

Excerpt from Marc Nichanian, *Writers of Disaster: Armenian Literature in the Twentieth Century*, volume 1, *The National Revolution* (Princeton and London: The Gomidas Institute, 2002)

G.M. Goshgarian translated this passage from Gurgun Mahari's *Burning Gardens*. Mahari's novel was first published in 1966 in Soviet Armenia, where it was officially condemned and burned in public. Yet even that first edition frequently departs from the original manuscript. This translation is based on the author's original manuscript.

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Pages 542–45:*

Van was being tossed and battered, tossed and battered by massive, muddy waves. Weeks of terrible and unequal battle had shattered its harmony and stripped it of its identity. The town had become unrecognizable. It finally lost all semblance of itself when the famished multitudes from the surrounding countryside thronged into the city in a peaceful invasion. The besieged town stood eyeball to eyeball with the danger of starvation or surrender. The fighters grit their teeth and fought.

It kept raining.

A few Assyrians who had fled the village of Ermants entered the city with the starving throngs. They knocked at Ohannes Agha's door. His wife Satenig opened it. Without a how-do-you-do or a by-your-leave, they came in in their rags and poured into the covered outer court. Among their skeleton-like faces (there were seven of them in all), Satenig recognized that of Horms-the-Assyrian, one of her husband's accredited business agents.

"Horms?" Satenig asked. She could hardly believe her eyes.

"I'm Horms, leetle khatum," Horms replied weakly.

Alarmed, Ohannes Agha stepped into the outer court. "Horms?"

"I'm Horms, agha. . . ."

It was Horms, as could be guessed from his droopy gray mustache and big eyes. There was nothing else left of Horms.

* Here the translation follows the original (unpublished) version.

“And my brother Mkho?” Ohannes Agha asked. He was not expecting good news.

“No more Mkho, agha, no more Ermants; they slaughtered us.” He drew his forefinger across his throat.

Inside Ohannes Agha, something went red hot, burst into flame, burnt out, and, so to speak, turned to ashes. Only now did he seem to notice that Horms was not alone. Two women of uncertain age had stumbled into the covered court side by side, along with two men, a boy with a bandage over one eye, and an adolescent wreathed in a broad smile. One had to look closely to see that it wasn't a smile, but a grimace of pain.

Ohannes Agha retreated to his corner. It seemed to him that he was swimming through the air, not walking. No, he did not feel the ground beneath his feet. When he sat down, it seemed to him that he had descended into a pit, a shaft, a well.

No more Ermants, no more Mkho. Obviously: this was a fight, and during a fight they don't hand round raisins and chickpeas. His old friend Simon Agha had lost his mind along with everything else. His old friend Panos Agha was in the same sorry state as Ohannes Agha. Why had Panos Agha dropped out of sight? Thank God, he himself had still not had to contend with hunger. And he wouldn't ever have to, either. . . .

“Satenig,” he called.

Satenig came inside.

“Satenig, give the Assyrians something to eat,” he ordered. “Verzhin,” he said, “make me a cup of coffee.”

“What shall I give them?”

“Green beans, lentil soup . . . do I have to draw you a picture? Let them go into the stable; it's better that way. . . . Good Lord, good Lord! . . . Verzhin!”

“What do you want from Verzhin?”

“I just said what I wanted,” shouted Ohannes Agha, angrily. “Tell her to make a cup of coffee.”

“The world can go smash, but you can't go without your coffee,” Satenig muttered, putting the *chezveh* on the fire.

Verzhin brightened and fluttered over, despite her heavy body.

“Verzhin,” said Satenig, “put a pot on, and clean and wash some lentils.”

“She downright forces a man to leave the straight and narrow,” Ohannes Agha thought to himself, noting that Satenig had arranged to do just the opposite of what he had ordered.

But no, Ohannes Agha hardly needed Satenig to push him into harm’s way. He was only making excuses for himself. It had been two weeks since Verzhin had moved in with Ohannes Agha and his family, and one could hardly say that everything had gone straight down the prescribed path, without deviations or aberrations. Verzhin had always been the one to take the initiative. If we want to blame someone for leading Ohannes Agha astray, then the blame lies with Verzhin. But she had not gone to work without solid foundations. Ohannes Agha had provided rich, fertile soil for Verzhin’s evil seeds. From the very first day of her farcical marriage, Verzhin had been jealous of Satenig, had envied her the strong, capable husband who had made a happy life for her. As for herself. . . . “What am I supposed to do,” had been her eternal complaint to her husband Kevork, “go work as a kept girl in Satenig’s household?” Now that her husband was gone, now that, at Ohannes Agha’s bidding, she was living under his roof and cheerfully working as a “kept girl,” that is, a maid, she wanted—what? to snatch Ohannes Agha away from Satenig? No, that was impossible, out of the question—she merely wanted a part of Satenig’s happiness, wanted to take out a share in it and enjoy the dividends in such a way that only she herself, Ohannes Agha, and the one who sees all would know. If he exists.

