



# THE MERCURY

THE STUDENT ART & LITERARY MAGAZINE OF GETTYSBURG COLLEGE

---

Year 2008

Article 4

---

1-1-2008

## Meadows, Grass, Bicycle

Nazli I. Inal

Gettysburg College, inalna01@cnav.gettysburg.edu

Class of 2008

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury>



Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

**Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.**

---

Inal, Nazli I. (2015) "Meadows, Grass, Bicycle," *The Mercury*: Year 2008, Article 4.

Available at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury/vol2008/iss1/4>

This open access nonfiction is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact [cupola@gettysburg.edu](mailto:cupola@gettysburg.edu).

---

# Meadows, Grass, Bicycle

**Keywords**

creative writing, non-fiction

**Author Bio**

Nazhlal is from Istanbul, Turkey. And she likes words. She likes words a lot.

## Meadows, Grass, Bicycle

I remember my childhood in fragments, like a dream. I do not know what comes first, I do not know what comes last. I remember it like a drunken time. Desires, disappointments, and defeats are intertwined, followed by a black sleep, followed by a hangover. I remember when I wanted to die, I wanted to love, I wanted to live. I hear a bird I do not see. I think it sings of the spring, but the sycamore is long covered with yellow leaves, it smells like sweet death and bitter linden. I look at three empty chairs across the lawn. I see ghosts of friends, family, lovers. First kisses, first touches, first losses stand up and go. Behind me I hear cars pass by. The sound makes me think of the sea. I imagine a wave forming when I hear a car approach, it hits the shore when the noise is the loudest, then recedes, indifferent, the car is gone away. Winter claims November with the calmness of death.

I see ghosts of friends,  
family, lovers. First  
kisses, first touches, first  
losses stand up and go.

What is on my mind is meadows, grass, and a bicycle. They come to me in separate visions. First I am looking down to a meadow, green stretched under the noonday sun, the wind is silent. Then I am lying down, the blades of grass tickling my neck and ear. I can smell the dusty earth. Finally, a bicycle. An abandoned bicycle by an abandoned wall. It is red.

I don't know if I want to go to them, if I want to dream of them, or if I want to remember. I call my childhood back. The neighborhood. The girls. Çiçek, Arzu, Cansu, Nur, Burcu, Nergis Gülfer, Fersun. I remember the day we met. Burcu has a brother. Berk, a tall, skinny kid, he is older than us, he already talks about sex. They tell us the reason they tried to start a snowball fight last winter was because they wanted to meet me and my sister. Nergis has a brother, too, Eray, who is also older than us, but not as old as Berk. The boys play together. They like to break things, or at least poke holes in them, and they say they can calculate one's penis size by multiplying height, weight, and shoe size. Berk has a pocket calculator. We scold the boys with giggles, because that's what we think we should do. Sometimes the boys sabotage our games, but usually they leave us alone. We skip rope together. We eat ice cream together. We go to movies together. Together we ask permission from mothers to stay out "just a little longer" at night. Then we grow up together, and together we disperse. In time the details rub off, and sometimes it is only the details that stay.

I think now that we never went to the meadows together. We grew up in the city, far from the green, and far from the sea also, in Ankara, the heart of Anatolia. We walked down big avenues, we sat on sidewalks, played on narrow streets. We were the proud children of the steppes. For us, meadows and grass were parks here and there in the middle of the cement. Bicycles were dangerous. "God forbid, my daughter, what if you get run over by a car?" said mothers. If we never went to the meadows, never rolled on grass, never rode our bicycles together, what

I am remembering cannot be memories. What is it that I remember then? Why will they not leave my mind? It is cold. The rain is grey. Muffled. It needs color, I say, and maybe that's why I am dreaming of meadows. A spark of green, an embrace of sunlight, a dose of children's laughter.

Mother sent me and my sister out to the street a little before the summer of fourth grade ended. I was ten. "Don't come back without making friends. Look at all those kids playing on the street. Go out and play with them," she said. We went out. We did not come back in for five years, begging for "five more minutes," until we moved to Istanbul. Mother had to tell us to go make friends because having been born within fourteen months of each other we grew up with a playmate who was always there. We played together when we weren't fighting, we played games that had two people in them, and should they require more people we were willing to perform multiple roles.

