

The Fear of Large and Small Nations: a novel

by Nancy Agabian

“...and though the words 'I must get away' do not actually pass across your lips, you make a leap from being that nice blob just sitting like a boob in your amniotic sac of the modern experience to being a person visiting heaps of death and ruin and feeling alive and inspired at the sight of it...”

--Jamaica Kincaid, *A Small Place*

"I am so close and yet so far from the strange life that throbs around me. A thousand threads connect me to my homeland, yet its life seems to be shrouded in mystery. Will I ever penetrate that mystery and acquire a clear insight into its existence?"

– Zabel Yessayan, *Prometheus Unchained*

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Prologue: Motherland

Look, my child, wherever you are,
Wherever you go under this moon,
Even if you forget your mother,
Do not forget your mother tongue.
– Silva Gaboudikian

I don't remember the first time I saw Mother Armenia wielding her heavy sword low across her narrow hips. It was likely from a distance while walking the streets in the center of Yerevan when I glimpsed her blocky military figure, an upright soldier guarding me from her perch above the city. Eventually I ascended the hill where she stood and learned she was inspired by actual Armenian mother-warriors and replaced a statue of Stalin in the '60s. But most of the time her stark figure hovered in the back of my consciousness, never really capturing my imagination. Instead, my preferred symbol of the motherland was an apparition named Fimi whom I encountered during the final hours of my very first trip to Armenia.

She appeared in the middle of the night, an otherworldly vision among the gangs of stray dogs that regularly wandered the outskirts of the cafes by the Opera. I wouldn't have noticed her if Gharib hadn't announced, "Oh, look who is here!" as Fimi glided across a lawn towards our patio table located beneath an umbrella of light. She was wearing a little rhinestone crown pinned into her reddish hair piled atop her head, and her face was framed by spit curls that twirled at her temples. Bright red lipstick lit up her lips and blue eyeshadow arched over her lids. She wore a white fur capelet over a glittering baby-blue brocade dress, with chunky costume jewelry clustered on her fingers, up her arms and nestled inside her bosom. Smiling in a boozy way, Fimi stepped further into the light, and I could see that everything she wore was somewhat shabby or broken. Had I encountered her alone on the streets, I might have guessed she was a prostitute. Among friends by the Opera, I regarded her as an artist.

It seems odd to call the people at the table my friends when I'd been in Yerevan just a week, but I did feel close to them. In Armenia it was paradoxically impossible not to feel embraced and nurtured even as the people subsisted, struggled, and suffered. This wasn't just a feeling lodged within a power structure: I spent my visit among an international array of artists and intellectuals at a feminist conference and the Westerners have since drifted from memory, but my connections with the Armenians are still cemented. With them I felt a unique sense of togetherness as they stayed up all night waiting to accompany their guests to the airport. In just a few hours my flight would bring me back to New York, but for now I was a member of what felt like a family in exile from the sleeping.

The cafe was the kind of commercial venture once loathed during the advent of capitalism after the Soviet collapse but now begrudgingly accepted at the time in 2005. More than a few people had lamented to me that this once was a beautiful park during the Soviet era, but now it was just a string of overpriced tourist traps; the complaints didn't preclude anyone from spending hours at a time smoking and drinking once they plopped into a patio chair, though. The artists collectively decided from month to month the least objectionable establishment, based on which had the lowest prices and the least rude waiters. They now passed Mother Armenia a glass and poured her some cognac.

Fimi was unlike any woman in Armenia I had seen. All week I had been confronted by conformity: armies of thin young virgins in uniforms of long dark hair, sleek skirts and high heels. Scattered among them were the matrons who had already raised their children and wore leopard-print boxy blouses and long shapeless black skirts, their thick unkempt hairdos a rainbow of hues and grey roots. The women of transitional age – like me – were nowhere to be found, probably because they were confined to the care of children in their homes or working

long hours in menial jobs – or both (which I had learned about at the feminist conference). Fimi, though hidden too, seemed to belong to another class entirely: the international tribe of artists. It turned out she actually was a singer but not operatic; she professed to love music from all cultures and entertained us with songs in Russian, Arabic, Ladino, Georgian and Armenian. With her deep, sweet and soulful voice, she performed passionately, twirling her arms and pushing her bosom towards the moon.

Luckily Fimi knew a little English. In between songs, she told me her story.

“I am hated here,” she said, “because I am so different from everyone.” She told me she had two young daughters but they lived with her mother and sister, which was a highly unusual arrangement for Armenia, where breaking the bonds of family was synonymous with tearing apart the nation. I wondered if her family had taken her daughters away, but all Fimi said was that she needed to live her life as an artist. Without a job, she was destitute, surviving on small loans from friends. One of the Western artists was recording Fimi's singing on a Mac book and hatching a plan for her to tour Europe, insisting she would be loved and adored.

“I'll go to Europe, darling,” she confided in me. “Why not? I live in a cold water flat, even in the winter. Do you know how hard that is? To take a cold bath in December?”

“No, you can't go to Europe!” Mardi, an Armenian artist interrupted her. “They will exploit you! It will ruin you!” His warning seemed ironic after he and Gharib had previously confessed to me that to be an artist in Armenia was next to impossible. They were the generation left behind during the “brain drain” when their ostensible mentors fled through the crack in the Iron Curtain, initiating a stream of expatriation that razed the nation of people. Mardi and Gharib told me that Armenia was such a small place that it grated on the mind to create. Because of the closed borders with Turkey and Azerbaijan, cultural access was constricted, with

little selection in films and music; books were even more limited because of the dearth of translation. And forget about owning a computer; they were prohibitively expensive. Gharib informed me that ideas were simply blockaded.

