

NEWSLETTER JANUARY 2018

Most of this newsletter was written at the end of last summer, but I haven't had a chance to type up and edit my notes until now. Please forgive any anachronisms or references to the hot August weather.

Dear Friends,

When I received news last May that my employer of nearly three years, a small startup at which I was the first employee, was “giving up the ghost”, which is to say, the venture capitalists to whom we had tied our fortunes could no longer suspend their disbelief about our business model, leaving us with only a few paychecks in the bank, I poured out a small drink to commemorate its demise and then conspired to take the rest of the summer off.

Equipped with a small severance and the prospect of nearly \$600 per month USD in unemployment benefits, my conspiracy began with an impromptu trip to the Catskills, where we stayed in old farmhouses and canvas tents pitched between rolling blue-green hills. Firewood was purchased and burned. Apples were pressed into cider. Hotdogs roasted, s'mores constructed. In Bovina, NY – yes, after the large number of cows – we drank fresh milk and ate raw cheese and ran through wet grass. Of all the prices paid to live in the City, the worst is forgetting what the stars look like.

Mostly though, my summer was spending time with Elektra, who is two now: going to the park in the morning, shopping for groceries at the farmer's market, cooking dinner, reading books, watching Sesame Street, holding hands, and kissing bruises. Not that this isn't work – as anyone who has cared for a two-year-old will tell you – but it's a different kind of work: harder on the body but easier on the soul.

The distraction of raising a child kept my mind from sinking into the place it usual goes when afflicted by too much free time. I am beset with a constant anxiety that manifests as fidgeting in my hands and soul. I must keep paper and pen near me at all times, not primarily as a method of record keeping, but as a sort of ward against primordial forces, like early man instinctively building shelters at the base of mountains or the edges of the sea to defend against barbarian invaders. Like sitting with your back to the wall and your eyes on the door.

In the notebooks I carry around I make small drawings and lists. Sometimes I trace the same word over and over as a form of nervous meditation. I draw charts and graphs and small maps. I make lists of all the things I own, or want to own. I catalog everything inside my kitchen drawers. I enjoy making these lists and find it calming. Life is a constant flux; as soon as you've captured a piece of it, that piece is already stale and outdated. It's nice to think we can hold these moments in stasis, stretch them out, to enjoy them. This is why people read magazines about dinner parties and architecture. But life is not like a photograph. Life is a shaky camera and blurry footage, the action always taking place off-screen, just outside the periphery.

I had a premonition¹ months ago that my company would be shutdown, and so only a few weeks before receiving official confirmation that I would lose my job, I booked three tickets to Turkey for the month of August, figuring I'd likely be out of a job by then, at which point I could hardly justify spending so much on airfare. Past Luke has become exceptionally good at manipulating Future State Luke, for better and for worse.

And so in August, as a bookend to my summer of escapism, we flew to Istanbul, where we drank raki with Turkish friends and lamented the states of our respective countries. The mood here has changed quickly, they said, and the city has sunk into a depression. Many of the foreign retail outlets that boomed over the past decade have closed, and tourism has slowed to a trickle. The only tourists now are from the wealthy gulf states,

in the city to shop for the weekend, to take advantage of the weak Lira, in a country where they broadcast the call to prayer and you can find good halal food on every street.

The country is still in an official state of emergency after the failed coup d'état of July 2016. The exuberance that came with the youthful protests in Gezi Park several years ago is gone. Turkish Twitter – Turkey has the largest and most active Twitter userbase outside the United States – once a vibrant meeting place for young troublemakers, has dried up. Accounts are watched, arrests have been made. Criticism of the state is not tolerated. No one here believes in change any more, anyway, they say.

Few of our friends are respectable, respectability being one of the more overrated attributes in a society. They're artists, filmmakers, troublemakers. Despite outbursts of exuberance the mood is deadened; everyone is tired. We order another bottle of raki that sits untouched at one end of the table.

"Everyone interesting has left or is leaving," says ----, who has accepted a teaching position in Germany and will move there in the fall, uncertain when she'll return.

The bright spot is Elektra, who can make friends with anyone, and somehow gets herself invited to another child's birthday party a few tables away. They send cake to our table, homemade marzipan in the shape of a bumble bee.

The next day we travel south, to Yalikavak, near the resort town of Bodrum, where we've rented a small apartment by the Aegean Sea. My wife's family has come here for years, and we join from the States whenever we can, every other year or so. This is the second time since the sudden passing of my mother-in-law in 2014, and the first time since the birth of our daughter. The owner, A-efendi_, treats us like family. He embraces us warmly. His sadness is our sadness, genuine, but brief, like a cloud passing in front of the sun.

Yalikavak has changed, like everything else. Once a sleepy fishing village and then a small town where locals came to swim in the Aegean, the gaudy glitz of Bodrum has crept northward like invasive kudzu. The beaches we used to swim in have been boarded up and turned into private night clubs.

The days here are long but feel short. In the pre-dawn morning the call to prayer echoes through the valley, and the stray dogs join in with their chorus. The roosters, not to be outdone, contribute their own harmony. Soon daylight rises over the hills and we all start another day under the watch of the sun.

In the garden outside our window: squash, eggplant, pomegranate, banana trees. Later I'll fry some eggplant and make a warm salad to dip our bread into.

Elektra, so far, has regarded our attempts to teach her Turkish with suspicion.

"*Karpuz*," Kat says, pointing at a watermelon.

A long, concerned pause.