In Ankara we lived on the fourth floor of a building and a large terrace wrapped three sides of our two bedroom apartment. On the terrace Mother grew herbs, right outside the kitchen door, so that one of us could go pick thyme, mint, rosemary, and marjoram when she was cooking. We had violets, Father's favorites, moss roses, daisies, scarlet sages, along with three lilac trees, and a number of roses. The soft orange rose Mother called Nazlı Nazenin for it would bloom one languid petal at a time, coy and delicate. She had given me the same name as she wanted her firstborn to be coy and coquettish toward life, that life would not tire her so much. There was also a grapevine in the terrace that gave only one grape in twenty-five years the summer when I was leaving home, and a mulberry tree that would become my best friend when I gave up talking to people. (I was eleven, and I had decided to kill myself. I was reading Vasconcelos.) The terrace was big, bigger when we were smaller, and it was alive, we could get lost in it. If we wanted to be outside we would go out to the terrace, run around, play with water, have picnics, acting all the while our many roles, getting into one character after another with perfect theatrical focus. Every now and then we would want to jump rope, which required a physical third person, but that was what the chair was for. It wouldn't cross my mind that we needed someone else to play with.

We used to wake up early, when Mother was leaving for work (she was an internist, now retired), and we would also go to work by setting up a table in the terrace and start playing "doctors." It required two doctors, us with our doctor names (we had new names for every new game we invented), and two of Mother's old lab coats, for credibility. The table was our office. Mother worked in a government office, her day consisted of seeing one patient after another, listening to complaints and prescribing medicine, and giving a good amount of advice, too. When we played "doctors" we would do the same thing, person after person would come to our table, we would write their names down, write their complaints, write the diagnosis, and finally the cure we thought was apt. Our patients usually had colds or upset stomachs, and we would not give them drugs for Mother rarely gave us drugs. We would write in their prescriptions, "keep your feet warm, drink tea of thyme with honey and lemon," or "tarragon tea, twice a day." We believed in keeping one's feet warm and created magic slippers—the greatest invention in the history of pharmaceuticals. You

could not take them off, nor did you need to because the material would become waterproof if you were taking a bath, and the slippers would turn into socks if you were going to bed or if you had to put shoes on to go out. That year we prescribed many pairs of magic slippers.

In the afternoon we would play "Leydi İnci." It was a game in which my name was Leydi Altın (Leydi being the Turkish spelling of "lady"), and my sister's, İnci Soprano. In "Leydi İnci" I would always be Leydi, and my sister would take care of the rest of the characters. She would come up with astronomical names such as Neptune and Venus for her characters, and Neptune and Venus would then come for tea. We would talk about important things, while I entertained and my sister jumped in and out of character to keep up with the pace of our heated conversations. Looking back now, it is interesting that I should stick with one character. I have been the one who was less stable, who had had many selves. I would, and still do, change from happy self to depressed self, reader self, writer self, Turkish self, foreign self, selfish self, selfless self. With that game I was Leydi for many years. It might have been my one and only stable self.

Every November, memories of Ankara come back to me, and I remember the cold first. I miss the winds that used to sting my eyes. I miss the day I would understand that winter had come to stay. That day when I turned on the faucet the water would have a more serious coldness to it. I miss having fires in the fireplace. I used to sit in front of the fire with flames in my eyes until my face could no longer bear the heat. Then images of home form, Mother, Father, my sister, the cat we had gotten when Father had left, fights, me reading, tension, me writing, snow, St. Exupéry, Vasconcelos, Steinbeck, my mulberry tree, rain, wine, too much wine, Mother praying five times a day, putting her prayer mat down towards south, "Your mother and I decided to live in different houses for a while," Joan Baez, Grieg, Lalo, Mother's sleeping, Father's drinking, the fluorescent light in the kitchen coldly buzzing. Finally sunny times gush into my quieted reminiscences. That's when the girls come in, noisy, jealous, happy, Çiçek, Arzu, Cansu, Nur, Gülf, Fersun.

