

Author

Of Turkish descent, this writer of short stories and fiction was born in Adapazarı. While pursuing his higher education, his desires conflicted with that of his father's; originally enrolled in the Turcology Department of Istanbul University in 1928, he ultimately made his way to Switzerland to study Economics in 1930, under pressure from his father. After school he lived in France for three years before returning to Turkey to try his hand at teaching. After 1934, he ultimately devoted his life to writing. Abasiyanik left his mark on Turkish short-story writing with realistic portrayals of laborers, fishermen, children, the unemployed, and the poor, bringing these often-ignored characters of society into focus. One of his major themes was the sea and he spent most of his time in Burgazada (one of the Princes' Islands in the Marmara Sea). He was an honorary member of the International Mark Twain Society of St. Louis, Missouri. His novels include *Bir Takdim İnsanlar* (A Set of People, 1944) and *Kayıp Araniyor* (Wanted, 1953) while his short stories began with "Semaver" ("The Tea Urn") in 1936, and culminated with "Az Şekerli" ("Just a Bit of Sugar") in 1954.

Translator

Aron Aji, a native of Turkey, has translated works by Bilge Karasu, Murathan Mungan, Elif Shafak, and Latife Tekin, including two book-length works by Bilge Karasu: *Death in Troy* (City Lights, 2002), and *The Garden of Departed Cats* (New Directions, 2004), which received the 2004 National Translation Award, sponsored by ALTA. Aji is also the recipient of a 2006 National Endowment for the Arts Literature Fellowship for his current translation project, a third novel by Karasu, *The Evening of a Very Long Day*.

The Waiter

The waiter who arrives with the summer at the seaside café barely earns eight to eight and a half a week. But what's the harm? The café now belongs to him. He can work as he wants. At the day's end, after setting the chairs on top of the tables, he can smoke a cigarette while gazing at the sea, then call it a day—earlier on slow or rainy days—and lie down on his back, on the bed made with five chairs put together. He has no one meddling in his affairs, no one he can't stand serving, and certainly no one whose services he doesn't care to receive. Nor does he have to wonder why the customer who usually leaves a tip on the saucer didn't leave any this time . . .

Every summer he leases this café for a modest price. It is off the beaten path, but he manages to earn his living because the café, a rustic wood building overlooking the sea, mostly attracts visitors and those of poetic nature, the type that leaves no less than five *kurush* in tips for a cup of coffee. If asked, "What is a first-class waiter like you doing here when you can wait tables in Istanbul, at, say, The Bellevue, Paradise Garden, Panorama, Golden Beer?" he doesn't quite know the answer either.

Forty years old, healthy, first-class . . . At those establishments we enumerated above, even the clumsiest waiter makes two and a half, even three, but let's say two, liras a day. Then why would he prefer this place for one measly banknote a day? Who knows? Indolence? No at all. He doesn't mind working. Here, even in this lonely café, he finds himself all sorts of chores, carrying bucket after bucket of water from the sea, scrubbing the blackened wooden deck, fixing the legs of the Ping-Pong table that he has been trying to assemble since last year in order to attract the village youth to the café, rearranging the tables, washing all the cups once more, inventing sundry other projects.

He can't stand being idle, and grows sullen. Still, when he does run out of chores, he almost pictures himself back at The Bellevue on a hot day, wading through the flood of customers; in the heat of the noon hour when even the village cats are asleep, he can be heard from afar, yelling with a burly voice:

"Four doubles. Hold the collar! *San fokol!*"*

He moves about, as if carrying appetizer plates, double mugs, setting them down, darting from one table to the next at lightning speed.