And yet the conference, organized by an Armenian woman living in Holland, had exposed me to thinkers I had yet to read: Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt, Gayatri Spivak. I held an advanced degree from an Ivy League university and had never heard of these thinkers. An MFA in Writing was simply a very expensive ticket one paid in the hopes of getting published. No student in my program had been so impassioned about art and how it related to love and if it should be influenced by politics and how it might bring change.

As everyone argued her fate, Fimi drank and periodically turned to me with a raised glass. “Art forever!” she shouted. “I only live for love!”

There I was, a small, quiet woman, entranced by this larger-than-life figure. It never occurred to me to tell Fimi about the performance I had done a few days before, recounting to an audience how I had once taken a woman on a date to the Armenian Cathedral on 2nd Avenue and 34th Street, while the cult of priests – in their own bejeweled brocade ensembles – chanted their arcane liturgy. Fimi was most likely a complex soul, but I could see her only through the window of my wonder. We were both the age of the hidden women trapped in lives in which they had little agency. Supposedly, Fimi was more free: an aberration, a pariah princess, a painted Anti-Mother who appeared only under the cover of darkness. And I, a third-generation Armenian American, late thirties, single, miserable, and dismayed by the reigning conservatism in the U.S., admired her defiant spark of expression.

The artists were stuck between destitution if they stayed and irrelevance or exploitation if they left, but my mind was on fire: everything was a puzzle to figure out, familiar and terrifying

at once. The government was corrupt, fashioning tradition into a nationalist tool to wield power. And yet the creativity of the people could not be stopped.

In poetry and the collective imagination, Mother Armenia fiercely protects her brood so that they will defend the homeland, a martyr passing on songs that her children should always remember, even if they forget her. After two generations of estrangement, I was drawn back to her to remember and re-acquaint myself – only to discover that Mother Armenia had been debased, her songs so beautiful because she really was a prostitute whose children had been taken away from her by the world.

Fimi wouldn't be Fimi if she were anywhere else, a fear which spoke to me. I never saw her, my Mother Armenia, again, but it was then that I decided to come back to Yerevan to live, to find art and love – no matter what.

Chapter 1: Lists of things as poems

ONE ARMENIAN WORLD

As an Armenian-American living in Yerevan for one year, I haven't yet decided what this blog will be: 1) A WEEKLY COLUMN, 2) A REGULAR DISPATCH TO FRIENDS IN THE U.S., 3) A CREATIVE OUTLET or
4) ALL OF THE ABOVE

Blog post: September 1, 2006. Greenpoint, Brooklyn, NY.

What I can bring with me on the plane

On my flight overseas I cannot take any liquids or gel-like substances into my carry-on luggage. This new security measure must be making the product development people over at Dr. Scholl's miserable. Their state-of-the-art gel shoe inserts are now a forbidden item listed on the website of the Transportation Security Administration. Other items on the list also seem questionable as security threats: liquid mascara, for one. I highly doubt there's enough room in such a tiny bottle for a harmful amount of explosive material. The TSA may as well ban magic markers. But they don't. They also don't prohibit toy transformer robots.

I find it difficult to believe that enough Americans had a question about toy transformers to require an entry on the list. Instead I think the TSA is just throwing us a bone, hoping we'll board the plane with a plaything that will distract us from the fact that we can't bring water on a transatlantic flight. The Transformers can help us imagine that we are cyborgs, impervious to terrorism.

The TSA must also think that American travelers are confused about whipped cream. It's pretty necessary for air travel, the Reddi-Whip, so it's understandable why that would be such a big question mark. Sorry, you can't pack dessert toppings in your carry-on luggage. No jelly nor

Jell-O either. But you can wear a gel-filled bra. And you can take up to 4 oz of KY jelly. Women must have enhanced boobs and lubricated vaginas at all costs, apparently.

I also discovered that you cannot squeeze a saber into your carry-on. Bows and arrows are also off limits, as are meat cleavers and cattle prods. You can't take incendiaries, explosives and firearms, nor *realistic replicas* of incendiaries, explosives and firearms.

Who are all these Americans, trying to get onto planes with simulacra of dangerous weaponry? Perhaps they are Civil War re-enactors, back from a vacation, packing their props. Nearly one hundred and fifty years later, the Civil War is still with us, re-staged as theater, as if we can never get war out of our systems.

Perhaps I'm reading too much into the TSA list of permitted and prohibited items, but I can't help but look at it as a poem about what government officials think we're afraid of and what we desire. Someone from another planet reading it might think Americans are addicted to dessert, fixated on women as sex objects, and driven to war. Such a list of banned items is meant to protect us, but it also indicates the dangers we pose to each other.

When I lamented to my mother that I can't take toothpaste with me on my red-eye to Europe, she advised, "Bring a travel toothbrush, you know, the kind with a case? And just squeeze a little toothpaste onto the brush part. What, are they going to take your toothbrush away?"

Yes, they might. I've had my fantasies: "Hey, Middle Eastern woman, hand over the dentifrice!" For after all our lessons about race, we still believe that appearance is most central in designating who we are, the reason the TSA has institutionalized racial profiling.

I told my mother, "I read in the news that this guy at JFK was wearing a t-shirt that said in Arabic and English 'We will not be silent' and the TSA actually made him take it off."

"Well," my mother explained, "that's because they don't want people on the plane to get upset."

