Hagia Sophia (forthcoming in "Into a New Country")

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Hagia Sophia

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Enter past Corinthian columns
through the gate to inner narthex,
into the cavern of great wooden shields
emblazoned with Koranic verses.
Layers of columns and narrow windows
undergird the billowing dome
that twice rose from its ashes,
reaching to the heavens.
Painted saints hover in tympana. Pierced
by archways, the nave leads
to the galleries and gates
of hell and heaven. Carvings
on elaborate railings chronicle
the ravages of Roman, Norman,
Lombard, Seljuk, Ottoman.

Inside the Empress’s hallway
lit from windows high above,
faces hover on a golden wall—
mournful, large-eyed comely
Virgin and the Baptist, eyes
contorted below unhoused
hair, knotted beard extending
to his turbulent folds and sleeves,
sainthood insufficient to dispel
the agony of his unruly soul,
while Christ the highborn, head
surrounded by a golden halo,
raises his right hand in blessing
or in condemnation, in his left a jeweled
book, blue cloak laid placidly across
his shoulders. Craftsmen, through
the miracle of gold leaf over glass,
captured the shadow that crosses
his neck and clavicle,
pink blush of cheeks, and
hazel eyes that follow you
with judgment or with sympathy
and look directly into yours.

And we are shadows made of blood,
the heart a vaulted dome
of archways leading ever inward
toward darkened niches where we hide
our treasures. Letters carved
into our memories proclaim the hordes
that rumbled through our past and scorn
the candle-lighted galleries
where we display our hollow pride.

Outside, a full moon climbs above the Bosporus,
rains light upon the silver dome. Amid the market’s
flutes and tambourines, gulls soar and dive
into the glow of minarets, fling themselves
across the circled radiance like empty sleeves.