"One winter night on a hill

where the huge refuse bins came daily and dumped the city's waste, eight shelters were set up by lantern-light near the garbage heaps. In the morning the first snow of the year fell, and the earliest scavengers saw these eight huts pieced together from the materials bought on credit - sheets of pitchpaper, wood from building sites, and breezeblocks brought from the brickyards by horse and cart..."

from *Berji Kristin – Tales from the Garbage Hills*
translated by Ruth Christie and Saliha Paker, Marion Boyars,
London/New York, 1993, 1996

Many years ago, one summer, as I was crossing the dry creek bed at the Sanayi - that stretch of wild gecekondu gulley which runs all the way to Kağıthane - I shivered with a strange feeling. It was deep enchantment followed by a rush of intuition! Ritual activity - wheelbarrows, sand, wires, breezeblocks - repair work on the steep, crooked alleys descending at right angles to the stream, brought to mind the image of threshers. "Harvest", I sighed, "it seems the peasants' summer adventure goes on in this way nowadays." I walked on, the miracle of an inspiration in my consciousness, my own very first thought welling up from deep down.

I've always felt I was from the gecekondu, though I never lived in one. Istanbul had crushed the memory of my birthplace and what I knew about the world. As I lived on with a deep sense of want and being held in contempt, it was possible for my

childhood - my peasantness - to be revived and treasured thanks to the gecekondus and the gecekondu people. I was able to look back on my past with the inspiration I drew from them. The gecekondu entered my life as a possibility, as one morning when my past had become useless, it worked on the fear I felt, and on the sense of absence that blossomed in my heart. The gecekondu was the expression of homes that did not exist, that were lost... A broken, diminished form in search of its origin, as if multiplied by an invisible mirror, reflected back to the earth and the sky. If I hadn't been spellbound by that intense vision of absence, would I have been able to build a life story for myself which never touched Istanbul, which began somewhere that did not exist?

from *The Gecekondu* (Istanbul, 1992)

I never could feel that I belonged to Istanbul. My sense of location is vague. This is also inherent in my writing. Maybe there's a link between the kind of shape Istanbul has now taken and the way people feel they don't belong here. It has to do with a sense of disconnection that legitimises everything done to this city. I can't express how I feel about Istanbul without talking about a sense of want. I live in a city, I love it, I can relate to it, but with a sense of want. There's a kind of distance between us. But, having seen many other cities, I also realised I couldn't live anywhere else in the world. I know that I can only live here, although I don't feel I belong. My sense of not belonging has a long history - a history resulting from a sense of remoteness and alienation from the city. Of course I was somewhat hurt by the way people whom I could identify as 'us' interfered with the city and how they thought of this as a legitimate exercise. My feeling was that those people were still looking at the mountains from the gardens of their homes back in their villages...My elder brother said something very striking one day when we were both looking out to Istanbul from the top of Camlica Hill. "D'you know, Latife," he said, "this city is very hurt about us."

This phrase, grammatically incorrect, stabbed me in the heart.

"Because," he continued, "we were so busy putting up a fight here, that we didn't turn around to take a caring look at the city." Indeed, people came to this city but couldn't turn around and

take a caring look at it. The people and the city couldn't get to know each other. When we came to live in Istanbul, we settled in Yenimahalle, Besiktas. We used to watch fires there. In retrospect, I feel that our past had been lost and our future was ablaze. We weren't aware of anything. Nor were we able to look at the city in the same way as the people who had long been living there.The city people used to burn down their wooden houses or mansions so that they could build blocks of apartments instead.

For myself, I can say that I've loved this city with a certain sense of lack and sorrow. But a lot of people couldn't even do that. They were involved in a great struggle. Viewing the phenomenon from a different angle, I think what really happened was that the stage had shifted. More than half the population of Istanbul live in the gecekondus and only a small minority have a salary. In order to survive, the great majority have to enter the city and find the money. The inner city is where people hunt for money. The fight has been going on for years. As people looked for money, they made up their minds and began to exploit the signs of a lifestyle which they longed for without knowing what it was. All the clothes and accessories they wore, the language they used, came about as the result of such efforts. They began to steal words, imitate ways of dressing, so that markets were formed. So many were involved in this struggle that some were bound to become much too clever at it. And that's when the stage shifted, for the people had stolen the show.

That's how I see my writing career too. I came from among those people and stole the writer's business. Essentially there's something stolen about this business. Maybe that's why I haven't been able to internalise writing for a career and that's why I'm looking from a very different angle at the Istanbul experience. Our fathers were roadworkers. Mine too. First they built the roads. We came to this city building the roads, travelling the roads our fathers built. Poor and routeless, we had no other way. But that way we settled in houses whose residents had left them to decay, which they did not want to inhabit any more, with which they were so angry that they wanted to burn them down, and which they finally abandoned. We crowded into those houses in huge numbers. Our fathers then built new houses for the people who didn't want the old ones any more. And this was a

process for much celebration - just like that experienced when Turks first went to work in Germany. It was a joyful encounter. There was no sense of repulsion at first. I, too, experienced the happiness of that joyful encounter. For the people who came to this city promised something and found encouragement. So we settled in those unwanted houses. Their architecture, everything about them, was alien to us. We gazed in wonder at their ceilings, the wood panelling, their ovens. Our fathers built new houses for the old residents, and we paid them back in rent from the money our fathers earned by building them new homes. Because those people were our landlords the process had begun so unfairly that the two sides could never really meet; 'them' and 'us' were two extremities far apart and opposed to each other.