I'm about to journey to Armenia, to live for a year among people who will look more like me. As a child I learned in Armenian school our history, represented by slides of colorful shrinking

maps: we were an ancient people who reigned over our share of kingdoms but mostly suffered under the conquest of others. Under an increasingly brutal Ottoman Empire, we finally managed to defend ourselves only to arrive at a terrible point in history; our grandparents were children when the catastrophe befell them in 1915, when the Young Turk regime shot their fathers and brothers, then marched their mothers, sisters, aunts and grandmothers through the desert where they were raped, abducted, or left to desiccate and die. There was no time to grieve during the slide show for the wounds of our grandparents, depicted as lost little children in white clothing standing in rows outside the front steps of their orphanage. Soon we were viewing the next frame: Russia, recognizing an opportunity, stepped in and swept what was left of Armenia into the Soviet Union. But our grandparents had fled across continents and created our far flung diaspora, where we were left to remember our silent cousins living in captivity behind the Iron Curtain, who mouthed a variation of our language, who ate different food, but who basically looked like us.

When the Soviet Union finally broke open, my friends and family trekked back to the closest thing we had to a homeland, returning to report on the emotional power of being in a place where your Armenian countenance was, for once, not unusual. I am curious to feel what this is like, but I am also wary of attaching so much importance to appearance, like simplified images in a slide show. Our history marched on, after all, once the Soviet Union collapsed, to a war with neighboring Azerbaijan. In some villages in Armenia before the war, there was a majority of Azerbaijanis, and now, as the cease-fire continues, there are none. No Armenians are left in Azerbaijan either. The border is closed and there is virtually no interaction nor exchange. The two people don't look that much different from each other, but thirteen years later, war is not out of their systems.

So as Armenia approaches a parliamentary election this coming spring, and I get ready to board a plane in the coming days, I wonder what the government of Armenia will think of its people and if they too will try to protect their citizens from getting upset. I wonder what words will be banned and what odd poems I will encounter.

Story: Early September, 2006. Yerevan, Armenia.

Na couldn't figure out how to call home on the cordless phone. After she had arrived in Yerevan in the wee hours of the morning and slept into the early afternoon, she decided that the first thing she needed to do was call her parents to inform them of her safe arrival. But she couldn't find the code to call the U.S. anywhere in the informational packet from the embassy. Unnerved, she searched for clues by the phone, then around the apartment, which she had rented from a diasporan family she knew in New York. The place was huge and modern and beige, fitted with all the amenities and stocked with plastic bins filled with medicine for diarrhea. The code to call home, however, was nowhere to be found. And the cupboards and fridge were bare.

As Na ventured outside to find something to eat, she discovered the apartment building was part of a complex of four massive structures situated around a central courtyard. Constructed of a pinkish tufa stone native to the region, the buildings appeared to be dry, dull and dusty. Every window was different, ranging from double-pane glass to black plastic garbage bags. Laundry hung from the balconies and electrical cables threaded through hacked holes in the walls. Na imagined that if there were an earthquake, all nine storeys precariously stacked atop her ground-floor apartment would crush her like a cockroach.

She wandered away from the buildings down a dusty, unpaved alley. The day was sunny, the air dry, the high altitude felt in her shallow breaths. She sensed a tension in the air, in the eyes of the people she encountered lumbering among the low, little trees. Following the alley to a busy road, she soon find a small store. She peered around the few shelves of cans, cabbages and tomatoes, the sounds of noisy old trucks shifting gears filling up the small space of the aisle. Stacked on shelves on the wall were fresh loaves of bread, flat and round and light brown. Na was relieved to remember the word for bread and the word for butter, too, from the once weekly

Armenian language and culture classes that her parents forced her to take throughout her childhood. She had long forgotten the nouns, then re-learned them as a graduate student, then they lay dormant since she had never used them in conversation. Now she didn't know how to make a sentence to ask for what she wanted. The translation of the Armenian expression in the imperative mood was "Give me the bread", which seemed rude. Saying, "I want the bread" sounded primitive and she thought it attracted too much attention to herself. In the U.S., she probably would have said, "Could I get a loaf of bread?" but the modal form in Armenian was beyond her. Finally she pointed to a loaf behind the clerk's head and said "hahts?" very softly, her voice sounding like that of a very young child. The clerk stared at Na, who appeared to be a fully grown woman. Na was so embarrassed by her fear and inability to speak Armenian that she lowered her eyes and wordlessly slipped out the open door next to her.

Luckily, she discovered a larger store nearby, where the food was readily displayed. She picked out from a shelf an oval loaf of bread, the size of a notebook, and brought it to the counter. The butter was in a glass case, so she pointed to it and said, "garac". The clerk was a broad woman in an apron, revealing a gold tooth when she asked which brand Na wanted. A pause and Na's furrowed brow caused the clerk to point and say, "This one?" in Armenian, to which Na nodded. Then she went home, let out a deep breath, and ate her bread and butter. The bread was equally light in texture and heavy in taste, settling at the back of her tongue, the butter slightly sour and soft. As she chewed, the pliability relieved her nerves.

Not knowing how to say or do the most basic things reminded Na of being a child in Armenian school, unable to answer simple questions in class. A top student in her public grammar school in the leafy Rhode Island town where she grew up, she found the Armenian language impossible to learn. She hated those classes with immigrant children who could speak

Armenian perfectly and who rolled their eyes when she couldn't keep up. The teachers, also immigrants, seemed impatient with Na, too, staring at her with expectation whenever they asked her a question she couldn't answer, loathe to offer encouragement. It was a very stressful experience for Na to fail at Armenian school, to be bad at what she was. Her parents had high expectations of her in general, and she tried her best to live up to them, but she could only strain at being Armenian for so long. She would spend many years avoiding the Armenian community, throughout high school, college and young adulthood, till she was thirty, when she decided she wanted to know her history and why it had made her so fearful; she had a theory that centuries of oppression had filtered through her blood, not to mention the stories her grandmother had told her about surviving the genocide. She went to graduate school for writing and found her way to her Armenian identity through research, storytelling and the writing of a book about her family history – but apparently it wasn't enough. Now she was in the country where she was bad at what she was, and there was no way to avoid it, her failure surrounding her on the language-laden streets.

