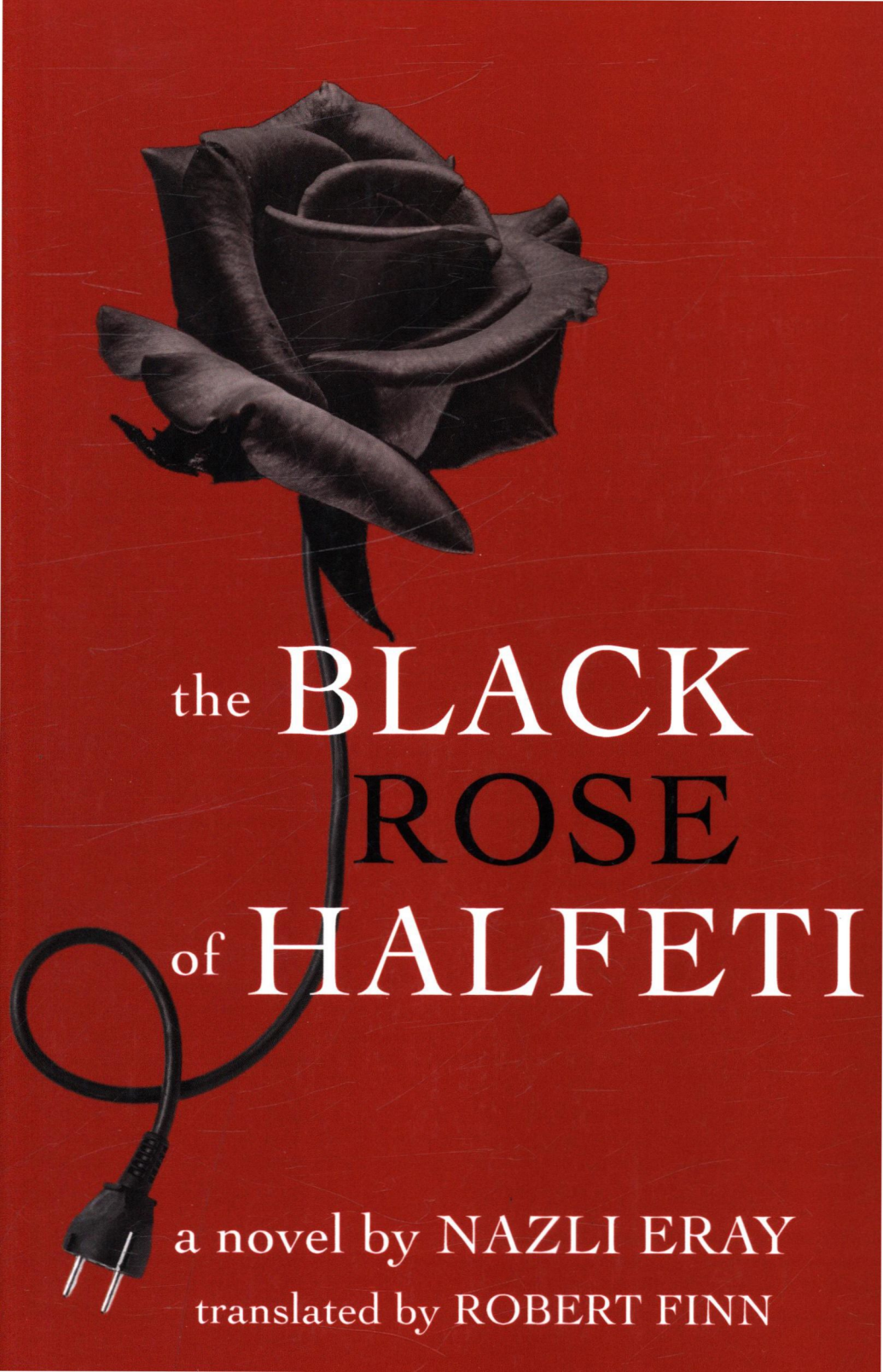
the BLACK ROSE of HALFETI
a novel by NAZLI ERAY
translated by ROBERT FINN

THE BLACK ROSE OF HALFETI opens with a letter delivered at midnight in Ankara, Turkey. In this letter, an elderly doctor who has begun to experience the first signs of dementia professes his love and desire for a relationship with the narrator, a woman in middle age beginning to contemplate her own mortality. From there, the novel moves between Mardin, Izmir, and Ankara; the past and the present; and the real and the imagined as the narrator seeks to know the doctor both in his prime and in his struggle to hold senility at bay. In these dreamlike landscapes, the author effortlessly introduces King Darius, the Spanish director Luis Buñuel, the actress Silvia Pinal, and the archetypal dream woman as the narrator's guides in her efforts to understand the human psyche.