So the situation today is the consequence of an inescapable process. The people who kept building new houses for their landlords, who paid them back partly in rent, partly in other ways and gradually became more and more impoverished over the years, stole the show when they began to imagine they could build houses of their own and wear the kind of clothes the others wore. These are the people who kept producing things that didn't belong to them, who were part of a lifestyle which they couldn't experience themselves. Naturally, in the process, they also learnt how to claim ownership over things they produced. I, too, went through the experience of 'learning'. There was access to reading, to writing, and to publishing books... But I felt there was always 'something that blocked the way'. The climate kept changing and shutting me out. Anything could happen, but what did actually happen was that that sense of lack never went away. Then I discovered that what shut me out was language. When I realised that, I started to write. For someone else this could have been a house with central heating or clothes to wear...

As a writer, I also see my own adventure as part of what happened on that stage. Like other adventures that, too, took place in Istanbul.

from "Istanbul is Hurt About Us"
(Interview-1994)

Today, like other professions, the writer's profession enjoys special privileges, a special seat of power. As for me, I'm still

trying to identify myself with the poor. Poverty, in turn, demands of me not to have internalised either a sense of possession or a sense of power. The privilege of my profession makes me feel ashamed. Besides, in my case, there's a two-fold implication: as a writer, I claim the privilege of talking about the poor and their suffering and end up becoming a kind of authority about them.

from 'Writing and Poverty"
(Interview in Defter, *1987)*

One of our 'palaces' on the gecekondu high streets is the *Cefa Sarayi* in Gültepe. This mirrored, two-storey beer joint is located in the infamous Ortabayir area - infamous because every time there was a traffic jam in Levent, there was bound to be a corpse lying in Ortabayir. The names of those daytime victims naturally remain on a faded leaf left in terrorism's history. In those days there used to be many fashion palaces in Gültepe, as if the dead could do their shopping there.

Who knows, maybe the owners of those palaces had imagined that the young murderers who killed people from boredom would kit out themselves at those palaces - isn't that a possibility? It could even be that the people of Gültepe, who did not wish to be targeted for wearing the same clothes every day, had chosen to survive by means of an assortment of clothes... Why? Because these fashion palaces disappeared as soon as the shrieks of terrorism stopped, in the same way that Ferdi Tayfur's painfully vociferous songs were no longer heard after the 12th of September [1980].I wonder if it was dazzling intelligence or dazzling confusion that led the people of Gültepe to make a connection between Julio Iglesias and the day called September 12th? Or did those people glorify the mellow-toned Iglesias because they had to have a 'king' singer for the beer palaces that replaced fashion palaces?

As for the story of the mirrored *Cefa Sarayi*, if you happen to go by Ortabayir, you may see a sign which is misread by everyone living at Gültepe. The name of the mirrored beer joint is *Cafe Saray* (Palace Cafe), not *Cefa Sarayi*, (Palace of Pain). One may think, "What a hopeful misreading!"? What if the people of Gültepe happen to misread every sign, price, and ballot?

Nowadays, high streets not just in Gültepe but in all other gecekondu areas, have filled up with furniture palaces. Nothing but wood-carved furniture, in tasseled, embossed velvet upholstery! The new political era ushered in on the gecekondu high streets must be the reign of the furniture palaces. In the backstreets and sidestreets, on the other hand, it's the reign of clandestine refrigerator, television, and cooker repair shops set up by fired workers right next to their gecekondus, bearing their surnames - Gül Electricity, Bircan Lathe... It is rumoured that families are breaking up, the wives of some are running off with married men, and that in factories there are organised networks of prostitution. Evidently the people of Gültepe will scatter the ashes of furniture palaces too before waiting for the next [military] memorandum. They will think it's clever to fall to pieces, shouting and screaming, rather than listen to the peaceful tones of Iglesias on tasseled armchairs in little palace-like gecekondu homes. In all probability, surgical palaces will rise on the hot ashes of the furniture palaces, to see to birth control and related matters. All the same, one has to say that the Veluna furniture palace stands a good chance of remaining there for some time. It looks as if Veluna, owned by the brothers Veysel, Lutfu, Nail from the Black Sea region, will stay on thanks to the consumer-tempting tickle of its name, Veluna, a Laz beauty perhaps! 'Veluna or The Hot Ashes of the Gecekondu Palaces'.

(Yeni Gundem, 1985)

Latife Tekin (1957), was born into a poor family with seven siblings. In many of her works, she narrates her life experiences in a fictionalized framework.

FAULT LINE

In Istanbul, on August 20, 1995,
a man sat at a bar crying.
Everyone pretended not to see him,
but I observed him closely.

At first he shook his head
as if he were trying to shake off
something that claimed him like a bad memory.

His white hair combed back neatly
and his stoic countenance contradicted
the tears building up slowly
in the corners of his eyes,

which finally overflowed and began
to send rivulets down his cheeks,
quickly wiped away before
the entire edifice of his look
began, almost imperceptibly at first,
to quake, as if the foundations
that held up the severe walls enclosing
the inner life had given way
to some deeper force pushing up
against the helpless face.

At last all walls cracked, then crumbled
completely, falling into cupped hands
that rose quickly to catch the pieces,
and the whole city rocked to the sobs
that broke from the heaving fault,
sending shock waves to surrounding municipalities,
which, suffering some tremors themselves
but negligible collateral damage,
surveyed the situation from various locales
in the vicinity of the epicenter,
and sympathized but sent no aid,

seeing that they could do nothing
for they held their own lives
trembling weakly in their hands.

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