

ararat



ISSUES OF ARMENIAN IDENTITY SERIES

Launched in spring 2005, the ISSUES OF ARMENIAN IDENTITY series tackles an array of topics concerning Armenian identity. Whether on a personal or a theoretical level, these issues reverberate deeply in our lives and answer some basic questions: How do we describe or define ourselves? What is an Armenian in the 21st century? Exploration of these matters can take place through a variety of genres and approaches. In this Ararat edition, articles by Alexander, Matosian, and Rowe, as well as a poem by Der-Hovanesian and an excerpt of Shafak's novel form part of this series.



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There Was and Was Not

by Rachel Goshgarian

*T*here was and there was not. All Armenian and Turkish fairy tales start with these same words, just a piece of Near Eastern culture familiar to children from Isfahan to Fez. These words signify an entrance into a land of fantasy, far from the reality of everyday routine. These six words, from the very outset, tell whomever hears them that their continuation may or may not be real; that the story behind these words is not of this world, but of another time and another place too far away to be a part of the listener's reality. *There was and there was not*—an attempt to embrace words and images, a struggle to imagine.

Outside Erzincan, May 2005

It was getting warmer by the time we reached the top of the mountain. The morning air was fresh and crisp after a night blessed with the soft singing of spring rain. But as we climbed higher and higher in our Ford station wagon, the car was getting stuffy. The sun had turned a Ford into a sauna. When my father finally asked the driver to stop, I was relieved. He opened his door, and a gust of humid, cool air swept into the back seat. He walked over the gravel of the mountain road to a small creek, whose waters bubbled over stones which seemed ancient. I stepped out of the car and onto the mountainside. The houses in the valley of Erzincan were like white legos, imperfectly ordered and surrounded by lush, green fields. The mountain road empty, the only sound was the constant trickling of the water in the creek behind us. My dad turned to me, his hand on his hip, and nodded his head. "Well, you can understand why priests would choose a place like this."

We were on a hunt to find the medieval Armenian monastery of Sourp Nerses. Having read so many of the works of Hovhannes of Yerznka (Erzincan), a thirteenth-century priest

and scholar, I had wanted to see the place where he had worked. I had wanted to understand the environment in which he had written the texts that had inspired me to pursue a doctorate, even against my own best judgment. My father (who my mother tells me used to whisper into my ears as a baby, "Become an archaeologist when you grow up so that I can come on digs with you") was eager to join my discovery mission to Eastern Anatolia. And, so, we had started our voyage in Istanbul, and traveled to Van, Mardin, Diyarbakir, and now Erzincan. The journey had already been exhausting and complex, distinguished by the meeting of imagination and reality. Both my dad and myself were trying to see multilayered elements in the mountainous landscape, and were discovering that the recent Anatolian past had created an historical amputation not only for Armenians living in the diaspora, but also for city people and villagers on the western side of the Turkish border with Armenia. And then we found ourselves in Yerznka. Finally, we were close to him—and on the brink of a real collision of the intellectual and the physical.

Even though I knew the monastery would no longer be standing, the romantic in me felt that I simply couldn't write any more about Hovhannes of Yerznka without at least trying to find some trace of his physical existence in his home province. For years, I had been reading from the wide variety of his published and unpublished advice literature, scientific works, translations, and poetry. At the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at Harvard, Professor James Russell had invited the chic and bright Seta Dadoyan from Beirut to talk about Hovhannes, and I had eagerly asked her questions as we sat around the intimidating wooden table in room 205. A few years later, I sat at another intimidating wooden table with Edgar Baghdasarian, prob-

ably the most eminent scholar on Hovhannes Yerznkatsi. In the belly of Yerevan's Madenataran, the table filled with delicate coffee cups and cigarette smoke, his wrinkled face laughed at my excitement as we danced through the story of Hovhannes' life. After that, I had pored over manuscripts written in Hovhannes' own hand while sitting at a wooden desk next to a window that opened up onto the Venetian lagoon at the Armenian Mekhitarian monastery. The journey to approach Hovhannes had been a long and trying one, yet my understanding of him felt superficial. I realized I needed to attach a real, physical image to the intellectual picture of him I had in my mind.

Like the followers of the medieval Anatolian poet Jellaleddin Rumi, who flock to his Konya tomb in hordes and read his works aloud while sitting in his presence, Erzincan called me to pilgrimage. I, too, longed to be close to my spiritual and intellectual guide. I, too, hoped to be inspired by physical proximity to the legacy of an erudite and mystical being.

And here we were on the top of a mountain in the province of Erzincan, not even sure that we were on the right mountain despite the three maps (one medieval) in our hands.

We got back in the car and Atajan, our Azeri driver from Kars, slowly maneuvered us between ditches and boulders. The uncertainty of our travel route and the sound of our car's heavy wheels rolling over gravel started to get to me. The sun was shining in my eyes and the whole business of searching for the location of a destroyed Armenian monastery in the mountains of Erzincan suddenly seemed an entirely depressing venture, weighed down by the knowledge that so many centuries of history had been erased in the same exact place that they had been born.