Nazli Eray has established herself as a master of magical realism, the perfect tool to bring to life this poignant meditation on love, aging, and the role of memory. And, as in her earlier novels, she paints vivid images of the urban landscapes of Turkey, capturing both the present and the past.

NAZLI ERAY has a large body of work, which includes short stories, novels, and plays, has earned her a devoted following in Turkey and beyond. This is her third novel to be translated into English.

ROBERT FINN taught Turkish literature and international relations at Princeton University and has published numerous translations, including works by Nazli Eray and Orhan Pamuk. He is also the author of The Early Turkish Novel, 1872–1900.

US $21.95

Modern Middle East Literatures in Translation Series
Center for Middle Eastern Studies
The University of Texas at Austin

ISBN-13: 978-1-4773-1309-1
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CENTER FOR MIDDLE EASTERN STUDIES
The University of Texas at Austin

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Cover image: Courtesy of iStock

Series Editor: Wendy E. Moore

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017932835
ISBN: 978-1-4773-1309-1

Originally published in Turkish as
Halfeti'nin Siyah Gülü by Doğan Kitap in 2012.

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THE BLACK ROSE OF HALFETI

Dear Madam,

I am madly in love with you. Maybe that is why I hold your hand in mine for so long and squeeze it so tightly. To feel your touch. I want to sleep with you. I want to make love to you, to make you mine. But Elfe must not hear of this in any way. If we are to make love, you should purchase a drug from a pharmacy. The name of the drug is Viagra. This will take place in your home, if you should be willing. I wait impatiently for that day, the day that you will be mine. My cell phone is 0535 361 77 13. Don't use my home phone. Use this one. If I don't answer, it means I can't talk then. Please don't get the Viagra from a pharmacy near your house. They won't think well of you. Get it from another pharmacy. If I take this medicine, we'll be very happy. Don't forget to destroy this message, sweetheart.

THE SEYR-I MARDIN RESTAURANT

I am sitting on the top floor of the Seyr-i Mardin, looking out at enchanting Mesopotamia spread before me. This city has intoxicated me; I feel as though I had something to drink, but on the contrary, everything around me is perfectly measured, perfectly calm and quiet.

Up above on the hill, Mardin Castle looks out at the plain of Mesopotamia and beyond, as it has done so for centuries.

There's a slight breeze blowing now; my hair flutters, and I readjust the black-framed sunglasses I am wearing.

Down below, a playful Arab tune jammed into a cassette player caresses my ears for a moment or two, then stops. Cut off. Mardin spreads out around me; I look out at this extraordinary city as though enchanted.

Silence.

The silence around me fills my head, making me dizzy. I want to walk some more in the narrow backstreets; I want to go up the nearby staircase and look down. I want to buy scented soap and never leave this city.

And actually, no one asked me, no one invited me here.

The city, silent and reticent, introverted, turned me with that strange energy it radiates into a fly fallen into a spider's web and about to die.

The Seyr-i Mardin.

A high place. I climbed up so many flights of stairs to get here. A setting that offers the city and the plain of Mesopotamia to me where I sit.

I'm both content here and struggling inside that murky, sticky, thick spider web into which I have tumbled.

I suddenly realize that this spider web must be a storm in my soul, the expression of a precipice inside my brain. Mardin, lying here so peacefully with its stone houses, narrow streets, and cool, dark courtyards, has nothing to do with this.

The only thing it did do was turn me into a fly and make me fall into that spider trap that I sheltered inside me.

Now I'm struggling. I'm struggling inside myself.

I could die. I could die as I struggle.

I realize this. I have to be calmer. More calm.

