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I Wish I Had Written That!

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Panel: I wish I had written that. The author discusses their favorite passages written by other writers and explain why a particular passage (and book) resonated with them.

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I Wish I Had Written That!

By Sridala Swami (India)

It took me three tries to get into Orhan Pamuk's *Snow*. It came highly recommended and what I had was a borrowed book with tiny print that was hard to read. My intentions were good, but I could not seem to get off that bus to Kars. The narrator reports the protagonist as having his eyes 'glued...to the window next to him', 'hoping to see something new.'

I saw nothing. I gave up. But on the third try, I fought my way past the first few pages. This time I began to wonder why I found it such a slog in the first place.

The protagonist, Ka, is a poet. He has come to Kars to investigate the suicide of some girls and while there, meets Serdar Bey, the owner of a newspaper. Serdar Bey's newspaper has a lead article about an event that hasn't yet taken place: "'Ka, the celebrated poet, who is now visiting our city, recited his latest poem, entitled 'Snow.'" the article says. Ka objects and says that since he hasn't actually written a poem called 'Snow', it will look like Serday Bey's newspaper has made a mistake; to which Serdar Bey replies,

There are those who despise us for writing the news before it happens. They fear us not because we are journalists, but because we can predict the future; you should see how amazed they are when things turn out exactly as we've written them. And quite a few things happen only because we've written them up first. This is what modern journalism is about. I know you won't want to stand in the way of our being modern – you don't want to break our hearts – so that is why I am sure you will write a poem called 'Snow' and then come to the theatre to read it.

It may seem as if Serday Bey is Pamuk's Randolph Hearst, saying to the writer in modern Turkey, 'You provide the pictures, and I'll provide the war', but Pamuk is much more subtle than that. What Serday Bey does in making Ka write his 'already-written' poem is what Pamuk continues to do through the rest of the book: he creates the future by describing it.

At the end of Chapter 9, Ka fulfils Bey's prophecy: he writes a poem that he titles 'Snow', though the narrator tells us that Ka, being interrupted in the writing (as Coleridge once was), doesn't find the last two lines of the poem in all his time left in Kars.

When I read this description of the poem (which you have as a handout), I spent days in an extravagance of envy and energy. I wanted to have written that idea. I wanted to have thought of describing a poem before it had been written and by doing so, call it into existence.

Envy is not a comfortable feeling, especially not for writers. While we're never entirely free of the feeling, we can turn it – as we do all things that happen to us – to good account. It occurred to me that while I had not thought of or even invented (as perhaps Pamuk himself had not) the idea of describing a poem that had never been written, there was no reason I could not make it happen. In other words, I was seized with Serdar Bey's creative, and entirely modern, god-like impulse to make poetry happen.

I called it an Absent Poem. I asked a poet friend to collaborate with me on this project, and wrote her a description of a poem she hadn't yet written. I told her the poem was called, simply, 'One'. She wrote the poem. It was a long one; that was unexpected. My friend returned the favour. She described a poem I hadn't yet written. 'Death sits in this poem,' she said of my Absent Poem. I wrote 'Post Mortem'.

All the excitement and – let me say it – exaltation of finding an idea so brilliant that I had to have a share in it, catch the virus of it and infect everyone within reach – all that excitement did not need to stay a wistful longing, a vague wish.

I am aware that when I cite Orhan Pamuk's narrator's description of Ka's poem, 'Snow', it is a vastly different thing than the astonishing piece of writing that Pamuk's book *Snow* is. Pamuk's ability to nest ideas one inside the other, make intricate connections between seemingly unrelated things, make clear like (stained) glass the messy complications of politics, love, the sense of place and the memory of it, are as much a cause for joy in the reader as they are an impossibility to imitate.

But ideas are something else altogether. I could have been Ka, standing at that window watching the snow fall; I could have written that poem, even the last two lost lines of it. And so I did:

I borrowed the idea, without envy and with gratitude, and the Absent Poems are now a collaborative project with many poets that I call *Chirality*.