I was the first among the girls to leave Ankara. At the end of eighth grade because the Ministry of Education changed the law on obligatory education, I had the chance to take the high school entrance examination again (I had already taken it in fifth grade) and apply to Robert College of İstanbul, where Mother went to high school. A Turkish-American high school, Robert College was then, and still is, one of the most prestigious high schools in Turkey, yet Mother rarely talked about it, mostly because she had denounced having gone to school in a capitalist institute when she became a communist right after her graduation. In the years she had lost contact with her high school friends, and she would not talk about them when she talked about her high school, either. Mother talked about Mrs. İüküryan, her biology teacher, and Mrs. Kondayan, her literature teacher, and she talked about the food, and the view. When I was fourteen, Mother took my sister and me to Robert College as she needed a document from the school to retire two years earlier than her designated time. This time she was denouncing communism.

The Bosphorus seen from inside the woods of Robert College, the feeling

of standing at the edge of Europe, the unconscious appeal of finding a city that resembled me in the way that it is cut into two, that it is neither one thing nor the other, called me to be there. I had already given up on school, and I reasoned if I had to go to school I should be in a place that at least aesthetically pleased me, inspired me, and provided me with a good dose of melancholy. So at the age of fifteen I was leaving home for good to go to boarding school in İstanbul, knowing that after that summer I would only come home for vacations, after that summer I was condemned to be a visitor at my home. I knew, after I left home I would not be a child again. Years of playing in the streets had ended. Years of dreamlike childhood were over. I passed out copies of Yesenin's farewell poem, that he wrote with his blood after slitting his wrists, "*This predestined parting,/Promises a reunion ahead,*" packed my books and some clothes, and made a dramatic exit, "*Dying is nothing new in this life,/But living, of course, isn't novel either.*"

Now I remember what we dreamed of and have forgotten since, just like I remember others' stories that I have made mine in time. Meadows, grass, bicycle. Stories fill my mind. Others' stories, true, but if I want to I can tell them as if they are my own. I know stories of meadows, and grass, and I know childhood stories, too. My friend, my sister, my past, I can tell you stories from the times when people went back to their villages to spend the summer. I can tell you youth stories from the times when boys and girls escaped to the meadows. I can tell you your own story, and tell it like my story.

Once, do you remember also, we had swum in the green river early in the morning? Then the boys came and we were ashamed when our wet t-shirts stuck to our adolescent breasts. Another time it had rained, and what a rain that was, in the middle of the summer. We hadn't cared that everything was covered in mud, but we were upset that the river's color turned turbid. That day the trees had smelled like the color of rain. We had held hands with coy bravery, we couldn't even talk, but we had laughed. We had always laughed. Another time we had discovered a boat on the river side of the meadow. The paint on it had fallen off in places, and in places it had come loose, when the rains returned they too would fall off. The name on it was illegible. We had talked on and on about what we would do if we had a boat. We said if we were boys we would push the boat to the river and see what happened, but we were a little afraid, and a little lazy. The sun was burning, the shadows of trees were warm. Youthfulness was a roaring thunder in our veins. It was the season of daydreaming.

In our dreams we pushed the boat into the river, and, you know, it floated, we drifted a little, but we weren't afraid, there was such peace around us. The day was warm with the sun, green with grass, it was flowing in the river with us. The afternoon was everlasting.

My sister spent hours watching other kids playing outside. She would come to me and report, "One of them is Çiçek. Arzu is the one with short white hair, Cansu is Arzu's little sister, they live up the street. There is Nur, who lives in the building right across, and Burcu who lives on the first floor of the building right next to it." I don't remember being amused by the information she had gathered, nor was I amused when she would shout one of their names and hide under the



terrace wall. She had learned that Burcu's mother yelled her daughter's name like "Buur-jaa" instead of "Boor-joo," and with a deep and cracked voice. Once she was done calling out for Arzu or Cansu she would very professionally and very patiently wait for a good while, then imitate Burcu's mother. Every time, she sent Burcu to her apartment window to see what her mother wanted.

