

THE ANKARA CROCUSⁱ
(ANKARA ÇİĞDEMİ)

By Hikmet Birand

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This winter we left another long, snowy, frosty and weary week behind. During the entire winter days, it wasn't possible—not even once—to open up to the prairies.

Today is the second Sunday of March—but actually the first warm and sunny one.

I took with me the herb box, the pocket trowel. I set off to İncesu. Nelli tagged along after me. But Nelli is aware of everything. Well, that shouldn't surprise you... This is Nelli who even counts the days of the week, who sneaks out every saturday secretively from the institute all by himself to come home, to Yenışehir, to join me every sunday on a hunting trip. With his intelligent eyes, he seems to be saying: "Well, this should be one of those sunday outings. My master did not take his hunting rifle. I guess this is another excursion often taken, in these seasons, in search of herbs." But Nelli is joyous. He is running, jumping, swirling around, turning back and jumping on my shoulders, sniffing stones and trees. He is pointing at the sparrows reveling in the bushes. Poor Nelli! He has every reason in being happy about this spring trip; well, he remained shut indoors during the entire winter.

I passed the plantation and entered the Incesu Creek. The creek is the same old creek, running the way she wishes to run. The willows, oleasters, poplar trees, almonds, hawthorn trees, oaks, quince trees, ash trees, as well as the blackberries and wild roses—ready to cover the creek with their green leaves after this short spring—are all naked. Glancing at them, I walk along the trail by the side of the creek. Just as the millions of seeds and grass which lay inside the humid soil all winter swelled and cracked open, buds of these trees are also impatiently waiting for the sun to rise, its light to heat up. Soon all of them will burst open; both sides of the creek, these gardens, these hillsides will be filled with life and colors. At every step, I will pass through clouds of fragrance that oleasters, thyme, veronica, and sage let loose to the air. Now I go round the little winding road, and arrive at the mill whose docile look I'm more delighted about every other year. I take a look at its wheel and I recall the man—I recall Yunus—who gave life to this wheel making it last forever, so that it would never stop, never slump, never decay.

Then I climb the southern slope of Incesu, and begin searching for old friends. Before I reach an elevation of thirty or forty meters, in front of the grey andezit block, and at the foot of the scrubby almond tree, which seems resentful about his ill fate with his entangled and dry branches, I see the first smiling crocus with its white petals, shooting out of the green lichen—the white crocus. I draw near to her: after a year's yearning, I take delight in this reunion and I say, "Welcome."

“You’re late,” I launch forth, “you’d blossom in the month of February in the previous years, and announce the approaching spring. Why so late this year?”

“What could be done? Snow laid on the ground for so long. This didn’t harm us but the thawing was so late. And we did not have the courage to lift our heads.”

“You’re right. This was such the winter. Did others arrive?”

“Yes, I think they arrived. But go forth and look for them. Who do you wish to chat with among us?”

“With the Ankaralı.^{iv}”

“Oh, really? Then see you next spring. So long...”

I move on some more, and go further up on the hillside. There you are, another white crocus. Another one, still another... Up on the left, a purple spot glitters among the yellow pebbles. I head toward that side, and I climb up. There you are... a purple crocus! I salute it and say goodbye after a little chitchat. I can see that spring has actually arrived in this pebbly hillside. Some of the ephemerals have sprouted and are about to bloom. The fresh and cotton-like hairy leaves of the spring starflower are all over the soil like a rosette. Let’s see what else there is. Oh!.. Here is a yellow crocus. Is he, I wonder, a native Ankaralı? No, this is *Creocus saturianus*. He looks like an Ankaralı but only a learned eye can tell them apart. I salute her as well, and move on searching for the Ankaralı. I run into many other crocuses: Violet, yellow, white, purple crocuses... I dig a couple of them out with my little trowel and put into the box to add to my collection. At last I find the Ankara crocus—its bright, deep yellow flowers facing the sun. She has spread her thin,

green, ribbon-like leaves onto the pebbles; content, exultant...

Immediately, I crouch down and I start a friendly chitchat:

“I have been looking for you over these hillsides for the past an hour and a half, and I’ve met all of your relatives. Oh, we’ve so many things to talk about. Would you share your story with me?”

“Here, light a cigarette, rest for a while so that we can talk at ease.”

“Your botanical name is *Crocus ancyrensis*. You see, Ankara is *Ancyra* in Latin. As your surname is *ancyrensis*, i.e., ‘a native of Ankara,’ your name is ‘Ankara crocus.’ Who gave you this name? Don’t you grow in lands other than Ankara?”

