

I have
never read
another book
like this one.*

And perhaps you haven't either. True originality is unusually difficult to define because it gives the impression of existing for the first time and this – fortunately – precludes generalisations. Within an original work you lose your way. If you stay with it, you are captured, you are forced to reside there, and the experience becomes unforgettable. If you don't like losing your way, you shut the book, you mutter Nonsense! and it remains closed to you, probably for ever.

It was several years ago I first lost my way in Latife Tekin's book. I had already lost my way many times in Istanbul, the city she writes about. I was visiting people in the shanty-towns. I was often on the Bosphorus ferry plying between Asia and Europe. My feet got dusty with exactly the dust of the earth she describes. And suddenly what I was watching, what I was brushing shoulders with, what I was turning my back on, what I would never see, what I was deaf to, was given a voice in her book. A book in which I again lost myself, but this time in the labyrinth of her understanding.

Several years later, through mutual Turkish friends, we met, Latife and I. And during an entire evening we kept on laughing. Laughing, I think, at the inexplicable. For example, we'd have laughed a lot – if we'd known about it then – at the idea of my writing a preface to her book!

* Preface to Berji Kristin - *Tales from the Garbage Hills*, by Latife Tekin

We were laughing partly because, without a proper common language between us, laughter was the best alternative to silence. (For different reasons, this is often the case in this book.) But also we were laughing at everything that can never be said anywhere. Two writers at the end of their tether, laughing about it. Such laughter is very Mediterranean. It begins where lucidity and sunlight say the same thing.

Of course Latife Tekin didn't set out to be original. If the thought ever crossed her mind, it would have been before she was thirteen. Artists who retain such an ambition are ones who never grow up. The originality of Tekin's mature book is the direct consequence of its story. Before her, no shanty-town had entered literature – had entered written narrative – as an entity in itself. If shanty-towns were there, they were there as décor or as social problems. In Tekin's *Tales From the Garbage Hills* a shanty-town community becomes the centre of the world, holding the stage and addressing the sky.

She has written down what before had never been written down. Other books by others will follow – perhaps have already followed – but their and our debt to her is enormous. It isn't that she showed the way. We all lose our way and there are a hundred ways. But she showed that it was possible, possible for any reader anywhere in the world, to at last imagine the centre of the world as a shanty-town! If you want to do that, read this book.

It's about language. Not because Latife is a post-modernist or a structuralist, but because she is familiar with the lives lived on the garbage hills. She knows deeply how nick-names, stories, rumours, jingles, gossip, jokes, repartee, constitute a kind of home, even the most solid home, when everything else is temporary, makeshift, illegal, shifting and without a single guarantee. Wind, dust, wind. Yet the *Tales* save from oblivion more effectively than the roofs give shelter. Everything is polluted on the hills except the legendary names people earn with their lives, and the laughter takes the arm of heartbreak and death is venomous and everywhere.

The story-teller of the *Tales* is rumour. As a means of expression rumour is not much approved of in places where certitudes rule. Law courts. Ministries. The offices of managing directors. Colleges. Rumour is worse than myth for it is

uncontrollable. The only big institution where rumour is rife is the Stock Exchange. The stockbrokers deal with (and create) events in a nexus which is volatile, unpredictable, often inexplicable, risky and packed (over-populated with money). Rumour is a mass reaction to trying to follow, anticipate and hold together events which are always on the brink of chaos. This is why – astonishingly – Wall Street and the garbage hills have one thing in common. The noise of rumour.

Otherwise of course they are the opposite poles of this planet, one occupied by winners, the other by losers: one set of rumours signalling the best way to make money, and the other set of rumours whispering about the latest crazy slender hope of survival. The first on the verge of mental breakdown – as the pharmaceutical record shows. The second on the verge of fairy story – so long as one remembers that fairy stories, when first told, were as cruel as life.

Rumour is born of the irrepressible force of a community's imagination deprived of shelter or any guarantees. And Latife Tekin has found here the voice of rumour. I don't know how she found that shanty voice. But it came to her like genius. There are comparable pages by Joyce where he found the male voice of drunken rumour. Tekin's rumour is feminine and sober. Never maudlin. Never shocked. Never rhetorical. Never flinching. As if rumour were an angel with a sword.

She walks blindfolded through wherever people gather on the hills – the car battery factory, the brickworks, the linen factory, Nato Avenue, the detergent factory, the hen houses, the grocery stores, the trade union meetings, the mosques, the cardboard homes, the brothels. Blindfolded and dry-eyed, she hears and therefore sees all.

Why say angel? She brings a promise that nobody can not believe in and yet nobody thinks true. The promise is that again and again, from the garbage, the scattered feathers, the ashes and the broken bodies, something new and beautiful may be born. Perhaps rumour here is a demon, not an angel – for she cannot stop raising hopes which do not last. But wherever I fell in this world, I would pray for her, angel or demon, to come and I would listen to her and she would revive me as she revives so many...

ONCE IN EUROPA

for John Berger

When evening settles on the mountain slopes,
 If you hear a knock at your door, it's us—
 like the sounds of flute and lute
 in the old summerhouses of İçerenköy
 in a time that is past and present and to come,
 in summer nights fresh with the scent of pine:
 two sleepwalkers never to be parted,
 wandering, calling at lost addresses.

Last time we saw you, you were in a film:
 Play Me Something. On a Scottish island
 you were telling a story set in Mestre
 to passengers waiting for a plane.
 It's time to make hay, you write—
 a writer in winter and a labourer in summer!
 They are rich with it too, your books,
 with the scent of cut grass and tilled soil:
 Pig Earth, Once in Europa,
 and now Lilac and Flag.

In spring,
 when the snow is gone from the mountain slopes,
 if there's an unexpected knock at your door,
 it's us—
 the seventh man,
 the seventh woman,
 with lilacs and flags.