

A Tea Shop in the Egyptian Bazaar, Istanbul

by

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Dominoes of stores were ordered
down a tunnel of spices and delicacies
one after the other like little Atlases,
holding up the curved yellow ceiling
of an endless loggia painted with scarlet mosaics.
Having been led away from the crowd
moving back and forth on the wide road,
I stopped at a tea shop on the right,
to a stall full of healing herbs at its front;
the odors of peppermint, lavender, linden tea
hooked me into a small heaven in the crowdy chaos
and their green and red hues shed bright light
on the Turkish delight shops next to it.
As I entered that apothecary,
a natural library of tea (the shelves of which
shaped a narrow corridor leading to the check-out)
surrounded me and promised me
to cure my love with its herbal books.
The shopkeeper offered me tea
in small plastic cups that gathered
all the perfumes of the East in a few drops.
He spoke to me in Greek as if he had known me
since childhood, as if we grew up in Asia Minor
when everything was just fine,
when there was no tempest in the sea of Smyrna—
“I was born in Thessaloniki, too.” he said.

I smiled at him, bought a bag of apple tea
and left the healing truce behind.
And I stood in the middle of the crowd,
in the middle of the loggia,
in the middle of the spice trade,
looking up at the mosaics,
trying to find myself in that maze
of tea, turmeric and baklava.

Poet's Note

“A Tea Shop in the Egyptian Bazaar, Istanbul” is inspired by my experiences from my trip to Istanbul in October, 2019. Having been born Greek, I was raised with the prejudice Greek people have of the Turks as a violent people, following the events of the Greek Revolution in 1821 and the horrible events of the 1920s. Yet, the enchanting multicultural scenery of Istanbul made me realize that this was not actually the case, at least between common people. A particular challenge I faced while composing this poem was to convey of the memories I had from my visit to the Egyptian Bazaar, aiming to reflect the synesthesia of the place and instilling details that will successfully ground the readers with a physical description of this extraordinary place in Istanbul.