“My surname is older than the surname act. We are the old natives of Ankara. Long before the old Ankara was founded—even before the sons of Adam stepped on these lands—we settled on these hillsides—to Etlik, to Keçiören, to Hüseyingazi, to Mount Teke, to Mount Çal, to the Çankaya hillsides. We are natives from times immemorial. But we didn’t just get settled in Ankara; we spreaded out all over Anatolia. Some of us even went off as far as İstanbul. About a hundred years ago, a British named Herbert collected several corms of us from those Kocatepe ridges lying ahead—the hillsides on which houses grow now. He took us to England and he raised us at Spofforth. He thought we were the *Crocus angustifolius*—the crocus that grows across the Crimean peninsula and looks so alike to us. But Herbert’s fellow townsman, G. Mav, who developed a passion for our kind, had our kith and kin collected from all corners of the world. Our corms were sent to him... Ms. Gavan Gatheral, the lady deputizing for England’s Ankara consulate

at that time sent them from here; and the clergyman, A. W. Hubbard—the American missionary living in Sivas—sent them from there. G. Mav heard from another that Ms. Danford had seen us, in 1876, on Mount Ahir in Maraş and also on Mount Erciyes in Kayseri. Ms. Baker sent word to him that at the Kew Royal Museum, near London, we were among the plants that Lady Liston had collected from the environs of İstanbul. G. Mav prepared a fine monograph of our species, consisting of about eighty kinfolk. He was the first botanist to realize that we were not the same as the Crimean crocus. He is the one who named us *Crocus ancyrensis*. All in all, nobody knew us in these lands, but our fame spread first in England, and then in France. You see, Mr. P. E. Botta had taken our corms from here to Paris, and had raised us at Paris Botanical Gardens. Ever since, people across the world have known me as Ankara crocus. Besides, we belong to a well-established family. Saffron is also of our kind. Have you heard how popular its trade once was? Back in the 15th century, whoever did fraud with Saffron were hanged. In fact, in 1449, a profiteer named Friedenkern who'd sold saffron in Germany mixing it with other stuff prior to selling, was burned at stake with all his safran."

"Well, I've learned your name, your race and all. Now tell me... from where and when have you all arrived in these lands."

"Let's leave aside the past. As I've just said, we all arrived here long long time ago. We got settled here right after the glaciers—covering almost the entire surface of the earth—melted down. Hence, out of habit dating back to those times, I'm not fond of hot weather. This

explains the reason why I blossom at the end of winter, the beginning of spring.”

“Then you don’t much see the beautiful and warm spring days.”

“That’s correct. My life on earth is quite a short one. In the following few days, I need to hurry up and accomplish all of my duties. A difficult summer is awaiting me, droughty and hot. I spend all these summer days, and then all the winter days under the soil. Now I’m busy creating my bud that is going to sprout and grow next year, and also I’m busy with the wedding preparations—the silent wedding that is going to take place inside my flowers that you, humans are fond of.”

“Your wedding? I’m curious about this. But first I’d like to see your bud which will bloom next year, as you’ve said.”

“Dig the soil a bit with your little trowel—be careful not to hurt me—and see for yourself.”

After I dug the soil a bit, two bulbs on top of one another—the one below bigger, the one above smaller—became visible. Both of them were covered with layers and layers of light brown lace-like, embroidered cloth. Without waiting for me to ask, he started narrating:

“This bigger and hollow corm below is last year’s remain; the little one above is this year’s. Inside this little corm lies my tiny little bud. In this tiny bud lies a sketch of all that is me—all that you see about me now. This bud will sprout and grow next year, and it will grow leaves and blossom forth flowers. She will be the one to tell you that the spring days are arriving. But a long year is ahead of us until spring. So there is need to prepare her food and drinks for the year urgently at this time, and store them inside the bulb that is enveloping this bud. That’s why

I'm telling you I need to hurry up. Within the tiny green chlorophyll drops inside of these frail leaves, all that will feed my bud will be prepared—flour, sugar, oil, albumen, everything. Then, down from the leaves they will flow into this little bulb, and will be stored there, and as they are stored, the bulb will swell and grow.”

“Sorry for interrupting you. Are these tiny chlorophyll drops somewhat factories so that diverse substances could be produced? We human beings are compelled to build gigantic factories to be able to produce even a single one of these many substances. We get at each others necks for the raw materials which the factories will process. Then we also need the energy sources in order to set the factories to work.”

“Yes, everything you do in your huge gigantic factories, I do in my microscobic chlorophyll particles that are too tiny to be seen by the eye. And as for the raw materials, I don't depend on anyone. Because the raw material that I process is the air's carbon dioxide—the very air that I breath; and my energy source is the sun. The very sun and the air—mind you, no one can own them and everyone and all living beings can utilize them as much as they wish.”

“What about water? During the summer, these hillsides become quite arid. The soil dries up, hard as a rock. Doesn't ever your bud get thirsty?”

