland cities believed in the existence of spirits, ghosts and saints.

Now, not even the Yürüks could bring themselves to accept the reality of such beings. They would talk about them, worship them, fear them even - yet seeing them as real, as everyone

knew in the depths of their hearts - was no longer viable.

Beings like Turtle Man would inhabit only the scattered islet realms of fewer dreams, madmen and schizophrenics; or the pitiful few pockets of the unknown that still remained in far-off continents. Reality had settled and calcified...

Years passed. The mountains that once were home to Turtle Man and the Yürük tribe that it visited were now part of an organised, prosperous province. Roads linked it to other provinces; and a State held them all safely in its vice-like grip... In the largest city of that province, stood a Museum of the Folk Arts. It was not a well-visited place, its main purpose being to provide employment for the several government officials and state academics who worked there. In one of its dusty halls stood a cabinet dedicated to Yürük dolls and folk dresses. On one shelf stood a crude rag doll in the form of snake-headed man...

It was, unbeknownst to the state academics and the government officials and the museum visitors and - to any other person who was then alive, the last relic that had remained of the Turtle Man in this rigid new world.