

Saga

SAMPLER

ALSO BY ENIS BATUR IN ENGLISH

Ash Divan

SAMPLER

Saga

*Poems from East-West Dîvan
and Other Works*

Enis Batur

Edited by Clifford Endres & Saliha Paker

Translated by

*Neil P. Doherty, Gökçenur Ç., Clifford Endres,
Selhan Savcıgil-Endres, Mel Kenne & Saliha Paker*

Shearsman Books

First published in the United Kingdom in 2026 by
Shearsman Books Ltd
PO Box 4239
Swindon
SN3 9FN

Shearsman Books Ltd Registered Office
30–31 St. James Place, Mangotsfield, Bristol BS16 9JB
(this address not for correspondence)

www.shearsman.com

ISBN 978-1-83738-027-5

Translations copyright © by the individual translators, 2026
Original poems copyright © Enis Batur, 2015, 2016, 2020, 2025

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our thanks to the editors of the following publications, in which some
of the translations or photographs first appeared:

Çeşnel Yılları 2017: 'Fairy'
Tusadik A Translation Review, 2018: 'Fear'
Witty Partisan 13, Vol. II, 2021:
'After Maurice Scève: Ten Versions, One Tribute'
The Punch Magazine, 2020: 'Porphyrogennetos'
Turkish Poetry Today 2017: 'Red' and 'Burnt'

Contents

Translators' Note / 8

Fairy / 9

Foreword / 10

Poems Selected for Saga

Fear / 17

Burnt / 26

The Light / 27

First / 28

The Cave / 29

The Seraphim / 30

Red / 31

Saga / 33

Porphyrogenetos / 49

In the Hagia Triada Library / 50

Misopogon / 51

After Maurice Scève: Ten Versions, One Tribute / 52

Gushing / 63

VARIATIONS ON KARACAOĞLAN POEMS:

The Shield / 64

Sword / 65

Ash Writing / 66

Five Roses / 67

Subjunctive Mood / 68

Poems for the Last Person Singular / 69

Four Epilogues / 92

Remedy / 96

SIgNe / 97
Parable of Abdal of the Sea / 98
Branchings Out / 99

Notes / 108
Turkish Sources of the Poems / 114
Author and Translator Biographies / 115

SAMPLER

*in memory of Selhan Savcigil-Endres (1957–2019)
whose vibrant presence, hard work, and lively participation over the years
in the Cunda Workshop, especially the final sessions of 2016–2017,
will not be forgotten*

SAMPLE

Translators' Note

Following its appearance in Italian and Persian in the 1990s, the poetry of Enis Batur has since been translated into many other languages but mostly into French. The first collection of his work in English was published in 2006 in the U.S.A. by Talisman House, Publishers. The English translations in *Saga* have their beginnings in the last annual meeting of The Cunda International Workshop for Translators of Turkish Literature in September 2016. The Workshop was initiated in 2005–2006 by Saliha Paker and colleagues from Boğaziçi University and Kadir Has University, with the financial support of the Turkish Ministry of Culture. Over the course of ten years it convened annually on the Aegean island of Cunda, off the town of Ayvalık, bringing literary translators from Turkey and abroad together with Turkish poets and fiction writers for intensive collaborative work. All six of the translators who worked on the poems chosen for *Saga* had been active and productive participants in the Workshop. Previously, Clifford Endres and Selhan Savcığil-Endres, Mel Kenne, and Saliha Paker had also worked for many years on their co-translations for *Ash Divan*, so they were quite familiar with the aspects of form and style characteristic of Enis Batur's poetry. Maintaining continuity as a matter of principle, the translators, joined by Neil P. Doherty and Gökçenur Ç., carried on with their work on *Saga* over the years as a team. Generally they worked in pairs and were credited for the final versions of their translations after critiquing and proofreading each other's work as they focused on preserving the unity of tone and voice in these burgeoning series of poems. We must also note that at our first meeting of the Workshop in September 2016 (which, due to unforeseen difficulties also happened to be the last in the sequence of Cunda Workshops), our group was aided by some very valuable input from the poet himself, who took part in a number of the sessions. In one, we discovered to our surprise and delight that Enis Batur had composed the following poem for us, thus marking a truly memorable occasion.

