

Cemile Sahin

All Dogs Die

*We see a tower block in the west of Turkey. The block has 23 floors.
We're in the stairwell. We know it is September.
We don't know what day it is today, though.*

Sample translation by Katy Derbyshire, pp. 1 – 32

EPISODE ONE:

NECLA

*Necla lives on the ground floor. Necla has pitch-black hair.
Necla has a dog. Necla is not from around here.*

NECLA

Don't get me wrong. I've always told people everything. I report on what happens every day. I've always talked about the things I know. Perhaps not exactly about what I've seen, but I've still always told the truth. I often stand in my kitchen, behind the table, behind the curtain. The things I see happen solely outside my door, on the street; I watch them and remember them exactly. But I can neither fast forward nor rewind, nor press pause. I live on the ground floor, alone. My name is Necla and over my socks, they're thin and yellow, I wear a second pair of socks, they're thick and made of wool. I wear them so I can move about my flat like a spy. I live alone and I hold my breath as I walk. Who might hear me? The neighbours might hear me. Which of them has already heard me? All of them. The same thing happens whenever they hear me: They think of me, which reminds them of everything I've done before, and then they hate me. They hate me because I cause them harm. What have I done? I do something I've been doing for a few years now. I betray my own people.

What does betrayal mean? Betrayal is the opposite of deception. It's insurance for life. I want to go on living, not die. I really do.

I've been living in this house for 22 years. When I first came here I had a dog. My dog's name was Bero. I'd say: *Bero, come and eat*. Then I'd put a bowl of meat on the wooden floor and Bero would eat until the bowl was empty. Once Bero had finished eating he'd go on staring at the bowl, and I'd say: *Bero, you've already eaten*. Bero would howl once and I'd laugh and pick up the bowl and put it in the sink. *Bero, that's all we've got*, I'd say: an empty bowl with no meat. You know, I often think of Bero and that bowl. An empty bowl in the sink is a very good description of my life. I came here on foot from Gurgum.

It doesn't matter how it happened. What does that matter now? I had that dog by my side. Now we live on the ground floor. I don't know where my children are. But I do know where my dog was. My dog was lying on a blanket I knitted by the stove before I left my house in Gurgum. Bero was a sheepdog. His ears and muzzle were dark brown. The rest of his body was beige. When Bero stood next to me he came up to my hip. He wore a collar I'd knitted; it was red.

One day, a watchman came to my house. When he knocked on the door I thought it was the woman next door. I had my glass of tea in my left hand and I opened the door with my right hand and said a cheerful: *Fatma, you're early*. I opened the door but it wasn't Fatma, it was a man, and that man was a watchman. He wore a uniform, his hat didn't match and neither did the belt, and he smiled at me and then he slapped the tea glass out of my hand. He watched the glass fall on the floor and then he bent down, grabbed the glass from the floor and threw the glass at me.

Where is he? he yelled. I asked: *Who?*

He took off my dress and my shoes, my socks too, until I was barefoot; I remember that well. He pulled a rod out of his belt and at first I thought it was a fork. Why did I think that? I'm a stupid person. He hit me across the face. And then the soles of my feet. He did it until my feet started to burn. That was when I first screamed. My dog came running from the other room and the watchman hit my dog, too. I lay on the floor and wondered whether he was a policeman or a soldier. My dog howled as the metal rod hit him. Bero tried to bite the watchman; he held my dog tightly by the collar and tears ran down my cheeks. It was in vain. The watchman was

stronger, even though my dog weighed more than 50 kilos. I weighed 70 kilos, more than my dog, less than the watchman, but we were already caught in his trap. I didn't have the strength to stand up.

The watchman grabbed me by the hair and dragged me out of my home. At first I didn't say anything, but then I did and I tried to fight him off, hit him with my arms, but it was impossible. He dragged me down the stairs, through the gate, into the yard. It was a small yard with three cars parked in it. The household rubbish was piled up on the ground; there was no rubbish collection. Next to the rubbish heap was Bero's kennel. My husband had built it years before but Bero never used it. We always had him inside. But I liked his kennel. It was red like Bero's collar. The watchman dragged me further. My belly hurt, and my legs, the ground was badly poured concrete and it ground into my skin with every tug towards the kennel. Once we got there the watchman turned my head, first towards the house and then back to the kennel. And only then did he slam my head against the ground. I was dazed from the blow.

He said: *You wait here.*

I wanted to laugh but I couldn't. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched him walk over to one of the cars and open the door, then come back with a plastic bag. In the plastic bag was a collar; he put the collar around my neck. He wrapped the end of the chain twice around a piece of wood and hammered it into the earth next to the kennel. He squeezed me into the kennel. I was a grown woman and the kennel wasn't small, but it wasn't big either. I had to draw up my legs to fit inside.