I watched the kids once. For five, maybe, ten minutes. They were playing a game in which everybody was running away from the one who was it, who could get them only if they were on the ground level. They had climbed on things higher than ground level, garden fences and stairs and even the doormats outside the building counted because they had metal grates under them. They would be still for a while and then it would all break loose, they would all run at the same time trying to climb on the next higher level safe zone. They would shout and laugh, stop, start again, then shout and laugh more. I went back to my books.

Kids playing out on the street were of no interest to me. I spent my summers reading in the terrace and playing with my sister. If ever we were bored with being at home we would go to Vietnam Café, which was in Vietnam. I did not know where Vietnam was, but I think my sister did, for she was the one who would read the world atlas while I was busy with my books. She used to memorize the capitals and flags of countries, and later test me on those. Vietnam Café was a favorite place to hang out, located at the backside of the terrace, outside my parents' bedroom and next to the short wall that marked the end of our terrace and the start of our neighbor's. Day after day we would go there and have mineral water with lemon juice and sugar in it. The specialty had a name I cannot remember anymore. It was served in blue and white china bowls.

We did not know what Vietnam meant. We did not know of the war, we did not know of the United States, we did not know of guns or protests. We did not have someone to tell us those things. Mother worked all day, and Father did, too, and he didn't always live with us, either. If I remember Father in the apartment in Ankara, I remember him depressed. I remember him drinking. He would drink, write, read, drink more, then one day, and when we were about to start dinner, he would pack his books and some clothes, and leave without saying goodbye. His empty plate on the table and the click of the door being locked from outside would mean something together, that I would not understand, for I would be crying, without knowing why I was crying. It was no news that he was leaving, but we would be surprised every time. My sister and I were used to finding poems torn from books and single flowers left in our mailbox or in front of our door, but we did not think they were from Father. It was easier to believe that an imaginary beast my sister was afraid of had become Mother's secret admirer. Mother played along with us, and if there was ever a sad amusement in her eyes for her children's ignorance of their own family life, or a look of yearning coupled with anger toward her husband, we were too young to see it. Among all this, we grew up mostly alone, and did not realize it.

I had seen the boat first. It was painted red inside, blue outside. Did I not say a bicycle? Where did this boat come from? We must have ridden our bikes to the meadow. We had left them under a tree, and eaten the piece of bread and cheese we had brought with us. We had seen a walnut tree then. I hadn't climbed it but

my sister and Çiçek had. I had picked up the fruit they had shaken off the tree, and we had peeled, cracked, and eaten walnuts until our hands were dyed a black-green. Grandmothers' advice on our minds, we had told each other not to eat too little, not to eat too much, not to drink water afterwards. That was when we had seen the boat. I had seen it first. While I was pondering what a boat was doing there, the girls were already over by it.

I was the dreamer. My sister and Çiçek were the adventurous ones. I was already lost in my dreams as they were trying to decide what to do with the boat. In my mind I was in a faraway country, in a faraway village, with faraway fishermen. I was there with those who coated their boats with special pastes only they knew how to make. I was there with the stifling smell and the glittery grey of the fish. I watched men and women who cleaned fish with mechanical motions of their sea-hardened hands. Woolen socks and hats, salt-bleached shirts, sun darkened skins. Early hours of the morning. I watched moments that had become meaningless because they were nothing but habits, and I watched the meaning imposed onto those moments also, with a feeling of hardness and coldness in me. I no longer knew where I was. The sun was hot on my back, wet in my armpits, and it carried me onto other stories.

