



On Earth As It Is

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In Front of the Black Sea

Matthew Batt

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prayer as story, story as prayer

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found photo from jeffrey simmons

In Front of the Black Sea

Matthew Batt

Dear God,

Ali and Sema have a daughter!
It's raining in St. Paul but
there was a spot right in front
of the Black Sea and I wasn't going
to go—it was already almost three
and I thought I could just plow through
till dinner but then I saw the sign—
the sign! in the window! Ali and Sema
have a daughter!

Her little premi face beamed
from the glass door on the restaurant
and I backed up and parked in front
of the Hardware Hank and thought
what a miraculous thing—what a glorious
and ecstatic thing—as only can happen

to a Turkish immigrant couple
in Minnesota, which is to say,
I suppose, to anyone. To everyone.

We brought our son here when he was
just one, when Sema wasn't even dreaming
anymore of getting pregnant (she and Ali
are both every bit of forty-five, fifty) but
every time she or Ali would pass our table
they messed up Emory's hair or swept their hands
under his chin and made him giggle as can
only strangers who don't care if you care
if they touch your child.

They're really beautiful people. They call,
both of them, everybody—me, you—
buddy.

It doesn't hurt that their prices
are low and the falafel a revelation
and the space—the space!—it's crowded
and eclectic as an Istanbul bizarre and
at last count, on the wall, there was one gun—
a flintlock pistol—three scimitars of various
length and polish, and at least seven vests
made of velvet and gold rope, little round mirrors
instead of buttons, as well as a sign
that says We Don't Accept Any
Plastic Cards. Thank You.

As you come in, you pass the counter
protected by a sneeze guard, and on your side
is the menu and various reviews of the restaurant.
On their side, which you can see if you sit
at the first table facing the kitchen—the one
with no weapons, only vests—is their baby.
It's the same picture from the door where she is
still a little tiny NICU baby with a breathing tube
taped cruelly, miraculously to her nose—she was two
months premature—but there she is, so beautiful
in her knit hat that wouldn't cover my wrist,
on the door, and there she is, above the garnishes,

and there she is, above the sauces, and there
she is, right in front of the cutting board where
they assemble your meal—my meal—a gyro
with fries—for 4.95—and there they are, working,
and all they want to know is
is everything okay
there buddy?

And you say yes.

And you say thank you.

And you say it is.

Everything is O.K.

Thank you.

Matthew Batt's fiction and nonfiction has recently appeared in *Tin House*, *Mid-American Review* and *Fifth Wednesday*. He has just finished a work of nonfiction detailing the renovation of what may have been a former crack house in Salt Lake City. He lives in St. Paul, Minnesota, and teaches at the University of St. Thomas.

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