Story 2083 (1999 Dictated)

Narrator: İnci Pirinçcioğlu, circa 72

Location: İstanbul, capital of İstanbul Province

Date: March 1999

Tekerleme

Once there was and once there was not,

In olden days when the sieve was in the straw,²

¹Formulaic opening for many folktales, the tekerleme may include a wide range of materials. A full tekerleme may run for many lines, though most narrators nowadays use only one to two parts of such a routine. The tekerleme is a nonsense jingle filled with paradoxes and other comic incongruities. It is meant both to amuse and to alert the audience to the fact that a tale is to follow. Some of the humor is lost in translation because it is difficult to reproduce in English the Turkish rime scheme.

²The humor here derives from the fact that the sieve is never in the straw; the straw is in the sieve. It refers to the threshing of grain on farms too small or too remote to have available modern threshing machines. On a dried clay threshing floor stalks of grain are thrown. They are chopped up into small pieces by a döven, a heavy wooden rectangle from the bottom of which protrude scores of sharp pieces of flint. When the chopped-up mass is winnowed, the chaff blows away, but there fall directly to the floor kernels of grain and small bits of the stem to which grain is still attached. Both the kernels and the small pieces of straw to which some kernels still cling are thrown into a sieve (about 30 inches in diameter). The kernels fall through onto a sheet of canvas, but the grain-laden straw remains in the sieve. The final threshing of these bits of straw is done by the fingers of the threshers.
Story 2083

When the camel was town crier and the flea a grocer,

While I was rocking my father's cradle, tingir mingir.

Tumbling out, my father cut his head
Against the door so that he bled.
"My son, go fetch the head physician!"
The doctor said, "Put fresh then dry manure
Upon his head," and this I did at once--
Fresh horse dung first and later dried.
And, lo! that head became a melon patch.
I planted watermelons there and soon
Became a merchant of that fruit.
When but one melon still remained, I took
A knife to slice it for myself
The blade slipped from my hand into the fruit.
I dived into the melon after it,
And there inside, whom should I see?
A bekçi\(^4\) father, club in hand.

\(^{3}\)Onomatopoeia for the sound of rocking.

\(^{4}\)A bekçi is a night watchman who patrols the streets of a city or town. A pair of bekçis often work together patrolling adjacent parallel streets. In the past they kept in touch with each other by means of signals blown upon a specially designed whistle. More modern means of communication are used now. Whether out of respect or fear, people often address one of these watchmen as bekçi father.
Story 2083

He asked, "What are you doing here?"

"Oh, bekçi father, 'tis my knife I seek."

It fell in here, and for it now I search

"Go, fool! How can you find a knife if I
Can't find my gold on forty mules in here?"

He said this angrily and clubbed my head
Which flew aboard a ship to England bound.

I had no option but to follow it

What should I see in England but my head
Selling onion skins and garlic too,
Out of a basket bottomless.

"Come over here! You are my head!"

"Only a judge can rule on that!" it said.

And so we went to court, but found

A fall downstairs had killed the judge.
Our case was thus postponed till Judgment Day. 5

5 The same narrator had told a somewhat different version of this tekerleme two years earlier. It is a common folkloric phenomenon for narrators to alter successive tellings of a given type. See ATON 2013 for İnci Pirinçcioğlu's initial rendition.