Our building was at the intersection of two streets, and the elementary school we went to was diagonal from our building. My sister and I would hold hands and cross one street to the building where all the kids played during summer, then cross the other street to the school. On the ground floor of our building there was a tailor shop and a small grocery, and where the front yard of our building ended, a taxi station hut. They had been there since we were born, and Mother knew they would be watching over us when we were courageously crossing the two streets with our tiny feet to go to class. The tailor we knew as Tippler İlerif, who years later refused the holy water but took the dates that Mother brought with her when she returned from Mecca. We agreed he and his assistant would eat the dates with rakı that night. We agreed also that he was decent enough to refuse the holy water. It would be sacrilegious to make his nightly glass of rakı with water from Zamzam. We called the grocer Uncle Grocer, who had a brother, Namık, and we called Namık his first name among us, because we didn't want to be related to him. Unlike his brother, Namık was a sneaky looking man with rather sharply defined facial features and more hair on his head. We liked Uncle Grocer who would crack a joke every time we would go in to buy a piece of gum, a piece of marshmallow, a piece of candy. He would tease me more if I were there to buy cigarettes for Mother or a bottle of wine for Father. "You gotta stop with these bad habits, sister," he would say. "It's easy for you to say so," I learned to reply when I was older.

When Mother sent my sister and me out to find friends we went to the schoolyard and walked in circles for a while trying to decide which one of the strangers we wanted to talk to. We said hi to a sister and brother, both younger than us, and asked if they wanted to jump rope with us. They agreed. It was their idea, I think, to go up and play with the others later. I went up first and introduced myself. "Hello, I am Nazlı," I said, (I still introduce myself the same way) and Çiçek introduced herself and everybody else to me. It was a minute before my sister came to join us, and Çiçek repeated the introduction for her. My sister waited until she was done, then said,



with a big smile, "I know." She told them how she used to watch them from the terrace, and revealed that it was she who had called their names. They were not angry. Soon we were included in the above-ground-level game. We laughed and shouted. We played until Mother called us back home.

At first we would fight about the games we wanted to play, and once we started playing, we would fight about the rules of the games. The rules were so flexible that they changed as we fought about them, yet we continued to shout. I do not remember when we abandoned our plans of building an underground hut, I do not remember when we abandoned the games, and claimed a certain corner to spend hours talking about boys. It was around the time Burcu and Nergis left the group and Gülfer and her younger sister Fersun replaced them. It was also around the time we were allowed to stay two more hours after sunset. When it was time to go in, instead of Mother shouting my name in a way all the girls made fun of, she prolonged the first syllable too much, Father started calling my sister and me by whistling Beethoven's Eighth Symphony from the terrace. He was living with us again.

We girls were becoming aware of our bodies. We talked about our hair, facial features, especially noses, we talked about our periods. We tried our first bras, first cigarettes, first kisses. They used to say in the neighborhood that "Gülfer is the more beautiful, but Nazlı is the more appealing." Gülfer had boys, I didn't. For me there was no difference among the real, the dead, and the fictitious, and I would fall in love with all of them and usually at the same time. I loved St. Exupéry who went on a reconnaissance mission during the Second World War and did not return. He took my feet off the ground. But my heart was all for Vasconcelos, he was the one who connected me to life. I had fallen in love with him when I read *My Sweet Orange Tree*, the first one of his three autobiographical novels about growing up in a slum near Rio de Janeiro. Zezé, a precocious, sensitive boy was neglected in a family of too many brothers and sisters, except when they directed their anger and disappointment with life onto him. Zezé wanted to be a poet with a bow tie. Zezé was me. He knew, like I did, life was meaningless without love, and not having found it he had decided to die even earlier than I had.

I cried many times while reading *My Sweet Orange Tree*. I cried when Zezé became friends with Portuga, a rich Portuguese man living close to his neighborhood. I cried because Zezé had found love that he was heartbreakingly hungry for, and I cried because I hadn't found it myself. Zezé would include Portuga in his dreams, and I would cry because I was only dreaming one person dreams. When Portuga died in a train crash Zezé wanted to die, and so did I. He continued living so that he would spread love, along with marbles and actress pictures, just like Portuga did, and I cried because I didn't have the courage to live.

