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from The Furrow

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The Hopkins Review, Volume 16, Number 2, Spring 2023, pp. 50-58 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/thr.2023.0038>



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Valérie Manteau
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Translated from the French by Claire Foster

Hrant, according to translator Dominique Eddé, addressed his reader not as one person in need of persuading, but rather as two people in conflict whom he hoped to bring closer together. Karin Karakasli, his longtime partner at *Agos*, says he “invented a language that wholly seizes nationalism by the throat.” I flip through all the translations I can find, in English and in French, while sitting outside my favorite cafés, where I seem to attract frequent demonstrations of sympathy from neighbors and servers. Erol, the souvenir seller just next to Café Muz, is the only one who doesn’t hide his disappointment. If you write about Hrant, there won’t be any room in your book for me, even though you promised. I ask if he has any stories about Hrant but he shrugs, I’m just a humble shopkeeper. I point out that Hrant himself had a slew of businesses before going into journalism, but Erol doesn’t want to be a character in a book about Hrant. I remember the day I saw on TV that he’d died, I didn’t know who he was, but I heard it was an Armenian journalist killed by a Turk and trust me: it was the first time in my life I’d ever felt so Turkish, so ashamed of being Turkish. I’d be happy to play the villain, but in a story. Whatever your thing is, it hits too close to home. Erol’s souvenir shop is trying to change with the times, as Westerners are scarce, and have been somewhat replaced by tourists from the Gulf region who, in addition to buying traditional soaps, napkins, magnets, and tchotchkes, acquire calligraphies that Erol can’t read, but which he sells as authentically Turkish. I’d sell anything, he says, as long as I can take some time off and ride around with my friends. I ask whom he votes for, but he dodges the question—I don’t do politics, I’m for peace, I just want everyone to respect each other, that’s it. He still does *some* politics, though—I mention the Syrian guy he’d hired but eventually asked to leave. He’d wanted to do his prayers and he entirely has that right, Erol contends, but he couldn’t just abandon the store like that without letting me know. And then he bothered the customers at Muz because the music was too loud, it was all too much. It’s a shame, because it was nice having someone who could speak Arabic to customers, but there’s always trouble with Middle Easterners. Hearing him say this I burst out laughing, but he doesn’t know what he’s said that’s funny—just so you know, it’s Europe here. “The difference between East and West,” writes Hakan Günday, “is Turkey.

I don't know if Turkey is the result of subtraction, but I do know that the distance that separates East and West is as wide as the country itself." And within this space emerges a third path, which occurs in any space between two things—without which Europe wouldn't be Europe, and the Middle East would be seen as a flat, illegible mess. Erol tried to hire Fares, who's tired of making coffee at Muz, but Fares declined without a second thought—the ridiculously low wages, 12 hours a day, six days per week, plus his total indifference towards the work. And why not shine the shoes of Emiratis too, while we're at it. Erol gets it, but can only bemoan his own situation, because of course he too would prefer to have a garage filled with old motorcycles. And to live closer to Izmir, spend the day doing nothing—like you, by the way, living *la dolce vita*. I wonder what it is you see in this place. If I weren't stuck here, I'd be long gone. If I had a foreign girlfriend, easy, I'd marry her, and we'd go to Europe. You see, the problem with having me in your book is that I have no intention of dying for this country.

Erol's wife comes into the back where we're chatting quietly, scowls at me, and in an ostensibly polite gesture she takes away our cups of tea, as if to get me to leave, all the while proposing that I have another. But because I insist on leaving now, despite the rain, she gives me a henna, pressing the ball of paste into the palm of my hand, and tells me to dig my nails in and hold on tight, for as long as possible. Afterwards, one can tell by the color of your hands if you're a loyal woman. I walk out into the rain, henna in hand, it's already dark, I pass by Muz again and the street seeps, wet and ominous. I'm soaked, Muz is locked, but I see there's still some light upstairs, and I've no desire to walk all the way to the bus stop that would take me back to the Asian side. I holler up, wiping off my makeup that must be a mess by now anyway. The voice that answers sounds off, he says he'll explain but that right now he can't come down, he's going to throw down the keys from the window. He mumbles, his voice dark, though I assume I've misheard, hopefully I won't hurl myself down along with the keys. The window opens, the keys fall, and miraculously they don't fall onto the awning. I collect them from the gutter, take the stairs normally reserved for employees, and from the back of the room I'm welcomed by a groan and the sound of a slumping body. I take off my shoes, drenched, grimacing as I pass the mirror.