He said: *What do we do to you dogs?*

I looked at Bero and started crying.

No, no, he said. *Not him* – and he pointed at Bero – *you*.

He was still holding Bero by the collar, which was getting thinner and thinner; I thought it would rip in two like a rope under the weight. But I also thought that was a good thing. Then at least Bero could run away and he'd be saved. Every person who can be saved is one more person. Even if my Bero was only a dog.

Then he shot at me. It was only after the tenth bullet that I realized he was shooting without hitting. I screamed: *BERO* – I couldn't think what my children's names were. My dog's neck was still entangled in the watchman's hand. And I knew: I won't be broken for nothing. There was rubbish in the kennel too. It smelled like it did outside. But I didn't smell it until the bullets flew past me. Only in the hail of bullets did I notice the stench.

I had two children, two. Sometimes I forget that. Don't laugh at me, please. I forget it because they're not here and I forget how long ago it was. A life can be very long. I was inside the kennel. First came the winter. Then the spring. I can only tell you one thing from that life inside the kennel: Whenever the watchman came I had to crawl out of the kennel and wait on my knees in front of him until he said: *Get up*. To begin with I fought back, but at some point I stopped. Not because I'd lost my will, but because of a simple thing: If I did what he said, he beat me less. That helped me survive. No one wants to die like that.

I didn't know where the others were. I was all alone with a collar, in a kennel, chained to the ground. Why? Then I had to get up and salute him, my right hand to my temple, and he'd yell: *HOLD YOUR HAND STRAIGHT*, until he laughed and forced me back to my knees. It went like that for hours; I could only guess how long. To stop me from losing my mind I'd count along in my head. One. Two. Three. Even when he was beating me. I tried to cling to the numbers. Four. Five. Six. That's how a story passed. Seven. Eight. Nine. I got cramp in my legs and arms. Ten. Eleven. Twelve. Anyone who's been through it won't be keen to talk about it. I hardly tell anyone about it. But then something strange happened: I thought of how he wanted to kill me, but I knew one day he'd die too.

He said: *Eat, you whore*.

He threw a plastic bag down at me. Although I'm not a whore, I looked at the plastic bag as if it meant something to me. Then the watchman took a rat out of the plastic bag, it was dead, and a piece of meat, grilled meat. I couldn't tell what kind of meat it was. It was pale, perhaps it was chicken. He threw the pale meat to my dog. The watchman and I, we both watched Bero eating. He was holding Bero by

the neck. The knitted collar still hadn't ripped. I was very glad of that. It was the only peaceful thing in that moment. Then he grabbed the rat by the tail and threw it at my feet. *Eat it*, he said. I didn't take my eyes off him, but then he came a step closer and only then did I see the rat on the ground. That was in the winter.

The rat lay in the snow, me kneeling before him. The watchman let go of Bero's neck but grabbed mine instead. I wanted to scream but I couldn't because then I'd have opened my mouth. He pressed my neck back and opened my mouth with the other hand. I only screamed when the rat came closer. Then the rat was in my mouth and I wanted to vomit. It was a rat, it was dead, I was desperate, and my mouth wouldn't close, I was full of disgust, including with myself, but that disgust did nothing to change the situation. I couldn't breathe, I gasped for air, thought of the old days and tried not to swallow and went on struggling for breath, but I thought I would suffocate. The same thing happened to my husband. He was in prison in the eighties. Only once, he only told me about it once. It's too late now to think of his story. The watchman placed one hand on the top of my head and the other on my chin. Then he pressed both hands together until I bit down on the rat and had to swallow. Whenever one person is suffering, another person is watching, I thought. Nothing more occurred to me. I fell to the ground, perhaps unconscious, but he wanted me to go on saluting. My knees were blue with cold, and then I vomited and fell asleep.

Then one thing happened after another. It went very quickly. I heard machine guns and I saw the watchman, who didn't know what was up either. He stepped towards me, kicked me in the belly, the abdomen, tied my dog's collar to my collar and ran away. Bero was as still as I was. The sound grew louder and I started to dig at the ground to release my chain from the piece of wood. Why hadn't I thought of that before? Why didn't I start digging when I was freezing in the kennel at night? I dug and cried. I thought of the rat and cried. I saw a woman digging with bruised fingers like a dog, chained to another dog, not stopping her digging. I saw a woman and felt the hair on her head, fallen out. I went on digging until I started to smell smoke. I dug faster, still chained. *I haven't seen anything yet, I have to get away*, I said to Bero.