Atajan started driving down the backside of the mountain. My dad, squinting, turned around in his seat and lifted his chin at me. "What do you think?" he asked. I could tell that my father, too, had become frustrated with the situation. I could

tell that his heart had begun to ache over the impossibility of the task we so naively had attempted. "I don't know, Dad. Maybe we should just go back to the hotel." Atajan Bey searched my eyes via the rear view mirror. He couldn't understand English, but clearly had recognized the sound of defeat in our voices. "*Geri dönmek mi istorsunuz?*" "You want to go back?" "I don't know," I told him. "It just seems impossible." Atajan's face changed. "Let's just go a little further. You said this was important to you and I have a feeling about the next village. At least let's ask there."

And so, at the behest of Atajan Bey (who would later tell me that after spending time with me and my dad in Anatolia, he realized that everything he had been taught was wrong and who hugged and kissed both of us with a tear in his eyes when we finally bid one another goodbye), we pushed on.

As we descended the mountainside, my ears were popping and I tried to imagine medieval Armenian priests walking

in their robes alongside the herds of snow-white sheep I observed. The image was a difficult one to conjure up as we pulled into a poor village whose houses' walls were adobe and ceilings tin. A pregnant woman wearing a *shalvar* smiled at me as we slowly coasted towards a group of disheveled-looking rugged men. Despite Atajan Bey's confidence in this village, it wasn't looking good to me. There simply was nothing in this village aside from a random collection of houses and a few scattered animal pens.

"Great," I thought to myself, feeling this was a bad premonition for my doctorate. "The one thing I really needed to see for my work, and here we are in some random village with nothing." Angrily, I told Atajan and my dad that I would get out and ask the locals if they knew anything. Truly frustrated, I slammed the car door behind me. To the surprised faces of my dad and our driver, I smiled at the older gentleman who approached me. A dirty coat wrapped nonchalantly around his shoulders like some French poet, he said hello and smiled. "*Merhaba, amca, nasilsiniz?*"



Dad, Mahmud Bey, and a Cross

He was happy to reply and asked how I was and what on earth were we doing in their humble village? "Well," I answered, "I am a historian studying the medieval period and I was wondering if there were any old buildings around here. Are there?" He laughed, "No, no, nothing here." I turned to the car and said, "See, I told you so!" like the mature twenty-nine-year-old woman that I had finally become. My father winced, annoyed with my attitude and stood up and out of the car. "Dad, there is nothing here. Let's go." "Well, let me take his picture. Ask them what they grow here." My dad had made best friends in every village from Van to Mardin and up to Erzincan thanks to his new friend, the digital camera, and his love for gardening. "Dad, come on, they are not going to...." and my dad was already snapping away. He turned the camera around to show the man his own photo and suddenly we were surrounded by four men. "Great," I thought, "Me, my dad and Atajan in the middle of Kurdistan and armed with a digital camera."

A few seconds later, we were invited for tea. "No, no," I said. "Thank you very much, but I need to find some old buildings. Aren't there any old churches or anything?" I was smiling but the tired child inside of me whined and just wanted to go home. A shorter, younger man with skin like rawhide and shiny black hair smiled. Taking a drag of his cigarette, he looked me in the eyes. "Yes, there are old churches." The child in me was instantly replaced by the eager scholar. "Eski bir manastir yok mu?" He shook his head, "No, no monastery here but I can show you where the old churches were." I translated for my dad and we walked, accompanied by the two men, up the side of a hill. Suddenly, I felt like I was in the middle of a fairy tale. *There was and there was not*. There had been nothing and then suddenly we were being led to a secret world that only these villagers knew. The elder of the two men chitchatted to me in a singsongy voice. I suppose he had guessed that we were Armenian. "It doesn't matter what religion a person is. What matters is what type of

human being he is." I smiled. "Yes," I agreed, "Insan insandır." *A human being is a human being*. I remembered the last time I had said those words it had been in Armenian. An acquaintance had asked me how I could stand living in Turkey. I told her that sometimes it was difficult but that sometimes it was wonderful. "*Marte mart e*," I had said to her. And she had responded, "Yes, but Turks have no souls." As I hopped over a creek, the man held out his hand so that I might follow him without falling. Despite the sun's warmth, the memory of my acquaintance had chilled me to the bone. This sweet-faced man wearing his chapeau tilted on his head had no soul?



Rachel in Jaferli Village

We hiked about fifteen minutes and our new friend Mahmud lit himself another cigarette as he used his dirty left hand to point out the sites of four former churches in the mountains. I pulled out my map and conferred with my dad, while the two villagers sunk to their haunches, actively observing the immense valley before us.