The Fulbright orientation hadn't prepared her for this. Most of the scholars were visiting countries they had studied, not that they had cultural or ancestral links to. She was expecting more worldly advice, but the scholars received instruction along the lines of a Fodor's guide: *learn the basic vocabulary of the language, like numbers, please, hello and thank you; don't walk alone anywhere at any time of day because you will be a target as an American; embassy-sponsored bus trips into the countryside can be a great way to experience the nation.* Emphasis was placed on what the Americans could teach the natives, rather than what they could learn from each other. She was critical of the orientation and George W. Bush's imperialist State Department, thinking herself much more adventurous.

After all, she could have come to Armenia many years before with one of the “Young Professional” tour groups of the diaspora, which her parents had offered to pay for, but she always refused. Such tours toiled around Armenia, a fledgling nation the size of Maryland with a population of three million; the group visited orphanages, schools, the military, an astronomy observatory and ancient churches, ostensibly so that young Armenian Americans would be able to see firsthand how the struggling homeland was faring. But it seemed to Na that the unstated purpose of the tour was to offer diasporans the chance to meet each other as possible mates in heterosexual matrimony. Her brother had participated in the late 90s and had a great time – though he was gay and remained closeted – but Na was insistent about coming to Armenia on her own terms.

The opportunity arrived when a young Armenian lesbian, Amal, who was studying in the States, had discovered Na's first book of poems and translated a couple of the proto-riot grrl ones for a new literary journal, which brought Na an unexpected audience of artists and thinkers in Yerevan. She was soon invited to perform at a feminist conference in 2005, exactly one year before. Unfortunately, she came down with the flu the week before her trip and spent her days in bed, watching the coverage of New Orleans' decimation by Katrina. In her bleary state, she felt a duty to witness the hell that was taking place: no food, no water, no sanitary conditions, no medicine, for those who were too poor or sick to evacuate. Order had broken down to such an extent in the Super Dome that gangs were bullying the meek for their food and water, some poor soul committed suicide by jumping off a balcony, and young girls were gang raped. Throughout Bush's first term, she had become dismayed by war upon war, fear upon fear, and she joked like other liberals that she would move to Canada if he was re-elected on his platform of gay-marriage-bashing and pro-choice demonizing. Now she was so disgusted by her government's

negligence for its own people that she just wanted to leave it all behind and flee to Armenia, the only other place in the world she felt she had any claim to. It was ironic to Na that on the heels of her first trip to her homeland that the desperation of the people in New Orleans, black and poor and disenfranchised, was so blatantly made manifest on the tv in front of her, conjuring up what her people had experienced for centuries as second class citizens when they were subjects of an Empire not their own.

Na had been still quite sick as she boarded the plane for that first quick trip, but she somehow managed to tour around Armenia, sit in on panels with feminists from Europe, perform her piece, and socialize with her host and guide, a man her age named Mardi who wore large, dark-framed glasses, his features vaguely Asian: smooth black hair, narrow eyes, high forehead, short, flat nose. He was rather foxy, Na thought, and she soon came to discover he was a filmmaker, divorced, and living with his mother. There wasn't regular running water at their flat, so Na took baths in the tub pouring cups of water over her head from a bucket of water saved from the day before, something that triggered a memory of how her grandmother used to wash her. Mardi's mother, Digeen¹ Sargsyan, was also familiar: with her critical, heavy-lidded visage, she kept questioning Na about her life in America and why she wasn't married. Such interrogations were de rigeur in Armenian American families, too. Na knew from experience: her mother in particular often asked why she wasn't dating men and expressed shamed distress for not having grandchildren like her friends did.

Na was quite protective of the fact that she had been single for five years because she feared there was something inherently wrong with her. She was very pained by these feelings, more so than the actual loneliness she experienced. So she wondered if Armenia could be a place

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Mrs.

where she would fall in love – if the reason she had been single all this time was because she was meant to find someone here, just as the diasporan Young Professionals trips had suggested. She actually had a little crush on Mardi, though he could be surly as he accompanied her around the city to the conference sites. She had to be informed by one of the European feminists that he was gay, and that he was in a relationship with Gharib, a jovial, pear-shaped political scientist who was moderating panels at the conference. Na was the President of the Queer Armenians of New York group, but her gaydar had failed her. She did have a sense that Mardi might be queer when she saw him primping in the mirror one morning. But she had assumptions about LGBT Armenians, that they weren't aware of their own sexualities, that they repressed them in order to survive. It didn't occur to Na that she might think this way because she was in the habit of burying her own desires.

As she tore off pieces of bread from the loaf, slicing them through the middle to add little chunks of butter, Na glanced across the sterile, renovated apartment, almost wishing she was still at the flat with Mardi and his mother with their 70s furniture and faded wallpaper. They lived nearby, on Tigran Mets Poghots², just around the corner from her complex, in a building which surrounded a busy inner courtyard of cars, makeshift garages and grape arbors. Neighbors hung out the windows and called to each other and watched the comings and goings below. She remembered breakfasts in their small kitchen and how Mardi's mother had brought out a special treat brought from her ancestral village in the countryside. The fig preserves in honey were so tender and sweet on her tongue that Na actually blushed with embarrassment.