I take a sip from the water in front of me.

I'm calmer now.

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A thousand thoughts are passing through my mind.

I realize that I'm in love with Mardin. Whenever I struggle like a fly inside that spider web, I realize that I'm in love. A love so intense it's as though it tore off my wings, broke my hairy fly legs, and blinded me. I can't do a thing.

There is an ancient city before me. I know neither its language nor its geography. I just suddenly showed up here.

It takes me into the palm of its hand, makes me a captive. It won. It won't let me go, let me escape from it . . .

Even though it's so hot, I don't want to leave the Seyr-i Mardin.

I scan Mesopotamia with my eyes as it stretches out in front of me, trying to capture something on the distant line of the horizon.

There's nothing there.

Everything is peaceful and quiet.

That Arab music starts to sound again from somewhere down below.

It's so playful, so lively!

I close my eyes and let myself go with the music for a moment. I relax a little.

I fell in love with a city of stone. There's no one here I know, no place to go, nothing that belongs to me.

If the sun gets hotter, I'll seek shelter in some courtyard and drink some more water.

I'm still listening to the music. The ancient stone city surrounds me. It seems to have taken me by the waist and is drawing me in.

"Let me learn a few streets, and find myself a hotel. A little restaurant, a store that sells soap . . . I have to find these," I was thinking. "A mirror shop, and Shahmerans on mirrors . . . I have to find them. I should get myself a pendant. A silver ring!"

THE MIDNIGHT LETTER

I will not forget for the rest of my life that letter I received at midnight. It was nearly one A.M. in Ankara when I received that cry of longing and passion, that strange, demanding letter, that manifesto of desire. I held the little piece of paper in my trembling fingers, reading in astonishment the sentences written in an agitated and expansive script.

A few minutes before the letter arrived, the following conversation had taken place in the Ankara night:

Elfe spoke excitedly.

"I was in the room inside. I heard banging noises at the door. I took the gun out of the drawer and put a bullet in it. 'Who's there?' I shouted. The racket at the door continued. Just then you called . . ."

"It was like I just felt an urge. That's why I called. How are you?" I asked. "How are you?"

"There's all this noise at the door. It could be a thief. Don't hang up the phone."

"Let me call the police."

"I have a gun."

"Please don't take the gun out. I'm calling the police."

I could hear Elfe speaking on the other end of the phone.

She must have opened the door.

"A, a . . . Doctor! Is that you? I almost shot you . . ."

"What's going on, Elfe?" I shouted from the other end of the phone.

"The doctor came down from the apartment upstairs. He was the one banging on the door. It was hard to see him in the darkness. He came downstairs in his pajamas, the doctor," said Elfe.

I heard the old doctor's voice.

"Where? Where is she?" he asked. "I'm looking for her."

"She's not here. She's in her own house," Elfe said. "But she's on the phone right now."

"I'm worried, very worried about her," the old doctor said. "I'm very worried about her," he repeated.

"Talk to her, she's on the phone."

Elfe gave the phone to the doctor.

"Hello, Doctor Bey?" I said.

"Hello!" said the doctor. "I'm very worried, very worried about you."

"Don't worry, I'm in my house."

"You weren't here."

"I'm at home now."

"A letter," the doctor whispered into the phone. "I wrote you a letter. I came to give it to you."

"I'll get it tomorrow morning."

"I have to leave it tonight," said the doctor. "But Elfe shouldn't see it."

I was a little taken aback. The old doctor was Elfe's upstairs neighbor.

"I left the letter in the box," the doctor said. "The white box next to the door."

I could hear the doctor pacing in the corridor.

"I left the letter in the white box," he said. "Once you've read it, destroy it."

He hung up the phone.

I was thinking, in the semidarkness of my room, What could it be?

I called Elfe again.

She picked up the phone.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Strange," said Elfe. "The old doctor came downstairs; he was the one making the racket at the door. I took out the gun and opened the door. He saw the gun right away. After all, he's a former soldier. He raised his hands in the air. He was asking for you. He was worried. That's what he said. When he talked to you on the phone he seemed to relax a little. He came inside and walked about a little in the corridor. He had his pajamas

on . . . I've never seen him like that. I brought him upstairs, to his apartment. His wife is old, and she must have been asleep. I didn't see the caretaker. He left the door open when he came down."