I grabbed a big plastic bag and threw it over my body for a coat. *Bero*, I whispered, *Bero, come*. Then we just walked off. We walked slowly at first, then a bit faster. We were both wasted down to the bones. Like the watchman used to do, I put my hand around my dog's neck and stroked his red collar off his canine body. On our way here, I divided his collar into four small pieces. I dropped the pieces along the way so that my children could find us, if they were to make it out and come looking for us.

On the day the watchman came, they weren't at school. I'd known for a while that someone would come to pick us up. One evening, I packed their things. My older son was eleven at the time. I can't say his name because I forgot it out there on the street. And that part of the story is worse than the rat I was forced to eat. I packed his bag: one pair of underpants, one pair of socks, two pairs of trousers. I rolled the things up like a baguette so there was still enough space in the backpack. Then I rolled up two hand-knitted sweaters, a picture of our family and a comb, and put them right on top of the other clothes. The zip wandered slowly along the backpack. I did the same for my second child; he was eight years old.

It was still dark outside but I woke my children and got them out of bed. I dressed them in socks, trousers, vests, shirts and sweaters. Then their jackets. I packed as much bread and cheese for them as they could carry. Then I gave them all the money I had left, walked them to the door and hugged them for a very, very long time. To make sure they didn't cry, I laughed. I tried to pretend it wasn't bad, but of course it was bad. Now you're asking yourself how I could do it, I know you're wondering. But there's no simple solution. I don't know either whether there's even an explanation for it.

Our house was in Gurgum and I was outside the door with my two children in the middle of the night, the crickets chirping, and I sent them to my brother in Sêwaz. Can I demand accountability? No, I can't. My children started running because I'd told them to. That's the only way to survive violence, to be stronger than it: by protecting your children. The only way.

I knew the watchman was coming. When he came, I only pretended to be surprised. But I knew they were looking for my husband. My husband's name is Ferhat. Ferhat is a kind person. They came looking for my husband and they chained me to the ground. We are taken from our homes and then we disappear. *It's not good to mourn the past*, the watchman said to me. I tried not to hear it; I tried to commit his face to memory instead. Not to forget one wrinkle or one hair. I thought: I'll be back one day. I was certain: One day I'll be back and I'll slit his throat, not even at night, in broad daylight so that everyone can see. That's how complicated it is.

I didn't go back though; instead I've been sitting here on the ground floor and waiting eleven years for my children to arrive. I live on the ground floor so my children don't have to climb any stairs. I live on the ground floor so I just have to open the door and run out when I see my children. I didn't even run when I got out of the kennel. But for my children, I would run. For my husband, too. I live on the ground floor so I can sit by the window on my chair every day to look out at the street. If my children were dead I'd know it. For me, the eleven years I've been waiting for my children mean something good as well: I know they're safe. Every day that passes assures me they're alive. But I'm waiting, still. If they were dead my brother would have called me; I haven't heard from him for eleven years either. And not hearing anything is a good sign. It means they found a place to hide. I imagine simple things: They're safe and they don't have to sleep on the floor, they have a proper bed. I wish my sons a long and healthy life.

I don't talk to anyone here. I don't like going out. I don't have anyone I can tell what happened. I haven't even told Ayten about the rat. Ferhat said they want to break you in prison. They want you to kill yourself so they don't have to do it. I'd like to talk to my husband Ferhat, but I don't want to tell him what happened.

I'd like to watch a film with him. I'd like to wait for the children with my husband Ferhat.

I couldn't stay in Gurgum, of course. There were fires everywhere. I was wearing a dirty plastic bag and my wasted-away Bero was the only thing I could rescue. The

watchman hacked his leg off but the wound healed, thank the Lord. Bero got used to having three legs, like I got used to the kennel. You can get used to anything. Animals adapt to misfortune too.

I met no one on the way here. I was riddled with lice. I thought: You deserve it. My husband's cousin Ayten, she lived here already and she took me in. I knocked at her window at night, trying to say her name. But it had been so long since I'd spoken that I only managed a squeak; I hardly understood myself. *Ayten, Ayten*, scratching at the glass with my fingers. At first she thought I was a burglar, she got a shock when she saw me outside the window and I still couldn't get her name out. Not until she saw Bero did she know it was me. She screamed: *HIS LEG*. I held Bero by the neck like the watchman.

She put me in the bath. I think I sat in that bath for two days, the dirt stuck fast to me. My skin was green and blue, the veins on my legs burst. The lice leaped off my head into the water and onto my back and bit me. Ayten had to shave off my long black hair I'd always loved so much. It wasn't until that happened that I cried, very loudly, and finally called my children's names.