Mardi didn't seem to appreciate such simple pleasures; instead, he always seemed annoyed by his mother and how much she questioned and interfered with his life, how she stared

² Street

out the window waiting to see when he came home. But he clearly cared for her: she suffered from a bad back, and he lifted her up off the ground in an awkward chiropractic maneuver from time to time. There wasn't enough money for proper medical treatment for Digeen Sargsyan: Mardi did not have a job, and his mother worked a couple days a week as a teaching assistant at a local school. Na was eager to learn more, but she didn't want to pry into what seemed like their difficult lives, and she was ashamed to call attention to their difference.

Na worried she had upset the balance of the household when Mardi's mother read an interview of Na in a local feminist magazine, in which she divulged that she was bisexual. When Na came home that evening, Mardi's mother seemed disappointed as she glared at her, which reminded Na of her own parents' disapproval of her sexuality and politics. The next morning, however, Digeen Sargsyan revealed to Mardi at breakfast that she had read the article, and she asked Na, through Mardi, about her orientation.

First off, she wasn't exactly sure what "bisexual" meant. "I tell her you have boyfriend and girlfriend," Mardi said.

If Na hadn't been more mortified, she would have been flattered that someone thought she could have relationships with two people at the same time. "No, no!" she said, explaining that she'd been attracted to both sexes for about as long as she could remember. She was single now, she told him, but in the past, her relationships had been with either a man or a woman. Not both.

"It's a difficult life," Digeen Sargsyan responded.

"Not really," Na lied. "In America, it's quite normal."

"It's special in Armenia," she said. Then she went on to tell Na that Cher was a prostitute. Of Armenian descent, the superstar might have been a respectable woman, Digeen Sargsyan purported, had she grown up in Armenia. Mardi laughed and shook his head. Na thought

perhaps his mother was making the Cher non sequitur because the topic of gayness was hitting too close to home. Na attributed Digeen's open curiosity to the fact that Na was an outsider; being gay was a terrible deviancy in Armenian society, one that Digeen probably would have trouble tolerating in her own son.

From her activist work with the Queer Armenians of New York, Na knew of all kinds of terrible crimes against gay and lesbian Armenians. The organization had helped get amnesty for a straight woman, a psychologist, who helped gay teens who had been kicked out of their homes and were subsequently assaulted, raped and blackmailed by the Yerevan police. Na also advocated for an acquaintance in Armenia when he was implicated in the murder of a gay American man who had been teaching English at one of the universities; the police investigated the crime as one of passion, using it as an excuse to identify, round up and harass any gay man in Yerevan. At the time, a new human rights bill protecting LGBT people was enacted into law, reversing the old Soviet penal code against homosexuality, but it was simply an empty diplomatic technicality to appeal to the Council of Europe.

When Na did her performance piece at the conference, in which she referenced going on a date with a woman, a progressive journalist came up to her and claimed that she was the first person in Armenia to publicly come out. A prominent outlier poet, Beatris, said that she was expecting Na to be much more forceful and aggressive based on the style of her poems. "I did not imagine her to be so passive. It was a surprise for me to see her so seemingly defenseless," she said. "A desire to protect her rose up inside me. But after her performance I suddenly realized that this vulnerable creature herself was defending us." As much as Armenia felt foreign on her first trip, Na had been offered space to voice her reality in a world where she never imagined she would be embraced – or needed. Suddenly she saw how her work as a writer

and activist could have much more power as a contribution to the cause of this small group of progressives.

It was odd that Na had now forgotten this sense of purpose on her first day back in the country, a year later, after she had convinced a Fulbright panel that she had enough knowledge and connections in the country to teach creative writing and to research the lives of artists and activists dealing with post-Soviet social changes. It was as if time had collapsed the years between now and when she was thirteen years old, begging her mother to let her quit Armenian school, everything triggering her fears from childhood of not being Armenian enough. She wasn't sure why this was happening. Perhaps it was because she wasn't staying with a family like her last visit, but occupying a family-sized apartment all by herself.

Just as she was finishing up her bread and butter, the phone rang. It was Mardi and Gharib, kindly checking in after receiving an email from her a few days before. She asked them for the code to call the U.S., which they didn't know, but they told her to meet them at Miasin (which meant “together”), the hip and trendy restaurant with track lighting, concrete walls and wooden tables where she had performed the year before and which was currently hosting the feminist conference again. The guys told her she would be able to use the internet at the restaurant to email her parents. Na unfolded her map and traced a route to walk there; as she maneuvered down familiar streets through the main square, with its grand Soviet architecture, and down side streets with old homes and tin roofs, she felt somewhat more competent.

I didn't set out to write like this, in disjointed sections. Weblogging was the latest internet sensation at the time, pre-Facebook. On my blog, I fancied myself an arch reporter, crafting dispatches for anyone who was interested. Eventually, when I lost my way, these texts became

more significant than a lark.

I also didn't intend to write in the third person about myself. At some point, I needed some distance from all the inexplicable ways I acted when I had lived in Armenia, e.g., how I had an identity crisis over seemingly nothing.

Three days after I landed in Yerevan, looking for bread and butter, I found love with an Armenian man much younger than I, who also acted in explicable ways. We came to New York and I kept a journal whenever we had troubles; three years into the relationship, I was turning to it every day.

Writing about my present while living in the past soon took over my life and became the whole of my story.

