

Excerpt from prose poem “Dreaming of Istanbul in Maine,”
as written for broadcast on WMPG, by Justine Denny © 2012

Just stop what you’re doing, and imagine for a moment
the sixth century “Sunken Palace”
or, what in Turkish they call the “Yerebatan Sarayi”.

Life in a touristy corner of Istanbul called
“Sultanahmet”--named after the “blue” mosque
known for its breathtaking tiles—carries on like
a rushing waterfall, taking everything with it in its
wake: Work-weary commuters waiting for the next
light rail, tourists leaving their sea-view hotels
for their next adventures, fast-talking shopkeepers
working overtime to drum up business, honking cars
carving out a lane for themselves where a second
ago there was none, diners taking a break from the
hustle and bustle to break bread.

And yet, the minute I descend the fifty-two ancient
stone stairs into the parallel universe of the underground cistern
that stretches out more than one hundred thousand square feet
in all directions directly underneath the lively street
scene above, everything here is damp, cool and quiet,
warm-colored spotlights draw attention to the three
hundred-some roman marble columns that punctuate
the shallow pool of water, while schools of carp wind their
way around this dimly lit and mysterious fragment
of Byzantine history.

It’s 2002.

It is a hot and steamy July in Istanbul.
My sister and I have traveled here to heal
our eleven year estrangement with our mom,
and now the three of us are standing on
the elevated platform near the sunken
palace’s café, her voice joining the other echoing
voices of visitors exploring the subterranean water tank.
My sister’s video camera is rolling, and mom plays
coy with the camera, “No, I’m *not* going to give you
any history!” and then suddenly switching hats, she says
in her best Ottoman-historian-voice, “Well, this was built
by the Byzantine emperor, Justinian the first,” and then adds,
“The light rail has to be careful to slow down when they
go overhead.”

If you go online and read what Atlas Obscura says about Istanbul's Sunken Palace, you'll come across the line that talks about how a Frenchman visited the city in the 1500's--it was then called "Constantinople"—and heard "stories of locals fishing and drawing up fresh water from holes in their cellars" from the sunken palace cistern.

Now, it's 2012.

I am living two blocks from Casco bay in Portland, Maine.
Living day in and day out surrounded by sensory reminders of my childhood life in Istanbul and my mom, who moved us there and made it come alive for me, I, too, am a fisherman of sorts, drawing up fresh water from holes in my cellar on any given day.
All my lost selves are integrated into a whole.
My catch nourishes me.

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