"Elfe, would you look in the white leather box in front of the mirror?"

"I'll take a look; what's there?" said Elfe.

She opened the box.

"There's a piece of paper, a folded-up message here," she said.

"Would you read it to me?"

"Sure."

I listened to Elfe's voice as it came from the other end of the phone.

Dear Madam,

I am madly in love with you. Maybe that is why I hold your hand in mine for so long and squeeze it so tightly. To feel your touch. I want to sleep with you. I want to make love to you, to make you mine. But Elfe must not hear of this in any way. If we are to make love, you should purchase a drug from a pharmacy. The name of the drug is Viagra. This will take place in your home, if you should be willing. I wait impatiently for that day, the day that you will be mine. My cell phone is 0535 361 77 13. Don't use my home phone. Use this one. If I don't answer, it means I can't talk then. Please don't get the Viagra from a pharmacy near your house. They won't think well of you. Get it from another pharmacy. If I take this medicine, we'll be very happy. Don't forget to destroy this message, sweetheart.

The letter the old doctor had left in the box had ripped the Ankara night apart, as though into pieces; it had fallen like a bomb into that sensible, quiet, sleepy darkness of the city night.

I was confused.

The directness of the letter, the commanding tone, everything in it astonished me.

Elfe shouted: "What is this?" from the other end of the phone. "What the hell is this? How can this guy dare to do something like this? I'll tell the building manager. I almost shot him. A lunatic!"

"Quiet," I said. "Please don't say anything to anyone. Nobody should hear about it. Hide the letter. I'll look at it when I come tomorrow. He's a very old man. He must be going through something . . ."

I hung up the phone.

I had no idea what to think, what I should do.

The darkness of that silent, tranquil, subdued Ankara night suddenly seemed to come alive.

For a minute it seemed like there were eyes looking at me through my bedroom curtains. I got up and went into the next room. In the living room, the plants with their green leaves seemed like they were awake. One leaf quivered slightly in the darkness. It had grown a little. It was getting ready for the morning.

I was thinking about the old doctor. His light blue eyes and the sharp lines of his face came before my eyes. I had seen very little of him. I was in a state of confusion.

Two months ago, when I was sitting in the living room, he had come down to Elfe's apartment from the apartment upstairs with his wife.

THE OLD DOCTOR

"Allah, Allah," Elfe whispered into my ear. "I've been living in this apartment for years. This is the first time that the doctor and his wife have come here, come downstairs. Last year the doctor made such a fuss just because I planted linden tree saplings in the garden. And you know, I pulled them out and replanted them next to the wall. He's a grouch. A tough guy.

An old solider. Graduated from two university faculties. He's a pharmacist too. He had an important job for years in a hospital. He's from Izmir."

I saw the old doctor's wife close up for the first time.

We couldn't figure out exactly how old they were, but they must have been at least eighty. We offered them coffee. We had a nice chat.

The clarity of the doctor's mind astounded us. He was telling us about things that had happened years ago, when he first came from Izmir to Ankara . . . the old Gülhane hospital, some of the streets in Ankara that were still dirt roads then, told us about the Ankara they had come to as a young couple, and about Izmir. He was a tall, thin man, the old doctor. His wife's caretaker had slipped into a corner and was listening to what the doctor said.

His wife was silent. It was clear that she had once been a very beautiful woman.

The visit of these very old people had both surprised and pleased us.

Elfe said: "These are grand people; who knows how many years they've carried on, who knows what they've seen and been though in their lives? For people like them to just show up here out of the blue like that is both weird and somehow good fortune, a little bit of luck, if you ask me. Like swallows coming in from the balcony of an old mansion in spring and fluttering from here to there under the high ceiling . . ."

"Right," I said. "Today's an unusual day. What a different world these old people told us about. So, they're from Izmir?"

"From Izmir. Both the doctor and his wife are from Izmir," said Elfe.

I was amazed by the old doctor's memory. He was the master of an older world, I felt it.

He spoke about old Izmir, of Alsancak, of Kordonboyu, and Kemeraltı.

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