Journal: August 2009. Astoria, Queens, NY.

Breaking up with Seyran

Pros:

*more time to write
less stress
more dignity*

Cons:

*loneliness
shame of failing
guilt for not helping him*

I feel so stupid, resorting to these kinds of lists. I never thought it would take this long to figure out how to break up with him. I guess this is what happens when you get involved so quickly – it was like we committed to each other after one date. I was so charmed by Seyran when he showed me around Yerevan, taking me to restaurants only locals went to, and out-of-the-way outdoor markets with all the stalls and stalls of stuff underneath loosely-hung blue tarp canopies -- clothes and food and nuts and cleaning supplies. Then there was that market he called

"the petting place" because the aisles were so narrow people nearly rubbed up against each other. When we shopped, we saw life in the markets. Families and children, old folks in slippers. Farmers from the countryside with their ruddy hands and seller's gaze. Some woman always skirting around with a tray of little cups of black foamy coffee to bring around to the vendors. I miss all of that.

Now we go to the Marshall's on Northern Boulevard in Long Island City. The fluorescent lights and piped in advertisements just can't compare. Seyran is obsessed with shopping as if he's collecting and consuming America, spending countless hours in malls, shops, and thrift stores looking for shoes or pants or rucksacks. I find it soul-sucking, though it can be bonding sometimes when he buys stuff for the kitchen like pots, pans, and long-handled spoons; I think they appeal to him because they help to make our house a home.

I also think that he likes the measure of control he has over shopping: you don't like an item, you put it back on the rack. You don't like a store, you leave. It has given him solace in a place that is foreign and unfriendly. I understand: when he took me shopping and helped me find the things I needed in Yerevan, I was finally able to breathe. Now when he needs to buy something, he does extensive online research into the product, reading everything he can, trying to find the lowest price. Then he orders it online and it comes delivered to our door. There is a process and a secure outcome. And if it's not exactly what he wants, he can send it back. Mostly he has kept the guitars, amps, cords, pedals, hard drives, keyboards, mic stands: equipment he couldn't get in Armenia. But he also keeps some crap: incense created by Tibetan monks, books on how to disappear completely, and size 10 men's sandals. The one thing that distinguishes our little apartment on the second floor of a brick house, attached to a chain of other houses just like it, is that we are constantly receiving deliveries from UPS, Fed Ex, and the U.S. Postal Service.

The second or third time we went to a Yerevan supermarket, which was a relatively new, expensive concept – people were still going to the butcher, the baker, the cheese shop, the fruit market – he told me, “You turn me into consumer”; at the time his English vocabulary wasn't that expansive, so the word “consumer” stood out. It struck me as a post-Soviet construct as I'd never even thought of it as an identity before. And I am so not a consumer. I told him that a lawyer friend who visited my old apartment in Manhattan had told me that he couldn't live the way that I did -- without a tv, stereo, microwave or fancy kitchen. I was a poor writer. But in Armenia, I had money from the United States government, and the dollar was strong. Food for the week cost \$10. Jeans cost \$5. We were able to eat out whenever we wanted.

We also entertained our friends. I'm trying to keep up the practice here as much as I can. This is when Seyran is at his best, eager to make people happy. I love how he helps friends with their computers, plays music on his guitar, burns cd's, serves food in neatly arranged plates, lights up the hookah, his pointed face gleaming in its sculpted, angled features. He is such a handsome guy, even dashing at times. And his benevolent nature goes beyond the typical Armenian cultural imperative of hosting with as much generosity as possible: it's really him.

But when he is apart from people, he is dark and mean. I'm tired of him telling me how much he doesn't like my friends, and I don't like how he makes fun of them behind their backs. Also, he doesn't understand that in New York, where friendships take place mostly over email and phone, that his kind of temperament is deadly. Within this bubble, he takes out his frustrations on me, calling me names. When he first called me stupid, I lectured him on how destructive it was. But now we call each other stupid all the time and I hardly ever notice. The other day I asked him to come with me to a party, and he declined, the reason given that I am unfit: “You have a beard and moustache!” There's no point in telling him that he doesn't

understand the concept of emotional support. That Americans have conceptualized such a thing is laughable to many Armenians. And I kind of get the joke. But when I think about being in a relationship, and how, like any commitment, you do it for someone who loves and cares about you, I wonder what I am doing it for.

The thing is, I am not sure when and how to call it quits. I have never broken up with someone that I lived with, married, and brought to America. Every time I have brought it up, he tells me, "I'm not ready." He still seems to need me. Besides the emotional component, there are all the legal issues; he'll lose his green card since it's based on his marriage to me. If he goes back, he'll face dangers that I can't even think about right now. As the granddaughter of a genocide survivor, who knows all the stories of rescue and survival, who has been taught how precious every single Armenian life is, how am I going to build up my American boundaries to turn a young Armenian out?

So sometimes, even though it's clear to me that it's over, I wonder whether it really is. The problem is that I haven't figured out our complex knot of troubles yet, and so I can't let go. And part of the reason is that he is all wrapped up in Armenia for me, in trying to understand that rough and troubled place. We got married because we were in love and wanted to be together in the same nation. We've made a commitment, and he feels like family to me. I feel responsible for him, and I want him to have a good life. Which, come to think of it, is sort of how diasporans feel towards Armenia.