The uncertain situation, the fighting, the daily crises, the incessant bombardments were part of the reason that Verzhin was led into thinking these evil thoughts. She slept in the main room with the couple, in the corner opposite theirs. When they would put out the lamp late at night, plunging the room into impenetrable darkness, and the sound of the gunfire became louder and sharper, Verzhin would be thinking only one thing: that this was the end of the world. This was the end of the world, and who could tell whether another day would dawn or not? On this last night, she thought to herself, she would take whatever she could from life. But what could she take, what was there left for the taking?

She would get up and test the darkness, holding her hand up close to her face and wiggling her fingers. . . . Nothing but blackness. She would inch softly toward Ohannes Agha’s bed and drop down flat on the carpet, then cautiously lift the covers and lie for an instant at his side, motionless. Ohannes Agha would wake up, and, breathing deeply, fondle and caress her, as prescribed,

it seems, in the Bible. But Verzhin had not read the Bible. The night would glide by. Tired and happy, she would get up, go back to her bed, and fall into a deep sleep. Day would break, with its everyday trials and tribulations. Verzhin would set the smoking nargileh in front of Ohannes Agha, and it was as if nothing had happened, so remote did the night seem, and so impossible.

Ohannes Agha fell asleep and woke up. He remembered that Ermants was gone, that Mkho was gone. Ohannes Agha did not number among the ranks of those in whose souls sorrows accumulate, eating away at the heart like maggots. No, he was of a different breed. The loss of Kevork had blotted out the loss of his shop; now the tragic end of Ermants, Mkho, and Mkho's family swept his grief over Kevork aside. A new incident, a new trauma would, if not make him forget this sorrow too, then at least mitigate it.

He remembered the people who had found refuge in the stable, and then his thoughts flew off: he thought of his brother Hampartsum, his mother . . . then of Kevork and Mkho. By now they had doubtless met again in the next world and were telling each other about the calamities that had broken over their heads. It might even be that they were sitting around and running him down. . . . Why? What had he done? Were they not better off than he was, after all, since he had not died but had lived, had borne these deep sorrows, and was now, like a blind owl, sitting in state over ruins?

What did life still have to offer him? Ohannes Agha blinked and smiled in the darkness. Whenever God shuts one door, he opens another. Or, as the late lamented Kevork liked to say, "every cloud has its silver lining." Apparently God had visited this misfortune on Van so that Verzhin, like an errant dove, would come flying from afar to roost under his roof. . . . Thank the good Lord. He so badly wanted Verzhin to come to him now, come with her warmth and powerful magic, and, as always, fearlessly and without qualms. If it had not been for this fighting, he would not be "seeing" Verzhin.

"She won't come tonight," he thought, "she'll assume I'm grieving . . . Ermants, Mkho. . . . Grief is grief, of course, but has she considered the fact that, as long as a man is alive, he has to live?" Ohannes Agha wondered, philosophically.

He felt Satenig's peaceful breathing more than he heard it. He knew that, once Satenig was asleep, you could pound a drum an inch from her ear without waking her up. In the obscurity, he moved his arms and saw nothing. He lifted

the covers; even their whiteness was invisible. But what if Satenig should suddenly wake up and reach out to feel his blanket, or Ohannes Agha himself? She often did so, to see if he was sleeping uncovered. If he was, she would tenderly cover him up. In that case . . .

He preferred not to let his thoughts take that direction, but the idea gave him no rest. What if . . . what if he were caught? “Eh,” he thought, heroically, “it’s no great sin, is it? Is Ohannes Agha, take him all in all, not every bit as good as a Kurd? Everyone knows that, according to a happy Kurdish custom, when one’s brother (God forbid!) dies, his wife becomes one’s property. A splendid rule. Who can console a grieving widow if not her husband’s own brother? It’s natural and it’s logical.” Such were Ohannes Agha’s thoughts. He was trying to reassure himself; yet he was well aware that what was lawful for a Kurd was not lawful for an Armenian, that he was not a Kurd, and that the mere thought of being caught terrified him—the cold sweat would break out on his forehead.

Ohannes Agha resolved to direct his thoughts to more serious matters. “Good God, man,” he rebuked himself. “We’re in the ultimate stages of a life and death struggle; Van is in danger, it’s careening from wall to wall like a slaughtered rooster, and all you can think about is your brother’s widow. Old age knows no shame. They say that the Military Committee never sleeps, day or night. And how could it? Do the fighters at their posts sleep? And how could the posts sleep—do the Turks sleep? Poor Vramian and Ishkhan made the supreme sacrifice; they’re gone.” Now Ohannes Agha remembered the year and the day that he first saw the one and the other. They seemed infinitely remote. He had always heard that Ishkhan had long hair and a long beard, but, when he saw him, Ishkhan had short hair and an even shorter beard. After his marriage he had doubtless become a family man, and changed his appearance so as not to frighten his wife and child. Vramian had been very fond of flowers. He was gone too; he was at the bottom of the lake, where there is not a single species of flower. That bastard Cevdet.* Aram was wandering in a daze from post to post. One day Aram too would die in battle. After all, that is what youth is for—for dying in battle.

* Governor of Van province as of July 1914 and commander of the Turkish troops stationed near the Russian border.