He's sitting on the edge of the couch, pale, looking at his shoes. What is happening. I don't know, he says, I felt like clearing my head, I took some stuff. I'm really not okay. I touch my hand to his clammy forehead. What can I even do, I pour a glass of water and get some aspirin, but in the time it takes for me to get rid of that stupid ball of henna—which has now turned my fingers scarlet red—he has lain down. I crouch next to him, holding the water, and wonder if I should call the doctor—but what doctor, with the few Turkish words I know, without knowing what he took. What are you looking at, he grumbles. He says that his mind is racing, he can't make it stop. This must be it, when people claim to see their whole life flash before their eyes: I'm going to die. At least I won't have to leave the country. . . . He wavers, gives up on finishing the sentence. What a shame to die now, my brother was going to visit tomorrow morning. He mumbles again that he's sorry I have to see him like this, but it's still better than having left me in the rain, no? I agree, and he looks reassured. He seems so stressed by the idea of dying before I'd gotten shelter that I feel compelled to tell him that even if he *had* died, I wouldn't have blamed him for the rain. He sighs as if I'd just given him the last rites. You're being such a drama queen, I say, caressing his forehead as one would a child. Come to bed, I'm cold. I slip into bed beside him, he stumbles through an incomprehensible muddle of Turkish and English, then quiets. After several minutes of total silence, I put my hand on his chest, and he jumps as if I were about to strangle him. What now? I wanted to make sure you were still breathing. That doesn't mean anything, he hisses, returning at once to his coma. He doesn't let go of my hand, minutes pass—then he regains consciousness, climbs strenuously up my forearm as if mounting a steep hill, finally arriving at my sleeve: take off your clothes. Now this is funny, I'd really like to see him try to have sex in this state, so I go with it. Outright hallucinating, he says that he's seeing double and this brings him back to life, *what luck*, a threesome I can't refuse. As loquacious as he is unintelligible. He rises, but just as soon as his feet touch the ground he collapses. He dissolves into laughter, I can't stand up, incredible, he asks me to get his cigarettes, and I tell him you can't be serious, you aren't going to smoke on top of all this. Of course I am. He hoists himself up and sits on the edge of the mattress as if it's a cliff, gingerly

lighting his cigarette and asking me to keep a respectful distance so as not to get burned. He is extremely careful not to burn the bed, nor the rest of the furniture, careful, careful. I love these exaggerated gestures, and he laughs without seeming to know what's funny, stop laughing at me, I'm dying. Behind his eyes is a joy I haven't seen in a long time, and he grabs me by the feet, kisses my knees, my hips, my sex, come here—I want to make love.

When I wake up the next day it's already noon, and I'm alone. If it weren't for the glass of water and aspirin still on the coffee table, I would think it was I who'd hallucinated. But on my skin lingers the distinct vibration of last night's embrace. I tell myself that if for whatever reason I got pregnant from last night, I would keep it—at this point it wouldn't make much of a difference. That child would look like us: a brat sprung from the edges of consciousness.

I go downstairs, the four of them are sitting around the bar, and they welcome me with smiling, cheerful faces that are at once a little mocking, a little friendly. I tell him he looks better than he did last night, and he tries to look serious, but I can tell he's still a little high. I'm curious, I venture, do you even remember what happened last night? He looks up at the sky, thank God, yes. Puffs out his chest and preens like a child—I was really good, wasn't I?

* * *

Ramadan has hardly started but it's clear that this year will be a tough one. June is the worst time of year to fast, the days are long, the heat is unbearable—this is going to be tense. A mob of fanatics pounces on an event hosted by a small record store in Cihangir, where they make a scene as if to set an example, vandalizing the store and beating up customers who were drinking beer and listening to Radiohead's new album. The incident goes viral on social media and ignites an outrage that's hard to pinpoint. It's the boys from Tophane who are behind it, sighs Ahmet, who lives right at the border of the hipster district of Cianghir and the Tophane area, which is overshadowed by the mosque. At night we see them roam around in small groups, they communicate amongst themselves and intervene as soon