The other day I was depressed, so he asked me to take a walk with him to Sports Authority: "Let me buy you a new pair of sneakers." The ones I got before I went to Armenia are all worn out from the walks we have taken there and here. As I tried on sneakers in the aisles of the store, lacing and unlacing, he told me that he knows he does not make a lot of money as an IT

guy, but when he finds himself complaining about his life, he stops and realizes, "I have money to buy things, I get to live in a nice place." After I finally decided on New Balance, I followed him around the store for an hour or more as he examined water bottles, shirts made with SPF material, sleeping bags for sub zero freezing temperatures, and other stuff he didn't need. I was thinking about how bored I was, how disconnected I felt from him, but by the end of the day, when we were saying goodnight, he said, "I had fun with you today." He hugged me and said, "I love you," which he very rarely does anymore.

When I think of what a good, healthy relationship looks like, and realize mine is far from it, I tell myself that I wouldn't like a good relationship: I would be bored or fuck it up or feel like I wasn't measuring up. There are enough sustaining elements that I have stayed: we do the laundry, we eat sushi, we like the same kinds of movies, we have people over for dinner, we take long walks around Queens. Raised in expressive, critical Armenian families, we feel that when we are mean to each other, at least we are being honest. And then of course there are all the things that I take for granted, that I can't even see or identify since I am in the thick of it: all the ways we have learned and accepted each others' eccentricities.

He is always asking me to wash his back when he is taking a shower; I don't like how my hand gets so wet and sudsy, and he usually asks when I am in the midst of doing something else. After we came home from shopping, he took a shower; as I rubbed hard and slowly across his wide back, I realized that I had this task, and it involved another person, and it filled up my life.

"I love you, too," I told him.

Story: Early September, 2006. Yerevan.

Once outside the center of Yerevan, Na noticed from the car window how the packed

streets gave way to more space, a few scrawny trees, and concrete block hovels. The landscape was stark and desolate, unlike the scene in the minivan, where she was packed in tight with a crew of Armenians and visiting artists, including Mardi, Gharib, and Hankist, the woman who had invited her to Armenia the year before. Now among friends, Na felt somewhat at ease, though she still hadn't been able to email her parents. When she had arrived at Miasin, Na had asked if she could use Hankist's laptop to check her email. "Ha," Hankist said, squinting at the screen through the smoke of her cigarette. "Mi vargyan," in a second. And then Hankist asked Na if she wanted to come along on a tour of the countryside with the visiting Europeans.

"Sure," Na said.

As Na continued to marvel at the nearly post-apocalyptic landscape, the car encountered a strange oasis: a small tract of new suburban homes with an American flag waving in front, which looked like it should have been in Teaneck; Gharib informed her that it was built, in fact, by a wealthy New Jersey developer of the diaspora. A moment later, the van pulled up to view a grotesque mansion under construction, the garden studded with dozens of fountains and populated by hundreds of statues of Armenian heroes. Gharib said the owner had made his money by monopolizing sugar imports with the help of his connections to the government. "This man is lawless," Gharib said. "A police officer stopped him for driving too fast, and he locked the cop in the trunk of his car and dumped him off at the station. And the police did nothing, just let him go. Can you imagine?" It seemed to Na, as the car drove on, that those with power did whatever they wanted, like the Wild West. Na knew conditions weren't good in Armenia due to the geo-political situation, but it troubled her to hear how people who had suffered so much and had fought so hard for their freedom now treated each other. She was reminded of how she had wanted to flee the dynamic that would cause such desperation and

despair for the folks in the Super Dome.

Now ten minutes outside of the city center, the tour stopped to examine Shant, an ostentatious restaurant with fountains and mirrors. After they passed through the restaurant and crossed a manicured courtyard, they encountered a small zoo. The animals faced each other in two lines of small concrete cages meant to look like caves. Monkeys and peacocks and bears and raccoons, and birds Na had never heard of before, were isolated and exhibited behind handpainted signs in Armenian, Russian and English. The creatures seemed despondent, the monkey uncharacteristically lethargic, slumped in a corner of his cave. Mardi told Na that the owner of the complex was a member of parliament, another oligarch. Na imagined those greedy men who swooped in during the transition to capitalism and took what they could get, leaving the rest of the country in squalor for years with their subsequent dirty deals. “Asshole,” Mardi said, echoing her thoughts. Na asked him who dined at the restaurant. He looked at her with contempt and explained, “The rich and the fucking rich.” Na couldn't understand the reason for the private zoo, wondering aloud if the corrupt clientele ate the exotic animals. “Maybe,” Gharib told her. “It's more the oligarch's pathetic attempt to exhibit his dominance.”

The next item on the tour was the nuclear power plant, Metsamor. An Uzi-wielding guard in a gigantic policeman's cap, almost halo-sized, checked them out. Hankist explained they were touring and the guard let them drive very close to the four reactors letting off steam. Na was intrigued with the outer surface of the reactors, which were covered in a cross-hatched pattern that looked like a spider's web. “The plant was shut down after the earthquake in 1988, but was turned back on a few years later, during the dark times,” Gharib said. Na had read of those years from 1991 to 1994 when Armenia had just become independent and was at war with Azerbaijan, when heat and electricity were so scarce that all the trees in the parks were cut down for

firewood. “Now that Armenia has stabilized, there is pressure from the E.U. to close the plant back down,” Gharib said, “since it is deemed unsafe by an earthquake fault.” He went on to explain that landlocked Armenia, whose borders were closed since the war with both Azerbaijan and their ally Turkey, didn't have any other energy source; oil pipelines from Azerbaijan to Turkey actually went out of their way to bypass Armenia. “The nuclear power plant provides 40% of the country's electricity,” Gharib said as Na gazed out the window at the silhouette of the chimneys, reminiscent of the nuclear meltdown at Three Mile Island. It seemed to her that the only way for Armenia to survive was to gamble with the possibility of a wide-scale disaster.