Ayten made up a bed for me. It was the first time in eight months that I saw a normal bed. Bero lay down at my feet. That was the worst night of my life. I was no longer punished by being outside, I was safe for the moment in a warm house, under a warm cover, with a relative.

One day, a man from Gimgim came to Ayten. By then I wasn't living in her flat any more, I'd moved in here on the ground floor. You know, it's very practical that we're all in one spot. There are at least six flats on every floor. And if we're all in one spot they can control what we do, of course. I don't want to leave the country anyway; I'm waiting for my children.

When my children come back we'll wait for my husband. And when my husband is back we'll leave this place. I know lots of people have gone away. I don't know how they managed it. Some went separately and some as a group. Sometimes they had

to split up again on the way. Bero and me, we can't do that. Bero and me, we're waiting.

The man from Gimjim's name was Murat, and he came at night. He was a tall gaunt man with a black moustache. His face was bruised. Ayten was scared someone might see us. She pulled Murat into her flat and turned all the lights off. Then we had to sit on the floor. *Have you seen them?* I asked as quietly as I could, but Ayten hit me on the shoulder, grabbed me by the neck and said: *Necla, don't scream.*

As she grabbed me by the neck I wanted to slit the watchman's throat again. Murat said my husband Ferhat was encircled on Cûdî Mountain in Şirnex. The Cûdî Mountain is beautiful and has four peaks. Each of those peaks is over 2000 metres high. My husband wasn't with my children but my brother was, I was told. My husband was on a mountain, but encircled by soldiers. He'd been hit in the arm by a bullet. Murat told me my husband Ferhat had fallen down for a moment. The other men thought he'd fainted but then they noticed his right leg had given way because it had also been hit by a bullet. He dragged himself to a cave with three other men and they hid there. That was a few months before. *Is he dead?* I asked. Murat said no, he had gone to Sêwaz. My husband Ferhat made his way to Sêwaz to get to my brother, to be with our children. That night, I lay in bed and thought about what the air is like at 2000 metres. It left me speechless for a while.

I wondered whether Ferhat could breathe better or worse at that altitude, because of the bullet wounds. I got up to ask Murat. I crept into his room in the dark, but his room was empty. Then I went over to Ayten's room and shook her awake. First she was shocked and then she calmed down again.

Where is he? Gone.

Can violence solve the problem of oppression? Probably not. I let go of her neck. I sat down on the edge of her bed and sighed. *Where has he gone?* I asked. Ayten sat up and shrugged, nothing more. Then she said: *I don't know.* And when she said that I realized that Murat, the man from Gimjim with the bruised face, might have come to Ayten's home out of pity or kindness but hadn't had the heart to tell me

the truth. When Ayten started crying I understood too, at last. And Ayten started crying because she'd just realized in that moment, like I had. My husband Ferhat didn't go to Sêwaz to our children. My husband Ferhat was hit by two bullets, one in the arm and one in the leg. My husband Ferhat died on the peak in Şirnex.

Even though I don't want to, I remember that time. I collapsed onto the floor, squeezed under Ayten's bed, trapped like in the kennel. Then at last I whispered: *My husband*. Ayten tried to pull me out but I dug my fingers into the bedframe. Ayten tugs at my dress and I scream: *Ferhat*, she tugs harder and harder and Ayten rips my dress in two because she pulls me and I pull at the bed and neither of us lets go. When my dress rips I listen closely. It's a sound I was afraid of hearing. I thought it would happen to Bero's collar in the watchman's hands. I hear the sound and then I scream my children's names. I want to bury my husband Ferhat but I don't know where his body lies.

After a while, Bero comes into Ayten's room, lies down on the floor next to Ayten and looks at me. One thing goes over into another. I say: *I'll find him*, I say that to Ayten.

But you know, and I'm telling you this, I don't know where to start. Ayten lit a candle. I started knitting. I want to knit a blanket for my husband, for him to be buried in. After that I'll knit a collar for my dog Bero. And last of all I'll knit myself a blanket in case I die soon; I'd like to be buried next to my husband. Wrapped in a blanket like him. Then I told Ayten about the rat. She vomited and I went on knitting. Then she noticed how grey her hair has got, and I went on knitting, no longer knowing how long my hair has grown. But I didn't put down my knitting needles to run a hand over my head. I wasn't sure how long I've been here. So I went on knitting because that was my answer for this life.