"No, it's watermelon," Elektra says. Six months ago, she did not know the word watermelon, did not even know what a watermelon tasted like. Now, the word is so foundational to her, she finds our use of the Turkish word *karpuz* deeply upsetting. How quickly we become set in what we know of the world.

In the afternoons, when the sun becomes too hot to bare, I sit in the shade and read. On the table next to me is James Baldwin's *Another Country*. In 1961, Baldwin traveled to Istanbul with a suitcase full of typed pages, burnt out and looking for solace. He stayed with a Turkish actor he had met previously at a party in New York, and months later after recovering a bit, was able to finish the novel that became *Another Country*, a novel set squarely in 1950s New York, between Greenwich Village and Harlem, but is curiously signed off:

James Baldwin

Istanbul

1961

I thought maybe reading *Another Country* in Turkey would help me understand it better. My plan did not work.

I try to read as broadly as possible, in many senses, but occasionally I become hooked on an author and read their oeuvre chronologically from start to finish. This year is James Baldwin, including his many essays, rare for me, as I almost never read non-fiction. James Baldwin is a revelation in 2017 America. His essays from the 1950s and 60s offer more insight into what is happening in America than almost anything published today.



Americans have the particular ability to categorize, despite all evidence to the contrary, foundational American activities as “un-American”.

Slavery: un-American.

The disenfranchisement of all voters save white men: un-American.

(All written down in our founding documents and signed by the founders: i.e. un-American)

As part of my summer travels, we visited Chattanooga, Tennessee, to see friends. Along the side of the road I saw a placard commemorating the Trail of Tears. The text on the sign was detached from all context. It was text commemorating a natural disaster – an earthquake that killed thousands, tragic but unavoidable. It spoke of the Cherokee *who died* in this area (if you look closely, you'll notice that genocide often happens in the passive voice). No connection to Tennessee itself, a state torn by settlers from the Cherokee in violation of treaty and even against the protests of the Federal government itself. The sign was staked into a vacant lot across the street from a Dunkin Donuts. "America Runs on Dunkin" a vinyl banner in the parking lot proclaimed.

Being anti-immigrant: un-American

(Consequently, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the Geary Act, the Immigration Act of 1903, the Asiatic Barred Zone Act of 1917, the Emergency Quota Act of 1921, the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, Executive Order 9066: all un-American)

Our founding documents, our laws, our local customs: at what point did America become American?



Not far from the resort town of Yalikavak is the launch point for Syrian refugees trying to enter Greece via Lesbos, an island only a few kilometers from the Turkish coast. Once inside the E.U. they will attempt to claim asylum. A cottage industry has emerged all along the southern coast of Turkey, supplying the refugees with gear for their journey: food, water, shoddily made life vests, the types of rafts one might play with in a pool but certainly not take to sea. The dead children washed up on the Greek coast whose images were seen around the world likely set sail from here. Perhaps the refugee business helps offset the sharp drop in tourism in this part of Turkey, perhaps the Turks are happy to make the Syrians someone else's problem again, or a mix of the two.

In the evening, we barbecue fish and squid and more vegetables from the garden. Two guests have joined us – friends of friends – and in the Turkish tradition, if you run into a friend after noon, it's rude not to invite them to have dinner with you. So I walk down to the market, and to the fishmonger, to make sure I have enough portions for our guests.

Some tips for buying fish: clear eyes, not cloudy, firm flesh, and, somewhat counter-intuitively, fish should never smell like fish, only saltwater and the sea. Never buy fish on a Monday, since fishermen do not work on Sundays. I'm not sure if this last one holds true in Turkey or not.



My mother-in-law Norita is buried in the Armenian section of the Cebeci Asri Cemetery in Ankara, Turkey. She passed away suddenly four years ago at the age of 62; complications arising from the common flu. She told my father-in-law she was cold; in the morning, she did not wake up. We try to put it out of our minds, but so life goes. A bright light shines, and then, the switch is flipped and the room goes dark.

Four years ago, we stood in the same cemetery, looking down at an empty hole, wondering if it was large enough to fit the makeshift wooden box a carpenter had put together for us (Muslims are traditionally buried wrapped in shrouds of cloth; you could count the number of coffin makers in Turkey on one hand). Sure enough, when we lowered the box, it fit only partially, and started to come apart. Three men ran to find shovels. Then someone cracked a joke about Norita always having been a non-conformist, to the very last, and the crowd laughed, the gasping, desperate laughter of the grief-stricken, like divers coming up for air.

Many of the tombstones here follow a particular trend. Dates prior to the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1926 follow the Ottoman (Islamic) calendar, while dates after 1926 use the Gregorian calendar, adopted when the country "modernized". For anyone born before 1926, the dates on their tombstone make them look impossibly old.



I write most of these notes from our hotel in Istanbul on our return to New York and the beginning of what feels like a new chapter of life. The heat and the noise flow in through our hotel window above the Bosphorus strait. Leather soles slap against the pavers, cicadas sing from their hidden places in the trees, stray dogs pant in the hot August night, the hinges of the atelier's shutters creak in the breeze. Iron ships the size of cities float past on their own tides; smaller ships orbit around them, constellations headed for the Black Sea. I take this all in from an open window overlooking the cobblestone pavers. I can hear everything at once and I can hear nothing. The sounds of the street mix and float in the cacophony and the silence of the night.

Luke Chamberlin

Brooklyn, NY

31 January 2018

1. I read the financial statements.