"This is amazing," my dad said. It felt like we were frozen in time. We were standing side by side, searching with our eyes for any Armenian remnants, and confronted with nature, Herself. We were both humbled, I believe. Mahmud got up and walked towards us. "There is a cross in the grotto over there. It is very ancient. Carved in the stone." My dad's eyebrows rose. "Can we go there?" I asked. "Of course," Mahmud responded. The elderly man (whose name was Ahmet) smiled and said, "I'm too old to hike with you people in the mountains. I'll see you when you get back." As we started over the grass and slippery mud, Mahmud asked me how old my father was. "Sixty-three," I responded. "*Mashallah*," he said, "Ahmet *amcam* is sixty-one." I translated for my dad and he smiled.

And so Mahmud, my father, and I set out across the hills of Erzincan on a hunt for a cross carved in a mountainside.

"You know, Rachel Hanim," Mahmud started, "The PKK of today is just like the Armenian *Tashnagsutun*." I was surprised. Here was a villager standing before me, in dirty jeans rolled up so

that the mud would not touch their hems, making a comparison between the Kurdish nationalist party and the Armenian Revolutionary Federation. "What do you mean?" "Well," he said, "Both of them have created problems for the regular people. For example, when the PKK started acting up, they closed our local grammar school. They thought we were teaching Kurdish nationalist ideals when all we were teaching was the Kurdish language. The Tashnags, they created the same sort of problems way back when."

We trudged up a hill and towards another creek. We heard gunshots. "Don't be afraid, it's just the shepherds scaring the wolves." Indeed, across the valley was a herd of sheep. Mahmud pointed out the wolf on the mountain. I couldn't really see it, but nodded my head. "See this river?" Mahmud asked. "It used to be lined with Armenian villages. They were all living there, the Armenians. This place was filled with commerce, thanks to the Armenians. Then they were forced to leave. And now you see... it is empty." I looked at my dad. We were both stupefied.

We made it to the top of a hill. "The cross is just over there, about another hour's walk." It had already been an hour. And I was getting tired. "Dad, are you sure you want to go on?" My dad was crouching over a creek, collecting fresh mountain water in his hand and drinking it. "Are you sure the water is safe, Mahmud Bey?" "This is fresh mountain water, Rachel Hanım. The cleanest water you could ever drink!" And we continued.

We got to the cross and took pictures in its shadow. As sheep gathered around us, we came face to face with their shepherds, smiling men with crinkly, tanned faces. They were happy when my dad took their pictures. "We'll be famous in America!" They laughed. And one of them cradled a newborn sheep on his chest.

We sat by a creek and the shepherds smoked. The newborn one stumbled over the grassy hill as we talked about wolves. The shepherds shot their guns off a few times. My cell phone rang. Atajan Bey. "Rach, *neredesiniz?*" "Oh, don't worry, Atajan Bey, we are fine. Just taking a walk with some shepherds." "Rach, you know this is Kurdistan. And I just heard some gunshots." "Oh, don't worry... they were trying to scare wolves." "How much longer will you be?" Atajan had suddenly become an over-protective brother. "Another hour or so," I responded. "Tamam. If there are any problems, call me." I smiled. Atajan was worried about us.

Little by little, we said goodbye to the shepherds and headed back to town. Standing in front of the remains of an old church, my dad's face looked heavy and gray. "Dad, are you sure you are ok?" He shook his head and smiled. We were both confused, it seemed. As we neared the village, my Dad sighed. "It's just too bad we couldn't find the *vank*." Mahmud turned his head. "*Vank mi?*" "Did you say *vank*?" I responded, "Yes, my Dad was just saying it was too bad we couldn't find a *vank*. *Ermenice bir kelime, demek...*" Mahmud interrupted me and heaved out a load of air along with cigarette smoke, "Why didn't you say so before? *Vank var!* There is the *vank*!" And he pointed his finger across the valley to a pile of stones. "*Orada mi vank?*" I asked. "Yes, that is the *vank*!" He responded, happy to be able to share more of his village's history. "What does it mean to you, the word *vank*?" I asked. He said, "It is a very old place. And sacred, holy. When someone is sick or if someone stutters or has an ear problem, they go to the *vank*. They drink the water from over there and it heals them." I translated for my dad. We looked at the map. It all fit perfectly. Both of us were shocked. Both of us just stared at a pile of rocks framed on top by a layer of snow. "So that is *Sourp Nerses*," I said to my dad. "*Vank var.*"

There was and there was not. As we drank tea and ate a myriad of dairy products in Mahmud's house, I was in a stupor. Luckily, the men were aimlessly speaking Turkish to my father and ignoring me. Here we were, sitting in this village that on the surface had nothing. A few dilapidated houses. Women in *shalvar* and scarves. Men wearing dirty jeans. Livestock. But one inhabitant had made the village a fantasy. His every word had matched the sketchings on the medieval map that my father and I had photocopied. Mahmud had become a gate between the past and the present. He had shown us everything in a place where there had seemed to be nothing. *There was and there was not.* As I sat, shoeless, on Mahmud's couch, I wondered if these six words had become so common in the Middle East as the entrance into fairy tales simply because they were so common in everyday life. *There was and there was not.* If every villager in Eastern Anatolia knew what Mahmud did, then I was sure that these six words were not just an entry into an imaginary world that had never been. These words were also a bridge to a place that had once existed.