The next day, I decided to go to my brother in Sêwaz. I wanted to fetch my children. And go somewhere else. I said: *Ayten, we have to get out of here*. I went down to my flat. *We all have to get out of here, we have to go back home*, I said to myself as well. But actually, I had no idea what home I meant any more. My house

in Gurgum without my husband but with my children? Or the time before that? If I had to decide, I'd decide on my children. They can't help what's happened.

What time is it? What day is it? My neighbours think I spy on them, because I don't talk to anyone but Ayten. Once, a soldier came here and spread rumours I was working for the government. He was maybe as old as my older son is now. Was it my son, perhaps? No, I would have recognized him. I take back the story I began with. I creep around the flat in two pairs of socks. But not because I spy on my neighbours; because I'm biding the time that must pass before I can enfold my children in my arms again. I creep around the flat in two pairs of socks and I understand: Behind a door comes a room, and behind a room comes a wall.

I fetched my travel bag from under the bed. Then I packed my bag. I packed the same things I had packed for my children: a pair of trousers, socks and pants, two knitted sweaters. It didn't take long at all. Then I looked at my things for a very, very long time, until I unpacked them again and put the bag back under my bed. That's when I realized I don't need anything; I just have to start walking.

Then there was a ring at the door and I jumped. Who rang the doorbell? Ayten never rings. Ayten always comes in with my spare key. That's when I knew something had happened. I automatically looked over at the window, but my bedroom faces onto the back yard. No one stands there and rings the bell. Then I walked very slowly to the front door. I didn't know whether to open the door. I thought at first I'd just hide under the bed. But anyone would find me there; it's a stupid hiding place. I held my breath as I looked through the spyhole into the corridor. I saw Ayten, which surprised me. Only when I looked very closely did I make out the outline of another person to her left. Then the doorbell rang again. Ach, I said, ach, not making a sound. I felt Bero nudging my leg with his muzzle. Then I opened the door.

Villages where shots are fired must be burned down,

says the man next to Ayten. Is he talking about my house in Gurgum? Or my husband? Did he burn my husband? He must have shot my husband, I think. My

children haven't been burned. They're alive. Ayten has glassy eyes and a gun in her hand. Her hair has wrapped itself around her chain.

I want to say: Ayten, what are you doing? But Ayten doesn't look at me. Instead, the man says: *Shoot, Ayten.*

But Ayten looks over my shoulder at the floor and I don't understand what's going on. I think of the watchman's hand on my dog's neck. My Bero is right next to me, the man takes a step towards me, then he steps behind Ayten and grabs her by the shoulders, presses hard.

Shoot, Ayten, he repeats.

My husband Ferhat's blanket comes to mind; I start to feel sad that I might not be able to finish it. *Shoot, Ayten,* the man starts yelling. Nothing happens at first, then he grabs her by the hair and pulls her head back. Ayten's hair is her rope. I want to run towards her but when I see her necklace rip in the scuffle I follow the necklace, which falls to the ground. The man yells and I hold my ears closed. His mouth moves but I hear almost nothing, thank the Lord. No one is burning, thank the Lord. Ayten holds the gun in my direction and I'm not angry with her. Ayten has tears running down her cheeks. Then she pulls the trigger and I quickly close my eyes. That's one answer to this life. I drop to the floor and think that I'm saying something this time, but it's too late already, and only then do I realize it's not my scream.

Ayten has hit my dog, who was standing behind me, behind my shoulder. My dog howls, my dog Bero with no collar, my dog with three legs, he howls and I've never heard anything like it. *Ayten, what have you done?* and it hits me especially hard. The man grabs Ayten by the back of her head and slams her face against the wall. My little Bero goes on howling and Ayten stands between me and the man, blood running down her face, leaning against the wall and not saying a word. At some point there came one last wheeze from my dog. There's nothing in the world more bitter than that: listening to someone die, even if it's just a dog. Then I looked at my

Bero one last time, and then there was silence. Ayten collapses to the floor and hides her face in her dress.

Now the man grabs my arm to drag me out of the flat. I fight him off and drop down to the floor, deliberately.

Ayten, I whisper, Ayten please, you have to bury Bero. Take the blanket I wanted to give to Ferhat. The man is taller than me, he grabs me by the arms, who betrayed us, pulls them backwards, where are my children. Ayten, I yell; I don't know if she hears me or not. What's the matter with her? I ask the man and as I turn around to him he head-butts me. Ayten, wait for them, and I mean my children. Ayten, please bury Bero, Ayten, let him find an end in dignity. With the blanket, Ayten. Ayten, I forgive you. I'm not angry with her. I've told her that. He drags me out of the flat. I have nothing more to say.