“Oh... It's been numerous years since I thought about it and found a solution. But you, human-beings... How many years has it been that you made silos to store wheat for the times of famine? How many years have passed since you built a dam on Çubuk Creek to prevent water

shortage when these creeks dry up and the wells are waterless? Now the soil is humid and generous. I get the water from it and store this water inside of the bulb. It is both my storage and cistern. I tightly cover it up layer after layer with leakproof corky wraps which do not let cold or hot in, which do not let the water to leak or evaporate. These corky wraps protect my bulb—full of delicious substances and water—from the greedy insects who go hungry and thirsty inside the dry soil, but they can not protect my bulb from you, humans. Oh, how much I suffer because of you! I prepare that stuff that I put into my bulb for my bud, for my child, so to speak... Not for you.

Humans dig me up in bunches, eat my bulbs, throw my flowers away. At this rate, I will go extinct on these hillsides soon. Then it will be quite bizarre. It won't be you but your kids who will see me, the Ankara crocus, not in Ankara but who knows where... Maybe in London or perhaps in Paris? You and I, we've been friends for a long time. It's your duty to call attention to me, to prevent them from bullying on me, to warn them to treat me as their fellow friend."

Just at this moment, a white-winged butterfly—with three black dots on each wing—came in sight. The crocus instantly became silent. The butterfly was flying on top of the crocus in a lovesick mood, as if not being able to decide whether to land on her or not; she was fluttering her wings before the flower, floating, floating, and then going away, performing different types of acrobatics by making strange circles in the air and coming back to the flower, turning back again, approaching the flower, and repeating the same games. Finally, after floating over the flower for quite a while, she landed. Right after the landing, she dipped

her tube, coiled up under her chin like an elephant's trunk, into the flower. Apparently she was drinking something thirstily. She had to dip her head and her tube deeper as the nectar inside lessened. While snuggling deep into the flower, her head was rubbing against the flower's pollen sacs, the flower was shaking and the butterfly's head, antennae, chest were turning yellow, and being powdered all over with the dust leaking from the sacs like a yellow mist. Now she was full. Slowly she was moving back. After coming out, she wiped her face and eyes with her fore legs and flew away immediately.

"Now my wedding ceremony is starting. That was the first ceremonial messenger. I have uploaded my yellow dust on her and sent to other crocuses."

"How could this messenger see and find you in this very large hillside, among these pebbles and bushes?"

"They like flamboyancy like you, humans. They get carried away with color effects and plays of light of the advertisement technique. The bright yellow color of my flower is for attracting the butterfly and stealing her heart. Her eyes are good at spotting this color. As for the white crocus, her ceremonial messenger is a moth. This is because, white is the most conspicuous color that can be distinguished in the darkness of night. These colors are no different from the plays of light and colorful posters that you make to attract customers to your hotels, shops and clubs."

"But we go to these places not for the advertisement itself, but for the thing being advertised. For example if we are drawn to a restaurant to which we are attracted by its advertisement, we ask for things to eat

and drink. Or else, it's not just the advertisement that we pay attention to."

"So do our butterflies. This butterfly visits me neither for my sake nor for the glossy yellow color of my flowers. The thing that ties her to me is, sadly, the most greedy concern in the world, the sense of acquisitiveness. You have just seen her. The moment she landed on me, she began to suck the sherbet^v that I prepared for her and just after quenching her thirst, she did not stay for a second and flew away. However I didn't treat her to my sweet sherbet for nothing. She has to repay me for the feast with a favor: I do not put the sherbet at a place that she can reach easily, I put it at such a place that when the butterfly places her head and chest inside, they rub against my anthers and thus are covered with dust coming off from the ripped pollen sacs and she carries them to another crocus she will visit in search of sherbet."

Here is another white butterfly. This is just like the other one: smaller, the edges of her wings are slightly torn. Obviously she wandered a lot; maybe the wind slammed her into the naked branches of trees, against the rocks, shredding the edges of her wings. Just like the other one, she played the same games and landed on the flower. But it was evident that this butterfly had landed on other crocuses before, because her head and chest had already turned deep yellow. She started out by landing first. She sent her tube down, striving to drain the remaining sherbet, moving without a pause, pushing her head deeper into the flower. With every move the pistils of the flower rubbed against the butterfly's head, brushing the yellow dust off her head. After the

butterfly flew away, a yellow mass of dust appeared at the forked top part of the pistil and the crocus said:

“Now my wedding ceremony has begun. These yellow pollens are male cells each having the essence which will bring a crocus to life. These cells will swell in the pistil’s sweet wetness, crack and by drilling the pistil with a pipe they will reach my ovary and inseminate my eggs. Seeds will come into being from these eggs and when the seeds are formed, I will scatter them to this infertile soil and I will trust them with its tenderness. Once this is done, I have nothing else to accomplish on the face of the earth. Before the hot days arrive, maybe tomorrow maybe day after tomorrow, my flowers will wilt, my leaves will gradually turn yellow. While my roots are shrinking, they will drag my corm to deeper and safer layers of the soil.”