Fairy *for Saliha*

It seems that Neil, while translating “Poems
for the Last Person Singular,” wakes during the night,
his wife, knowing he has got up from bed and
gone to his study, grows uneasy, while one of his hands
dangles in space the other strokes his long beard,
wouldn’t I know, as a bearded man myself?
Talk then moves to ghosts, Saliha says she
would like to translate “Apparition,” my piece
on the Büyükada Orphanage, I am telling Selhan
and Cliff a fairy story involving Beckett,
as husband and wife they sit, intensely engrossed
in my Maurice Scève poems, cold facts have
long since placed the mysterious Poet
of Lyon among the ghosts. On a whim,
I begin to talk of Yeats and Neil, impassioned,
flies to Ireland on the back of the *shee*,
I hear Gökçenur’s voice reminding him that
I had once translated “When You Are Old.”

Late that night I took *Writings on Irish Folklore*,
Legend and Myth down from my bookshelf,
while skimming through the *Sheehogue*, *Deene*
Shee and *Marra Shee*, the great Yeats himself
appeared suddenly at the window opposite my desk—
drawing my attention to a sentence of his
on the island’s peasant beliefs: “fallen angels
who were not good enough to be saved,
nor bad enough to be lost.”—I almost
leapt out of the wicker chair I was sitting in:
I had not forgotten how one night thousands of
years ago I walked out of my tent by the shore
of Lake Tuz and while I was looking up at the sky,
composed the very same sentence out loud.

Enis Batur,
September 2–7, 2016. *Translated by Neil P. Doherty*

Foreword

Almost twenty years have gone by since Enis Batur's poetry was first introduced to English readers with *Ash Divan* (2006, Talisman House, Publishers).¹ The broad array of poems in that critically acclaimed volume brought Batur to the attention of a growing English-speaking audience, and revealed in particular his energetic engagement with both Near Eastern and Western sources. In the meantime, his corpus of poetry has grown exponentially, offering an even wider scope for the verses of his maturity to flourish.

While the current volume comprises only a fraction of his ever-growing *oeuvre*, it presents some of the poet's most important recent work from *East-West Divan* (2018), his collection of "dramatic" poems.² We have also included some of his outstanding lyrical poetry from various collections. The moving spirit of Batur's vibrant verse draws deeply on his vast range of disparate sources. Of major significance to him is what he calls, in his preface to *Ash Divan*, "my relationship to diverse poets with widely different poetics." The dynamics of this relationship, he goes on to say, have led him to channel his own poetry "in three separate directions: lyric, epic, and dramatic ... each genre following a different course..."³ Our translations in *Saga* offer readers a memorable taste of the poet's wide-ranging literary and cultural receptiveness and exemplify how it informs his art.

Batur's abiding interest in French and other European authors, which doubtless derives from his early education and academic studies in France, had, at the beginning of his career, led some Turkish readers to view his poetry as "alien."⁴ Were such an approach to be taken now it would overlook the poet's life-long, parallel engagement with Ottoman and

¹ *Ash Divan, Selected Poems of Enis Batur*, ed. Saliha Paker, Talisman House, Publishers, 2006. The title *Ash Divan* was chosen by the translators, Clifford Endres, Selhan Savcıgil Endres, Saliha Paker, Mel Kenne, Coşkun Yerli, and Ronald Tamplin, with the approval of Enis Batur.

² *The East-West Divan (Doğu-Batı Divanı, Dramatik Şiirler (1988–2018))* is the general title given to the large volume of "dramatic poems," made up of seven collections, each named a Divan (the Ottoman-Turkish term for a poetry collection), and each bearing a different title.

³ *Ash Divan*, Enis Batur's introduction, 'A Concave Conversation,' p.6, p. 4 respectively.

⁴ *Ibid.*

modern Turkish literature, for in truth his sources range from such classical Ottoman poets as Bâkî, to the mystic bards of Anatolian folk tradition, along with the love balladeer Karacaoğlu, to modernist poets like Oktay Rifat, Melih Cevdet, Behçet Necatigil, and beyond.

In his acceptance statement on receiving the Turkish PEN Poetry Prize in 2024, Enis Batur declared, “My pursuit of poetry runs on a twofold path: On the one hand I engage with the verse of others, be they old or new, local or foreign—reflecting, writing, and striving to throw light on those who have been forgotten. On the other, I choose to stay utterly alert to subtle adjustments while crafting a poem in my own constellation; and I choose to continue writing in ‘pure, undiluted ink,’ at the risk of being read less widely.”⁵ This credo is particularly significant in the way it draws attention to Batur’s distinctive policy of integrating his creative work with his critical essays on Turkish and European poetry, which happen to be far more widely read than his poetry.