as something upsets them. And no one does anything about it. A retired guitarist, now a programmer for one of Istanbul's most beautiful concert halls that hosts rock, jazz, and indie artists from all over the world, Ahmet is what Georgi calls a Kemal type, joking about their forthcoming extinction, the sons of the secular Turkish middle class; brought up on European culture, they are increasingly in the minority, unprepared to live in a country whose power dynamics they never could have anticipated would undergo such total reversal. Just down the road from Orhan Pamuk's Museum of Innocence, Ahmet's apartment is a haven for all the artists of Cihangir when it comes time to drink beer and listen to music. A vinyl collector, he scours the neighborhood second-hand record stores, all of them know him from a mile away. I ask if he's heard from the guy down below who'd been beaten by the mob from the mosque. He says that it was a new guy, not from around here, a Korean immigrant. It was almost as if to apologize on behalf of his country that Ahmet called the owner of the record store who, though rattled, declared that he would re-open his doors as soon as possible. Radiohead posted a sympathetic statement on Facebook, which boosted the owner's spirits, but Ahmet wasn't impressed. If they had the courage to come play at the protest tonight, I would have thought that was great. But "peace and love" platitudes posted on Facebook from London just aren't enough. A support rally has been announced to take place this evening in front of the record shop. The police are urging everyone to stay home. Ahmet doesn't know if there's really a chance it'll get violent, but because it's just below his place he'll show up, and I might as well stop by, too. By the way he just bought a Bash Hong record, a real marvel—I make him repeat the name over and over again, desperate to understand what he's talking about—do I know it, I must not be familiar with it, *what* are you saying? No, you *must* know it, and on and on, and we play this guessing game for several minutes before I land on Alain Bashung, *yes*, of course—now get over here, you can translate it for me.

The neighborhood is already surrounded by the police. The corner store is closed up, we can't buy any beer, which Ahmet says is no big deal, we'll get some delivered. I ask if the delivery guys work during Ramadan, and he raises his eyebrows, are you serious, do you think you're in Saudi

Arabia or what. What's the point of having beer delivery if they don't work during Ramadan. On the coffee table, Bashung floats in the dark waters of *Fantaisie militaire*. Ahmet's ear is turned toward France these days, he's even bringing a few French bands to the street music festival that's coming up. You saw the cops in the street. We're going to get tear-gassed; it'll remind us of Gezi. Wait, before we go down, can you translate this for me? He plays "La nuit je mens." *Je m'en lave mes mains dans le Vercors à l'élastique*: untranslatable. Sorry. Disappointed, he listens in silence, a cigarette dangling from his lips, looking out the window at what's brewing down below. Lyrics that speak to me alone, and which seem to have something to tell me, assuming the shape of a bubble, a ghost that only I can perceive and which follows me when, with some nervousness, we leave the apartment to join the crowd in front of the record store. It doesn't last long. Just begun, the protest is violently broken up by the police, and we cough our way back to the apartment, eyes red, we shut the windows tight so we can breathe inside, but after an hour of stewing in our anger, our powerlessness, it's ultimately the heat that stifles us. We decide to go dancing and migrate to Taksim Square; on the way, we run into the infamous militia from Tophane, they watch us pass, sure of themselves, playing the bullies, casting contemptuous glances. Some insults are exchanged. Ahmet immediately calms the situation, as he's known in the neighborhood, and has already had his share of threats that have struck as close as his street, under the pretext that he played music too late, too loud. We shouldn't aggravate them, it wouldn't take much for things to get ugly. He seems wound up afterward, snarling that people ought to organize counter-militias, that they would need to be armed, too, and ready to move, to show once and for all who sets the rules at night in Istanbul, because we can't count on the police.

It's only when we get to the rooftop that Ahmet calms down. Beer helps more than my jokes, which inevitably fall flat—Elif Shafak is right to point out that it's thanks to her fondness for alcohol that Turkey occasionally resembles a democracy. Luckily Ahmet is already drunk when, in the middle of the night, he receives a cancellation message from one of the groups that was scheduled to come to the street music festival. They'd heard about the scene at the record shop, as well as the police violence

this evening. The message, written in French and roughly translated into English, is appalling. That, seen from Paris, Istanbul doesn't seem like a place where musicians really thrive, everyone understands that. But who is so cruel as to tell Turkish people— themselves caught between fundamentalism and dictatorship—that, well, *we* like to drink and make music, we'd rather not risk our lives for pleasure. Ahmet hides his disappointment behind nervous laughs, attributing to mere ignorance the snide tone of the email. I'm livid. He raises his glass: long live arrogance, long live France.