“But why don’t you use your own pollen to inseminate yourself and give up bearing the burden of that butterfly which is no use except for carrying your pollens away?”

“No! I really don’t want this. If my eggs are inseminated by my own pollens, the seeds originating from them become weak and feeble. I know you are also careful about this. You wouldn’t marry your close relatives to prevent your children from becoming degenerated, right? We, as well, would want our male seeds to go to other crocuses; we want to mix blood so that the strong progeny can breed and multiply the differences that make the world beautiful. Let’s put it this way, we also like diversity.”

Clouds, white and dense clouds were emerging in the blue smoky sky. Some of the white ones were round like summer clouds. But most of

them looked like strange animals. Animal-like clouds with white chests, sunlight seeping out of their furs with thousands of glitters... There was also a big black cloud among them. The wind was pushing the clouds, some of them were moving slowly, some of them fast, one passing the other. A strange race had started. The black cloud left all of them behind and stretched from side to side in front of the sun like a curtain. A dimness covered all things around. Along with this dimness, the flower of the Ankara crocus started to close slowly. I was able to trace this movement step by step. Its yellow petals were rising slowly and folding up on each other. Finally they closed tightly. After all, neither the stamens nor the pistil were visible. The crocus had dived into deep silence, and I'd gotten immersed in watching the race of the clouds. A whole regiment of crows descended rapidly over a creek with a big clatter, and perched on the bare branches of a tall poplar. It was still possible to hear their clatter. They were cleaning their beaks by scraping them against the branches, calling out to each other. Another group that was left behind also joined them. The top of the tall and naked poplar tree became a strange view; there appeared black fruit which seemed like coons coming out of hell. The crows are a strange community... Gypsies, wanton creatures.

The darkness was lightening up and things around were being illuminated. I turned my head to the clouds. The race was going on. The sun had gotten rid of the black cloud, and had begun to shine with endless splendor. The flower of Ankara crocus that closed and took the shape of a yellow candle began to open up again. Now she opened and was smiling.

“I was so scared thinking that I offended you. Why did you close yourself?”

“No, why should I be offended? I got scared of that black cloud. I sense both warmth and light. When it is cold and dark, I close up. You see, these yellow pollens each bearing the essence that will bring a yellow crocus to life. They are very fragile. If they get wet, they decay; if they get cold, they freeze. This black cloud either brings rain or snow. Both rain and snow destroy, devour and decompose my pollens. For this reason, when it gets cold or black clouds cover up all over the sky, I immediately close up and thus protect both my pollens and my egg, which will be inseminated. I can feel even one degree of change in the air. Botanists call my opening and closing “thermonasty” and try hard to understand the causality and mechanism of it.

Our chat with the Ankara crocus had ended at this point. After uttering traditional sayings such as, “Let me not interrupt your work; let me not exhaust you any more,” I left, promising to meet with her again next spring. While climbing up the hillside I want to watch the sunset that is painting the horizons red. I climbed up the hill and sat on the belly of a rock. A red kite^{vi} passed near me like a lightning: a small, grey, and agile red kite. It descended on the creek. One of the crows in the creek began to caw bitterly. I knew what this meant. This was an “alarm.” When I turned my head to the creek, I saw the crows taking off altogether. With a fast circular motion they surrounded the red kite. But the red kite, like a hunter, was flying faster, descending down abruptly and rising quickly without flapping his wings. During these ups and downs, the last lights of the sun were being reflected like fire on his

yellowish chest. From time to time, he was making daring attacks, fast nosedives, and hitting a crow like lightning. And the crow was rolling down in turbulence after losing its balance with bitter shrieks, and long afterwards it was able to bounce back. Finally the red kite left the regiment of crows and disappeared after becoming a small dot on the smoky horizon.

Now I was sitting on the hill and smoking. I felt both younger and a thousand years older on this hillside. Talking to myself I was saying: In this solitary place, what is the difference between me, a human, from those grasses, those clouds, those pebbles of the hillside? Oh, how free I am! Let's go, Nelli...

ⁱ The late Hikmet Birand donated all his assets and revenues to the Turkish Education Foundation to enable scholarships to be granted to students with financial difficulties. Turkish Education Foundation, the appointed heir, grants permission for this English translation and publication. Source: Hikmet Birand. "Ankara Çiğdemi" in *Anadolu Manzaraları*. Ankara: TÜBİTAK Popüler Bilim Kitapları, 2008. 37-52.

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^{iv} Ankaralı: a native of Ankara.

^v Sherbet: a cold drink of sweetened and diluted fruit juice.

^{vi} *Milvus milvus*