Batur offers a vision of the “East-West” as a hyphenated, singular literary-cultural concept that is broadly integrative and may be best explained by an analogy (in reverse direction) with Goethe’s *West-östlicher Divan* (1819) and his unique perception of the “West-East” that underlies his translations of Hafez.⁶ For in Batur’s poetry, East and West, as well as past and present are welded into an organic whole, thus leading the poet far beyond the tired duality of an “East-West synthesis” or an “East-West divide.” Batur’s sensibility is in fact measured, selective, and woven seamlessly into the poems: there the classical or the historical references of the “East-West” can meet and converse with the modern or the contemporary on the same plane, a feature we see repeatedly in the poems of *Saga*.

While most of the questions that might arise in regard to the contents of the poems assembled here are addressed by the end notes, the longer poems merit some commentary relating to certain thematic and aesthetic concerns that emerge as leitmotifs in the context of the book’s poetic sequence.

In ‘Fear’ we see the predominating notion of the poet as a sort of architect, “a creator of spaces: spaces of thought, motion, and imagination

⁵ From Enis Batur’s acceptance statement for the 2024 Turkish P.E.N. Poetry Prize (Enis Batur’dan 2024 Şiir Bildirisi,” P.E.N. March 18, 2024. pen.org.tr)

⁶ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *West-Eastern Divan*. Complete, annotated new translation, including Goethe’s ‘Notes and Essays’ & the unpublished poems, by Eric Ormsby. GINGKO. Internet Archive; Enis Batur, ‘Batı Doğu Divanı: İki Işık Arası Küçülen Gecemiz,’ (The West East Divan: Our Night Shrinks in Between Two Lights) *Smokinli Berduş, Şiir Yazıları (1974–2000)* pp.369-372, YKY İstanbul.

where readers can dwell and find meaning.”⁷ The poem is composed of memories—each within its own verse-space—that are triggered by a set of photographs taken many years before in the poet’s Istanbul office as he and two friends, an artist and an architect, discuss, among other things, the politics of Turkish poetry. When the subject of architecture arises, the Ottoman builder Sinan is duly invoked as the ultimate master of the form. In poetry, however, the building materials are less tangible. Here, past events are wedded to a chain of memories that ultimately coalesce in the figure of an arachnid-poet who spins a web of words to ward off mortality and loss. Yet if ‘Fear’ ends in the poet’s personal anxiety, a general sense of angst pervades in ‘First’, ‘The Cave’, and ‘The Seraphim’,—the poems that follow ‘Fear’—and grows in intensity until it culminates in ‘Red’, the final poem of Burnt Divan.

‘Red’ begins with the cry, “My country is burning.” It pictures an apocalyptic state of affairs whose overtones reverberate with meaning for the political life of the country. Mid-way in the verse we discover that the narrator identifies with the Daidalos of Greek mythology. While known to be a wise, resourceful and inventive protagonist, Daidalos yet again fails tragically in ‘Red’, this time in a battle against the forces of destruction and chaos that are tearing the country apart. The poem ends in utter despair with Daidalos’ lament that “in a widening lake / of crimson and brown, “we’re sinking to the bottom.” Likening the hapless Daidalos to a figure in one of Goya’s “dark paintings” on the wall of the Prado, the poet—like Daidalos, a maker himself—positions mythology and art as the frame of reference for contemporary reality and its poetic mirror.

Incorporated as the final collection in a new, expanded edition of *Doğu-Batı Dîvanı* (East-West Divan), published in 2018, Burnt Dîvan appears to be emblematic of the end of a certain cycle in Batur’s poetry.

‘Saga’, the poem from which the present collection takes its title, is one of the most impressive poems in Batur’s *East-West Divan*. In its short but powerful prose prologue an elderly sage has a dream depicting *a globe dripping in blood*, and in anticipation of his demise he advises his disciple to *Take care of this earth beneath us, try to cover it at the very least with a looking glass*. In the verses that follow, a poet is on his way to visit the ruins of Sagalassos, the Hellenistic-Roman city in the Taurus mountains. Ancient history will overlap with the present day on the excavation and restoration site as the poet and the chief archaeologist meet and engage in conversation. On the subject of the fallen portrait head of Emperor Hadrian, the poet

⁷ Enis Batur, Interview with Elif Tanrıyar, *Gazete Oksijen*, March 8, 2024.

points out to his host the similarity of their vocations: *Any poet or writer who doesn't stray from the core of literature is essentially an excavator. We must descend from the surface to the depths in order to find what we are searching for, and even if we don't find it we must still experience the search. ... Think of Memoirs of Hadrian, isn't there an extraordinary work of excavation behind it?*" These words lead to the crucial question of how civilizations are periodically destroyed but are only occasionally restored. This plumbing of the depths emerges in and of itself as a major current of Batur's poetry from the dramatic to the mystical. In 'Saga', it leads him finally toward his true object of interest in Sagalassos: the great Flavius Neon Library built in Hadrian's time and then restored by Julian the Apostate several centuries later.

