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YOUR FATHER DID HE EVER DIE

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Translators' Preface

Abbas Karakaya

Cemal Süreya (1931-1990) was born in Erzincan, an eastern province of Turkey, but lived most of his life in Ankara and Istanbul. His career as an inspector in the Ministry of Economics also allowed him to travel throughout the country a great deal. He was one of the major poets and critics of the "Second New" (*İkinci Yeni*) movement.

Süreya is widely acknowledged as a leading poet and preeminent theoretician of the Second New poetry movement, which dominated Turkish poetry circles from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s. In addition to his poetry, he was known for his essays, such as "*Şairin Hayatı Şiire Dahil*" (The Poet's Life Is Included in His Poetry), in which he points out the significant place of autobiography in artistic practice and especially in poetry.

Süreya knew that autobiographical elements enter into a poem in a myriad of puzzling and not easily predicable ways, as the present poem suggests. First of all, Süreya published this poem in a journal in 1953, while his father was still alive, four years before he died in a car crash. Nevertheless, his father merits much of the credit for inspiring the poem: One day as a teenager, Süreya, then a middle school student in Bilecik, went to a public bath (*hamam*) with his father. There, young Süreya saw his father's penis in its flaccid state, which came to him as a surprise and a kind of disappointment. Presumably, this rather comical, strange, and (for him) saddening experience left its mark on him, which resurfaced in his poetry years later as his father's poetic death. (I heard the "real" story behind this poem from Vecihi Timuroğlu, a literary critic and close friend of Cemal Süreya's, during a visit with him in Ankara in 2006.)

"SIZİN HIÇ BABANIZ ÖLDÜ MÜ?"

Sizin hiç babanız öldü mü
 Benim bir kere öldü kör oldum
 Yıkadılar aldılar götürdüler
 Babamdan ummazdım bunu kör oldum
 Siz hamama gittiniz mi
 Ben gittim lambanın biri söndü
 Gözümün biri söndü kör oldum
 Tepede bir gökyüzü vardı yuvarlak
 Şöylelemesine maviydi kör oldum
 Taşlara gelince hamam taşlarına
 Taşlar pırıl pırıldı ayna gibiydi
 Taşlarda yüzümün yarısını gördüm
 Bir şey gibiydi bir şey gibi kötü
 Yüzümden ummazdım bunu kör oldum
 Siz hiç sabunluyken ağladınız mı.

"YOUR FATHER DID HE EVER DIE?" by Cemal Süreya

Translated by Abbas Karakaya and Donny Smith

Your father did he ever die
 Mine died once I went blind
 They washed they took and they carried him away
 This I did not expect from my father I went blind
 Did you go to a Turkish bath
 I went one of the lamps went out
 One of my eyes went out I went blind
 In the dome there was a sky it was round
 It was sort of blue I went blind
 As for the stones the stones of the bath
 The stones were gleaming they were like a mirror
 I saw half my face in the stones
 It was like something like something it was bad
 This I did not expect from my face I went blind
 You did you ever cry when you were soaped up.