Weighed down with melancholy, does he know or even sense—as in a flash of recognition—that the desire to have his own place had drawn him to this café? No one can tell. And pay no heed when he says, I have no one here meddling in my affairs. Back in the city, none of his bosses ever found the slightest reason, even an excuse, to complain about his work either. Because he is swift on his feet, steady with his hands, and always smiles at the customers. And let's also mention this: he is a stutterer . . . Which, of course, is a significant attribute in a waiter! The more hassled, the more he is able to amuse the customer. He also has clear blue eyes. His hair and beard are

white as snow. If he doesn't shave for four days, he looks ancient. But when he shaves, he dons a flawless youthful face. His hair is soft and straight, combed back. In short, after twenty years in this line of work, he has acquired the complete physiognomy of a waiter. Look at his face, his hair, his demeanor, and you can tell out of a hundred people that he is the waiter. You'd think that he was born to wait tables. He, too, is aware of this. Yet, he wasn't born like this. He could well have become a doctor and acquired the doctor's physiognomy after practicing medicine for a few years. This is a quality that professions, affiliations lend to one's hair, eyes, eyebrows. We shouldn't be fooled. Because people are not born as waiters. In fact, let's offer here an apt saying of his which he repeats often: "People may die as waiters but are never born as them."

No, this is not about meddlers or no meddlers. Waiter Ahmet cannot quite understand the point of sacrificing two, two and a half liras in wages in the name of a rickety café, though neither can he ever resist the desire that flares up in him every year in June, the desire to be the keeper of this little shop. Just a week into the season, a neighborhood boy shows up on his own accord and becomes his apprentice.

The boy arrives one morning, "Hello, Ahmet *Agabey*,"** he says. "Hello," Ahmet replies. Without further exchange, the boy walks up to the dish tub, scoops the coffee cups out of the black water, scrubs them with the discolored dishtowel, until they are spotless white.

Ahmet frowns, ignores the apprentice. At times he grumbles. But by the evening of the fourth day, when finished with the chores, the two are eating tomatoes and bread together.

Some days are particularly enjoyable, when Ahmet props up a grill on the side of the dirt road, and the charcoals, glowing like pomegranates, send out a blue smoke. Soon, the smell of lamb chops and roasted pepper fills the air, spreading across distances. On those evenings, Ahmet downs four shots of *raki*, the apprentice scurries away to the pier, and a woman comes walking down the hill, her eyes crossed, her eyebrows painted, her head covered with a white muslin scarf, her smock iridescent like changeable silk. She is Ahmet's legal wife. But throughout the summer she visits three or at the most four times. There, in a corner of the deck over the water, she sits like a ghost, facing away from the sea, silently smoking her cigarette. She never looks at the customers, fixing her gaze at the wall instead.

Ahmet's cheerful disposition fades soon after his wife's appearance, giving way to nervous chatter. His stutter getting worse, he grows irritable, snapping at the apprentice and the customers.

"I suppose Mehmet Efendi's coffee beans are not good enough for you."

When the customers leave, the woman opens her mouth. Heavens, does she open her mouth! She flings her scarf, and holding the cigarette between her long crooked fingers, she starts screaming: what is he doing here?

But one thing is certain: one June, the owner of the rickety café waited an entire week for Ahmet to show up. He never did.

Now Ahmet is at the Bellevue Garden, filled with the joy of owning absolutely nothing in the world, free to perceive his surroundings as he wishes, and happy with the thought that only five percent of the people in the crowd earn a living by the sweat of their brow. Adding the ten percent Sunday surcharge plus the tips on top of the surcharge, he makes seven liras, and doesn't even remember the rickety café he used to lease every year in June . . .

Even if he remembers it, he laughs it off, seeing that not even a live ember remains from the fire that used to flare up in him every year in June.

He doesn't know the cause of this transformation. He doesn't know, yet how did Ahmet come to realize that he would never own anything in the world, that he harbors no such desire, that ownership is all harm and no profit? This is an important question.

Ahmet's wife died from pneumonia last winter. With her death, he concluded that, on the face of the whole world, only a woman would be worth owning, and everything beyond that was either false or unjust; so long as he couldn't hold on to a woman, all else were dust motes drifting in the wind. And that's why Ahmet now shouts:

"Pour two doubles," adding the French, "*San fokol.*"

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**Sans faux-col, without the froth.*

***Elder-brother, an expression of deference*

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