During the day I would sit with the girls on our wall, which Gülfer named "the randy wall," and we accepted not because we were randy, but because the thought of being randy held something exciting. We talked about classes, teachers, friends from school. We complained a lot. "Mother and Father are not talking," I would say. "My parents talk, but only against me," Gülfer would reply, then talk about three different boys; one in her class, one on the school bus, one who lived down the street. Çiçek talked about women. If she talked about family it would be aunts not uncles, if she talked about movie people it would be actresses not actors. "I wrote about Hume

and Hegel in the science quiz," I would say, "I think I will fail this one, too."

At night I would sit on the terrace wall right across from my mulberry tree and sing and cry, and sometimes if I could find the voice, I would talk to it. I had named it Portuga, hoping Portuga would love me like he loved Zezé, and that with his love my life would also become meaningful.

Vasconcelos wrote about rivers, boatmen who talked to their boats, fishermen who wrist-wrestled on a table with two upright knives on it, he wrote about whores, dark skinned women who were darkly soft to touch. He wrote about people who were brothers of the wind. I read every book he has written. In cold Ankara nights I imagined the Brazilian sun that dried the salt of the ocean on the beaches. I imagined Zezé growing up, through which I would imagine myself growing up. But I could not see myself in the future. I would then put my feet up on the corner of Portuga's high flower pot. Next time I would put one leg outside the wall. I would look down, seeing my dead body in front of the grocer's door. My blood would be black because red looked black in dark. Then I would dangle both legs outside. I could not look down. When I sat like that I thought the ground was so much closer that it made me dizzy, but I didn't think of death being any closer. Death was always close to me. I had decided on it.

When I left Ankara, I was aware that many things would not come with me, so I took my desire to die, I took being in love, I took the childish laughter and the memories of unending games we played in the afternoons too short. I took some sad memories along with the happy ones, and I remember them as if remembering a drunken time. All the dead and fictional came with me, and all the living left me, forgot me, and sometimes, maybe, they remembered me as their past. The further away I went the more my childhood became a painting framed with the cold, and maybe that's why I miss the cold so much, for it keeps my childhood together. With the dry frosts of the steppes I can go back to my childhood, I can dream of sun burnt countries, I can think of meadows, grass, and a bicycle.

They say there is so much air pollution in Ankara that birds die on tree branches. The children and elderly people should not go out if they do not need to, we hear in the news. It must have been November. Fersun. I have drunk too much, I understand it in the morning. I wake up late, I don't shower, I don't put on a bra, I pull a pair of shorts under the t-shirt I had on instead of a nightgown. Çiçek. Look at all those kids playing on the street. Go out and play with them, Mother says. Cansu. Hide and seek. Arzu. The randy wall. Uncle Grocer, two packs of cigarettes for my mother. Uncle Grocer, my father says it is more obvious when you wrap the bottle with newspaper. Nergis. Is this what you call a family? Nur. I prepare breakfast, I make coffee, I pull my hair in a pony tail without brushing it. We could take a bus, a bus whose destination we do not know, and it would take us to a city whose name we do not know, says Father. He is holding my hand. There is a smile left on my lips from the dreams I have not dreamed, in the meadows I have not gone to. A light blue bicycle under a sycamore tree. St. Exupéry says the coming of spring should be no irony to death. I see from my shadow that my breasts are budding. Remember, we used to buy peaches, one for you and one for me? Gülfer. Think of this book as a bird, Father tells me, think of its pages as the bird's wings. Will you marry me? Is

there a present time that will not turn into memory? If I were to love you, but not remember it later. I only let you stay the night because I was drunk. I reread St. Exupéry's memoir, *Flight to Arras*, and my longing for him comes back. In my heart I miss the touch of a lost lover. In the book St. Exupéry is getting ready to die, watching the war and the spring, dreaming of when he was fifteen, dreaming of geometry class, dreaming of card tricks. His dreams leak into his reality. Remembering the past, I remember myself when I was more daring, more restless, more reckless. A past self comes and stands by me. She is me when I read *Flight to Arras*. She doesn't even look at me. They say if the poplar trees start to shed their leaves from the top it means that winter will be a cold one. Tell me, are we late for everything? Nazlı Nazenin. What a strange tiredness is longing.