

# Beyond

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n.2

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## A Tale of Two Cities: From Florence to Erzurum

Korey Silverman-Roati

Two years, almost to the day, after my first day in Florence, I landed in the eastern Turkish city of Erzurum. Three other young Americans and I were there on a Fulbright English Teaching Assistantship, expected to spend the next nine months teaching English speaking courses at Ataturk University. We landed at the Erzurum Airport with only a loose idea of how we would get to our new apartments. After waiting around at the airport for thirty long minutes a young man in a sharp suit, who spoke very little English, ushered us into his '80s Mercedes. He drove fast down a highway through a valley below treeless mountains, past shepherds and their sheep, up to a city at the base of the Palandoken Mountain.

As we were driving, my mind wandered to a taxi ride two years before. A future roommate and I piled into a small taxi outside the Peretola Airport, about to spend a semester studying at Palazzo Rucellai. I looked out the window the whole time, my forehead pressed against the glass. We drove by small cars and even smaller streets. Hundreds of mopeds swarmed around us like bees. The buildings fit together as if they had been cut out of a single block of stone. The streets became narrower and narrower as we got closer to our apartment. When we arrived, we unlocked a fifteen-foot heavy wooden door to enter our apartment building.

Recently I began wondering why the first rides into both cities have been etched so clearly in my mind. One of my favorite authors, neuroscientist David Eagleman, studied near-death experiences to try to discover whether time really slows down when people are in mortal danger. He placed people on a fifteen-story drop above a net and recorded their brain activity during free fall. He found that time didn't slow down for people. Instead their brains, experiencing mortal fear, recorded everything they were experiencing, giving the people the illusion that time was slowed

down in their memory of the event.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps, then, it was fear that led to such vivid first-ride experiences for me. In both cities, I had dropped out of the sky into a new city in a new country with months of living ahead of me, perhaps afraid of what I did not know.

My memories of the two experiences stand out not as linear progressions but as crisscrossing and sometimes overlapping thoughts. One vivid memory from Florence was the day of my art history test on Florentine architecture. My walk to school every day took me on a twenty-minute path through the old streets of Florence's city center. On that day, I began to count the number of buildings I walked by that would be on my test. First was the Ospedale degli Innocenti, a Brunelleschi-designed orphanage adorned with clay artworks by the della Robbia workshop. Next was the Duomo, its imposing visage towering over the city, its marble walls newly cleaned and restored. Across from the Duomo was the Battistero di San Giovanni, the bronze gates of which were the result of a design competition, which Brunelleschi lost. However, his anger at losing spurred him to become an architect and design the Duomo's dome across the street, which now looms over the Battistero. Finally, I caught a glimpse of Orsanmichele, a church adorned with fourteen statues in niches on its ground floor exterior (the real ones had since been moved inside, replaced by replicas).

My experiences with architectural monuments in eastern Turkey were less structured. On some weekends, my fellow American teachers and I would rent a car to explore the mountains around Erzurum. Sometimes we would come across a brown sign indicating that a historical building was nearby. We would follow the signs and drive up a winding path to an old Georgian cathedral in ruins. I would park the car and we would explore around, alone at the site, witnessing an empty circle to the sky where the dome once was, wooden planks holding up walls where

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1 I should caveat that this description of Eagleman's scientific study about memory was recounted from memory. For a more detailed/accurate description, see his study here: <https://www.edge.org/conversation/brain-time>.

marble columns once stood, and climbing up and sitting in empty windowsills to look out on trees growing through cracks in the stone.

Exploring foreign cities has a way of bringing literature to life. In one of my classes in Florence, we studied Boccaccio's book, *The Decameron*, in depth. The book begins with ten young people meeting at the Santa Maria Novella Church to tell the 100 tales that make up the book. During our study, it quickly became one of my favorite books, especially for the way Boccaccio seemed to burst through time with views that appear more acceptable in our day than in the fourteenth century. When I visited Santa Maria Novella, I sat at the top of the steps and tried to imagine the city as it looked during the characters' time – a task that is probably easier in Florence than anywhere else I've been.

Before I arrived in Turkey, I read *Snow* by Orhan Pamuk. The book is set in the eastern Turkish city of Kars (*kar* means snow in Turkish) and follows its main character through a magical realism telling of heartbreak and an attempted coup. My fellow teachers and I took a couple weekend trips to Kars, only a two-hour drive from Erzurum. While there, I drank the main character's preferred drink, *raki*, and wandered through the streets imagining I was he, ducking into alleyways to avoid detection by the military enforcing a curfew.

This is perhaps an obvious point, but certain nuances in culture are much better understood through direct experience. In my Italian class in Florence, we spent an entire entertaining day learning Italian hand gestures. One of the ones I distinctly remember was a way of expressing, with exasperation, "What are you saying?" in an exasperated way. To do so, you clasp your palms together as if in a prayer and shake them up and down. On my walk home from that class, I saw a group of five men around my age walking in the other direction. As they passed me, one made the shaking prayer expression while loudly asking, "*Cosa dici?*"

In one of my speaking classes in Turkey, I taught twenty or so doctors, some much older than me. Each week, we would read an article of my choosing to give them practice reading and comprehending and to learn any new words they didn't know. One week, I chose a story about

Turkey that had reached the American press. Turkish Airlines had recently made flight attendant dress more conservatively, sparking a cultural debate about shifting cultural values in the country. I was curious about the students' views about the article, especially being in a city widely viewed as conservative. One of the students explained to me his view that the "shift" in values was actually an expression of Turkish people's true values that had long been suppressed under secular rule. Another disagreed, arguing that the airline dress code change represented one action in a long list of moves away from the country's foundational principles.

When it was time to return home from both trips, the anticipation flipped. Now a fear crept in that when I returned home, I would find things had changed over the last months. And when I arrived, my mind began to record in overdrive once again, this time overlapping my previous memories of home with new ones seen through new eyes, informed by my experiences in Florence and Erzurum.