

# Perpetual MOTION

By *Elif Shafak*



**MEMORIES ARE MADE** of water, they seep into our minds when we least expect. There is a moment in time, a mental photograph, that I find myself vividly remembering, the colours all sharp and bright, though everything around the image is slightly vague, blurred. My mother and I, we are on a train, sitting across from each other by the window. I must have been five years old, perhaps six. There are other passengers with us, coming and going, but the feeling of loneliness is acute, unchanging. Our journey is long, more than 1,400 miles. We will pass through Germany, Austria, Hungary, Romania... We will be

changing trains at different cities and towns that have mysterious names. We are travelling from Strasbourg to Istanbul. We are leaving France, where I was born, and heading to Turkey, where I will from now on try to belong.

My father is staying in Strasbourg meanwhile, where he will marry again, have another family. My mother and I are going to my maternal grandmother's house in Ankara, which I have never seen before. I feel nervous. I wish I could read a book but I haven't started school yet. Even so, I can count up to 100, though some numbers I pronounce in French, others in Turkish. Doesn't matter, I think. Numbers are good, steady and solid, and since everything else feels liquid and uncertain, I seek refuge in numbers. I stare out of the window, counting telephone poles as we go. When I get bored with that, I count passerine birds, railway tracks, the beatings of my heart, and I count how many times my mother silently cries.

As the train chugs along, passengers point out to the signs outside and that is how I learn we have just left one city or region behind and entered a new one. Valleys, tunnels, mountains. Borders, police officers, customs. When you arrive at a new land—my mind wonders—does that automatically mean you have left the previous one completely behind? Is it possible to be in several places at the same time? These are strange questions and people think I am a strange child anyway, so I try not to talk much, I keep counting.

Since that train journey of my childhood, I have made countless trips, travelled east and west, north and south. Although raised in Turkey, I have also spent a considerable part of my youth in Spain and the U.S., and today I am the citizen of another country, the U.K., which I call my home, my adopted land. There is a term the American author James Baldwin would use for himself: "commuter". I, too, believe I am a commuter.

So the question of belonging has always mattered to me, and felt deeply personal, emotional, complicated.

One question that I dreaded for a long time was, "Where are you from?"

Not because I didn't have an answer, but because I had many answers. Plural.

"I am from multiple places," I wanted to be able to say in return. "I come from memories and forgettings, from stories and silences, from various countries and cultures, but also their ruins."

I struggle with the concept of belonging not because I do not feel a strong sense of connection with the places and cultures that have shaped me to this day. I struggle because people—especially politicians—tell us that we cannot be various things at the same time, that we can only have one identity, at least one dominant identity, and everything else must be secondary. Our world, our strange and troubled times, encourage exclusivist identities at the expense of multiple belongings.

And yet, the truth is, whether we have made similar train journeys or we stayed in the same town all our lives, human beings, all human beings, regardless of race, region or ethnicity, are complicated, multilayered. We all have multiple belongings. Only when we start to share our stories and open ourselves to the stories of others, will we understand that so many people around the world, in fact, feel the same way, and that contrary to what we thought, we are not alone.

At a time of pandemic, when we are understandably more withdrawn, either in lockdown or unable to travel, it is important that we do not forget there are threads of stories connecting us beyond all borders. ■