Two shorter poems, 'In the Library of Haghia Triada' and the tragic 'Porphrogennetos', connect in some ways with 'Saga'; both are grounded in the concept of the physical survival of libraries by means of which, this time, the Byzantine past finds its way into Batur's deeply contemplative verse.

With its call-and-response *a cappella* structure, 'Poems for the Last Person Singular' flows in a series of stanzas, each accompanied by a haiku-like poem, that seem to act as oblique commentaries on both the preceding verse and the work as a whole. 'Poems' must surely count as one of the most innovative of Batur's later works, opening up to different voices and perspectives and resisting any final interpretation. Batur, in an interview,⁸ has described most of them as verses composed not at his desk but conjured up during the walks he also took abroad from 2007 to 2014. They seem to be haunted now and then by the pervasive spirit of a wayfaring mystic (a frequent motif in his poetry), who is aged, somewhat troubled, and nostalgic. The concluding poems—'Four Epilogues' and 'A Lullaby for Kum (in bittersweet mode)'—at once echo what has come before and trace new paths through a labyrinth that is ever-reluctant to let go of the reader.

The sequence of poems in our collection ends with 'Branchings Out'. This long poem presents a profoundly personal dramatic monologue that serves as the last testament to a poet's lifelong dedication to the study of his art. It develops through a series of arguments by an elderly poet addressing a sharp younger critic whose book seems to have misinterpreted his work. The poet's narrative that proceeds in a step-by-step response to counter the views of his critic, reveals the roots of his poetry, in which a significant yet

⁸ Enis Batur, Interview with Gamze Akdemir, *Cumhuriyet Book Supplement*, March 30, 2015.

hardly noticed leitmotif becomes more apparent: the mystical thread that ties in particularly with such cryptic poems (earlier in the sequence) as ‘Gushing’, ‘*SigNe*’, and ‘Parable of Abdal of the Sea’. In the end, the poet sums up a history of his poetics by drawing attention to what he calls his “Tree text”: *That tree, / he explains, is formed of many trees: inklings of oak, willow, / horse chestnut, sycamore, magnolia—all in one*, evoking the mystical union that branches out from the creative heart of his artistry.

Clifford Endres, Saliha Parker, Mel Kenne

SAMPLER

Poems Selected for *Saga*

SAMPLER

SAMPLER

Fear

*Time in passing wipes out, blurs, diminishes time.
Can't remember which year it was, 1998 or 1999,
before that, or later. No question about the location, though:
it was my office overlooking İstiklal Avenue. Must've forgotten why
we had met: who could've got us to sit at the same table for what
I remember as a closed session on the triangle of Art, Architecture, and Poetry.
Our conversations were recorded, the "accident" that befell them
was revealed months later. Then, a compact print of thirty photos
mixed up with my papers came to light.
Who had taken them? Samih Rifat, perhaps—*

SAMPLER

recordings deleted, a pocket in my memory
had saved whatever it would: in a top row
photo, last from the left, first from the right, why
is Turgut Cansever laughing as he listens to me,
I recall every bit of detail in the conversation.
The topic shifts to the Erteğün residence in Bodrum,
Ömer, leaning his face on his right hand, I with my cigarette
gathering ash all along, we listen, in pure attention,
to the story how that magnificent, double-winged mansion was erected,
much later I open a parenthesis—

SAMPLER

had opened one: the summer of 1975, Hüsnü Göksel asks me
over to lunch at his home, son-in-law of the Ertegun family,
he was there in the crowd on the seafront when Münir Ertegun's
remains were delivered by the battleship *Missouri* in 1946,
to a country bewildered, with bright WELCOME lights
strung between two minarets of a mosque,
farther away, a sign pinned on a brothel wall,
“Welcome to the Sailors” in English,
students, intellectuals from the left demonstrating in protest—

SAMPLER