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The city moves in slow motion. Some shopkeepers are closing early so they can go to dinner. Certain cafés have temporarily stopped serving alcohol. I wonder if I'll have to part ways with my little reading spot, on the benches facing the sunset in Üsküdar, but I note that the tea vendors in this conservative neighborhood are still keeping busy, despite their fasting. I linger here one evening with Hrant Dink under my arm, and when the time comes to have a drink the motorcycle comes by to pick me up. I love riding into Muz's courtyard, as if passing through the Blue Mosque's monumental doorway as the Sultans once did, staying up on their horses, just to make a spectacle of it. Childish pride. I take off my helmet. In lieu of driver's licenses, we have invested in brand-new helmets, betting on the fact that cops would never stop motorcyclists who have two helmets *and* wear them (the general rule is to ride with no helmet, or with a helmet attached to the handlebars). I wave to those I see sitting outside: Berkin, and the small group of cartoonists for *Ondört Muz* who are pretending to work in the sun. Anna is alone inside, behind the bar. She hardly responds to my hello, grabs a glass and as she pours from the percolator, I see her hand trembling; it's strange, I've never seen her like this before, she really is shaking, as she puts the full cup onto its saucer she can hardly stop the shaking and the coffee narrowly lands on the bar. I ask again if she's okay. She scrupulously cleans the side of the coffee machine. It's as if she didn't hear me. Anna, are you alright? There was a weird guy who came by just now. She doesn't want to say more, she makes a gesture that indicates that

we're no longer alone. But I carry on anyway, waving over the others, what do you mean a weird guy, she puts a finger to her mouth to say no and then she surrenders, at least wait for them all to be here so I don't have to repeat myself. A guy came in this afternoon when there was no one here, he came to the bar and grabbed me, he dragged me to the storage room and took me by the throat and I wanted to fight back but he hit me against the wall and then I remembered that I should yell so I screamed and then he left, he just left. I want to say something comforting, but he cuts me off, what do you mean that happened here this afternoon, with the guys outside? No, they hadn't arrived yet, there was no one here. He raises his voice, but why didn't you call us, she shakes her head no, he slams his helmet on the bar, where is he, what does he look like, she starts to explain but he cuts her off, increasingly furious, did he speak Turkish? What was he wearing? Would you recognize him? She says yes, of course, he's been here before, but why didn't you kick him out right away and call the neighbors for help—I see her begin to cower and it breaks my heart, now it's my turn to yell, fuck it's not her fault, he shoots me a glare and leaves to take his anger out on the group of artists sipping their beers outside. Now it's all hands on deck, they're all riled up, going up and down the block, scanning the passersby, Anna stands in the doorway, trembling, arms crossed over her long yellow dress. As if he would come back right after, I say, and then what, they're going to kill him? She shrugs, and why not, men could stand to die a little, too. I ask if she wants to go home, if she wants us to go somewhere else, but she refuses straightaway, absolutely not, I want to stay here, I work until 10. She's stubborn, no way she'd leave her post and, in any case, she doesn't want to go home, she asks us not to tell Fares, who will just get upset if he finds out about this, he'd already made a comment this morning about her dress. I'm horrified. But she says she'd like some vodka if I can find some. I accept the mission. Passing in front of his store I alert Erol, who seems at once sorry and not surprised, he says, not the least bit maliciously, girls, what can you do, you know it happens, we have to live with it. I want to smash the bottle over his head. I go back to Muz, the cartoonists have returned to their table, resumed their conversation and now have the nerve to ask for a drink. Berkin alone is at the bar and asks if we can watch the security

camera videos, see if his face was caught, but of course the cameras aren't set up properly, the images are useless. I say we have to report it anyway, but he winces, you know that cops here just make things worse. I insist they do something, but what, in any case Anna doesn't have valid papers, so forget the police, it'll only cause problems for all of us. I think about this, Anna stays quiet, Berkin seems distraught; Erol closes his shop and comes over, no doubt to show his support, but when he hugs her all he can say is that her bright yellow dress during Ramadan maybe wasn't the best idea. And now I'm really fed up, listening to them explain that it's too much to expect anything better, there are assholes everywhere and you have to be realistic and protect yourself—a rift erupts among us. Stop making this face like we're defending the guy, we're just trying to say that these apes are at home here, and none of your feminist theories can do anything about it. The least bit of skin is provocation enough for them, simple as that. Do you think we enjoy this? Welcome to Turkey. Their voices get louder and Anna, panicked, apologizes, and I'm furious at the guys for taking her apology as proof that they're right. Berkin must think that speaking to me as if I were a toddler will calm me down, the other just pretends not to hear, but I can tell he's annoyed, on edge, and Berkin ends up asking me to go back home instead of going hysterical on everyone. No way. He says he doesn't want me here in this state. What state, because I'm angry, because I'm upset, don't we have the right to be? I repeat that we should go to the cops and that if none of them have the balls to do it I'll go with Anna myself, but he says in Turkish—and for the first time ever the language is unambiguous, clear, I understand each and every word—if she says one more time that we need to go to the police I'm going to lose it. He starts to raise his arm but stops mid-way, a gesture that I interpret wrongly, perhaps, as if he were going to hit me, I throw his helmet and the pile of newspapers on the ground and suddenly he yells, get the hell out of here, you don't understand anything, and you aren't helping anyone.