Eventually, the group began to wonder how much radiation they were soaking in. Noticing a large crack in the concrete surface of one of the chimneys, they high-tailed it back to the city. On the return trip, they noticed some strange shapes on the horizon. As they drove closer, they could make out a series of long buildings on the outskirts of a small village, and they all agreed to make a detour to investigate. Na hesitantly followed the group as they silently walked around the deserted landscape until they stumbled upon an empty Olympic-sized swimming pool. The adjacent buildings' doors were locked. Nothing was labeled; there were no signs. They peeked into windows and discovered in each of the three buildings a gymnasium, another swimming pool, and tennis courts. The complex seemed well-maintained, but oddly-outsized for the countryside. Neither Mardi, Gharib nor Hankist could explain how or why it existed in the middle of nowhere. Na assumed it was a late Soviet idea that didn't work in the current age, frozen in time, perhaps a pet project of a corrupt governmental crime boss.

By the time they got back to Yerevan, Na was exhausted. As everyone went their own ways, Hankist sat with her on a park bench while Na tried to grasp her bearings. When a vendor came round, Hankist offered to buy her an ice cream; Na realized that she hadn't eaten since the

bread and butter, and she was starving. She had no way of knowing that by saying “Sure,” she would end up spending her entire day touring the countryside, examining the obscene monuments of the corrupt. So much for her goal to call or email home. She realized it had been comforting to play the tourist again, driven around and cared for, her only goal to look. As she ate her ice cream, she noticed that the wrapper said “Shant” – the name of the zoo-restaurant.

Before leaving home, Na had written her first blog post, ending it with a question about what odd poems she would encounter in Armenia. It occurred to her that this tour was the first poem: a mansion amidst hovels, an egotistical zoo, the nuclear plant on the edge of a tectonic plate, the well-maintained buildings in the middle of nowhere. Misspent wealth and abject poverty: no one was protected here.

Where there is little safety, people try to create their own.

As I place myself back in time, I find that I must bring a few selves to the task. There is the public me blogging observationally, and the private me who experienced a love story. My public and private selves, which I thought I had somewhat integrated over the years as a bisexual feminist Armenian American woman, became re-fractured in Armenia, where people submerged any deviation from the norm for their own protection. There is also the later me ensconced in her life in Queens, who wonders in her journal why she can't leave a difficult relationship, protecting her reality from most of her family and friends and herself.

Identifying, incorporating, and submerging multiple selves was something that I witnessed early on in Armenia during my first visit. After Mardi showed me to his bedroom my first night, I was confronted by a large, life-sized black and white photograph on his wall of a topless woman with dirty blonde, teased hair and thick, black fake eyelashes. Her arms were

open wide as if she were dancing, stretching open a crocheted spider web of a top. I tried not to be startled by her breasts, which were perfect and pert, and noticed that her face seemed strained. The next morning Mardi told me, “She was a child psychologist in Germany who was also a stripper during the 60s. She committed suicide. She was tormented by her double life. I am interested in this, in subjugating identity.”

When Mardi and Gharib took me to the Parajanov museum a few days later, I viewed many artifacts from the life of the famed director, not to mention his curious collages of doll parts, buttons, found objects and scraps of paper, which he created during the years the Soviets banned him from filmmaking, imprisoning him for being gay, which he never actually admitted, which the wall labels did not explain. The museum was a residence that the Soviet government had built for Parajanov to live in, which I had trouble understanding: would he be on exhibit, like an animal in his own zoo? There were two bedrooms and a kitchen, but no one had ever used them because Parajanov died in 1990 before it was completed.

As we rested in Parajanov's courtyard, Gharib started singing suddenly, slowly and sweetly, what sounded like a hymn. I was captivated by what he told me was an ancient pagan song that was usually played on the duduk. When I expressed that I hadn't known he was a singer, he explained, “Yes, I am classically trained. You know, I also sing in persona,” and he belted out a few lines of Gloria Gaynor's “I Will Survive” in a completely different tone, then scatted in a be-bop style. “I'm recording an album of jazz standards with her voice,” he said.

I came to discover such collaging of selves, styles, and voices among artists who were borrowing references and other source materials. It seemed that after the Soviet Union collapsed that deconstruction took a spot in Armenian consciousness. Seyran was making collaged poems from words he found in American and British song lyrics, Armenian classical literature, and

porn. Amal, my translator friend, was also collaging her texts, juxtaposing voices of theorists and Armenian 19th century feminist writers. At one of Hankist's lectures, a young visual artist told me that he had created a video that spliced the dramatic reading of one of my poems with images from classic Soviet film footage.

I remember thinking of these Armenian forms of collage as a gleeful form of stealing, the artists taking back their voices by appropriating the state's version of culture. But I also wondered if they were using the words and images of others in order to escape directly expressing themselves, a protective mask. The Soviet censors were gone, but a new batch of extremists had filled their shoes. Challenging the status quo wasn't as clear cut as it had been behind the Iron Curtain, when people were shipped off to Siberia. But there was still someone or something to fear or resent: traditional families, powerful mobsters, the corrupt government, enemies across borders, and superpowers jockeying for influence.

As much as that reality feels a world away from how I live in the U.S., listing my life and pasting my words onto others helps me to see the seams, the gaps, and the places we overlap. It now seems to me that some experiences defy national identities and that privilege can create its own prison. Only through sorting through the evidence and ephemera of my relationship with Seyran can I attempt to understand the fear in my body, the loathing in our cultures, and what it made us do.