

Story 2013 (1997 Dictated)

Narrator: İnci Piringcioğlu,
circa 70

Location: Istanbul, Istanbul
Province

Date: December 23, 1997

A Tekerleme¹

Once there was and once there wasn't,
In an era long since past,
When the sieve was in the straw,²
When the camel was a town crier
When I was rocking my father's cradle,
My father fell out of that cradle
His head struck hard against the threshold.
"Hurry, my son, and get for my head
Some çiriş³ costing five paras."⁴

¹A formulaic opening device for Turkish folktales, a tekerleme is a nonsense jingle filled with paradoxes, incongruities, and non sequiturs. In Turkish it is rimed. It has two functions. It alerts an audience that a folktale is about to be told. It also amuses a potential audience and puts it in a receptive frame of mind.

²The sieve is never in the straw. While threshing grain, workers pass the detached grain and finely ground straw through a large-mesh sieve. Longer pieces of straw which may still have grain attached to them do not pass through and will need further threshing. So, the straw is in the sieve, not the sieve in the straw.

³Çiriş is the powdered root of the asphodel plant.

⁴The para was formerly the smallest monetary unit.

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Finding no çiriş, I then returned.
 I put wet horse dung on my head;
 I put dry horse dung on my head.
 I planted watermelon seeds;
 I planted seeds of cantaloupe.
 I sold my crops when they were ripe;
 I sold them as a merchant would.
 I kept the last fruit for myself:
 "This watermelon is my own
 To cut and eat with appetite."
 The knife I stuck into the rind
 Slipped from my fingers, fell inside.
 I entered the massive melon then
 And saw a bekçi⁵ with his stick,
 A tak tak⁶ stick held in his hand
 "What are you looking for?" he asked.
 "Oh, bekçi father, woe is me!

There were 40 paras to the kuruş, and 100 kuruş to the Turkish lira. By mid-20th century devaluation of Turkish money had eliminated from use the para, and by the 1970s the kuruş also fell out of circulation. When the lira dropped to the value of 1/10 of a U.S. cent (and much lower in the late 1980s), the kuruş became utterly meaningless.

⁵A bekçi is a watchman who patrols city streets from dusk to dawn.

⁶Onomatopoeia for the sound of knocking or striking something.

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I dropped my knife somewhere in here
 "What? When I have lost herein
 Forty mules all bearing gold
 How could you find a little knife?"
 His tak tak stick then struck my head.
 My body reached a seaport town,
 But on to England went my head.
 You cannot guess what I saw next:
 From baskets bottomless my head
 Sold garlic cloves and onion rings.
 "Come, come!" I said. "You are my head.
 "No, I am not your head," it said
 "Alas!" I said. "Don't treat me so!
 You are my head and nothing more!"
 "No, no! Let's take our case to court
 So I found a Kadı⁷ Efendi.⁸
 My head went too but fell and rolled
 Beneath the stairs and would not move
 Stalling our case till Judgment Day

⁷A kadı was a judge of canonical law in pre-Republican Turkey.

⁸In earlier times the word efendi was a term of respect used in speaking to distinguished men. By the mid-20th century, however, its prestige had so eroded that it was used only when speaking to children and servants.