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Writing Sample

Violet Grigoryan

Includes "Midnight," "African Kiss," "The City," "Love," "Harem Rose" and "Unfinished Ode: Upon the Clitoris."

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Violet Grigoryan

Poems

Midnight

And the full round moon enters the stage, hand-painted porcelain, a skilled puppet-master of sorts, spreading its fingers, pulling the cords...
Enchanted by it, everything rises: the agile male organs, the waters, the dogs and the sleep-walkers. Rising higher and higher, higher than the sand, higher than the woman, higher than the roofs, higher than the bridges, higher than the taverns, higher than the trains.
But I cannot raise so much as my arms...
But I cannot raise so much as my eyes...
But I cannot raise a word from a word.
I walked on until the passing of the rose, but it pricked my heart with its final thorn.
I walked on closer to the thicket of the pines, those dreamy trees that gently swayed in their green orgasm, but then I tripped on their pinecones and fell.
I danced the dance of death on ice, but all I got for it was a head of cabbage on a trey.
I gave some gold to a money-changer, and he gave me colored shreds of paper for them; I'll use them all to make a dress that covers me and fits my body.
I looked and discovered that I was crying.
I looked and discovered that I was sad.

* * *

I close my eyes, it makes me sad; I open them-still makes me sad; I turn my head, it makes me sad; I light five matches-still makes me sad; in the street, right under my window, Maret is haggling passionately; I open a book and lo, a white deer skips down the page, and its branching horns get tangled between the lines; a thrush hops from one branch to another, waiting for some sign of change; the wild boar runs around the meadow for a couple of lines, stomping out the undulating grass; the fireflies declare, let there be light; the mole and the owl just sit in one place, dazed; the light of my solitary candle flickers (in the dark Maret's still haggling); the woodpecker says knock-knock; the snipe-it's no dope-doesn't answer, it knows better than that; the thrush hops from one line to another, waiting for some sign of change; the deer shakes its horns free, disentangling them from the lines; the boar stomps out another bush-just watch it gloat; the field mouse peeks out to check what the commotion is to find the same ham wreaking havoc, and nibbles on another leaf, safely hidden from the unicorn's eyes; the thrush waits for a little longer, despairs of change, and moves to a different branch. Suddenly I cough; Pan notices me and approaches me with joy, he touches my hair, plays his flute for me; the wind gently ripples my curtains (outside, Maret is still haggling); the nymphs bring me offerings of ornaments, blush and hair-dye, and sandalwood oil; they give me charms, a silk kerchief for my hair, they fasten a blue bead to my arm to ward off all the evil eyes, they take me to the bank of the river and bid me to look, beware, don't you fall asleep, look closely...

The black water came, I didn't go in,
the ash water came, I didn't go in,
the rust water came, I didn't go in,

the gold water came, I washed my hair in it,
the milk water came, I washed my face in it,
the rosewater came, I washed my body in it,
and when the clear water came, I jumped into the river, frolicked with a mermaid, sang in the water,
splashed in the water (under my window, Maret yelled out-what miscreant is dumping dirty water?),
the wind ripped the kerchief off my hair, the water washed away my sandals, I rolled around in the
grass, my head and feet completely bare; the forest spirits fancied me, they pampered me, caressed
my face, they licked my belly-button clean, they pressed their luscious breasts to mine, they wrapped
my wanton thighs in theirs, they tickled me with their lithe tongues, they turned me into a soft mass,
just spread around in the grass. Then suddenly, I realized that I had something to tell, so I stood up,
swayed in the wind-a blade of grass, then, as I began changing into a singing re... whack, under my
windows someone slapped our Maret, you stupid bitch, why are you shoving me these dollar bills?
Pan blew up a storm, the pages got mixed up, and I stayed like that, a centaur-half-reed and half-
Violet. What kind of a reed-pipe would I make now? I shut the window, sad. I shut the book, sad.

* * *

I don't speak reed very well
For Violet doesn't come much,
Yet I still feel I must somehow tell
The story of my sorry life,
Marets, go forth with your laments,
Bemoan my luck, bemoan my fate.
At midnight, sharp, my finger died.
I went outside, sat on my porch,
Let myself go, and cried and cried,
Over my finger and my life.
My daddy raped me at some point,
My mommy went and sold my ring,
My brother, well, he called me "witch,"
My sisters all derided me,
My lover left me with a child
Inside my womb and left one night,
Our weird neighbor came to me
And sa... and spat upon my face.
My uncles stuck me with sharp pins,
And then they rolled me down the hill
Inside a barrel, lined with nails,
A cozy coffin made of oak,
My nephews gave me as a gift.
My friend seduced my fiancé,
My eldest gambled me away.
My young lame daughter pleasures drivers.
And to the sound of utter silence
My finger died today at midnight.
Marets, begin your loud laments,
Offer a prayer for its peace.

* * *

I have not talked or laughed for seven years
I have done nothing but spin yarn for seven years,
I have been weaving a cloth for seven years,
I have been stitching shirts for seven years,
But none of the swans turned into a brother,
Nor does the prince ever recognize me,
He doesn't look into my eyes or at my hair,
He just keeps checking the size of my shoe...
In the ashes, in the ashes,
In the ashes I will hide from him.

* * *

But I, I have seen a rose closing shut its eyes, stretching its long spine, placing its own head on the sacrificial stone; it whispered to me, come and take my place.
But I, I have seen how the blood gushed out from the gates of man, washed all over me, and how multicolored warms wove their cocoons in my flesh and skin.
But I, I have wandered long in the winter's chill, in my paper clothes, and that which I sought was covered with ice; what my eyes could see, my hands couldn't reach, what my eyes could see, my lips couldn't touch, what my eyes could see, my nose couldn't smell, what my eyes could see...
But I, with the leper's bell tied around my leg, many times I've chimed, ring-ring, healthy babes, run away from me, ring-ring, wealthy dames, move away from here, ring-ring, look away, pretty little boys, ring-ring, unafflicted folk, ring-ring, the unrancored ones, ring-ring, the unworméd ones, the unscathéd ones... How many times did that tinkle of forewarning shield me! But a deaf bee with a stealthy flight buzzes over me, probes me on all sides, wants to furrow me with its trunk of love; it will gather nectar from my oozing sores...
But I, after all, at the fortnight's end, will recline upon a single water-drop, with my heart as bait; I will stretch my back, lie down, supine, with a blade of grass pressed between my teeth, and la-la la-la-la, undaunted by what's passed.
And when the full moon appears, bang, up will go my penis, higher than the sand, higher than the rose, higher than the ash, higher than the flag, higher than the word, than the money-changer, the tragic and the farce, higher than my parents, higher than the sports, math and the commandments, higher than the curse...
High and higher still, higher than this whole, this entire trembling mass...

“African Kiss”¹

Batter and Filling

150 g. butter, 6 eggs, 2 cups sugar, ½ cup milk, 2 tablespoons cocoa powder, 1/5 cup flour, baking soda, vinegar, vanilla extract.

Frosting

70-75 g. butter, 3 tablespoons cocoa powder, ½ cup sugar, 5 tablespoons milk.

Baking Instructions

Combine the yolks of 6 eggs with one cup of sugar, add slightly melted butter, mix well. Separately, mix one teaspoon of soda with one tablespoon of vinegar and add it to the mixture. Add 2 tablespoons of cocoa powder, vanilla extract, ½ cup lukewarm milk and 1/5 cup of flour. Mix thoroughly, then transfer the batter into a pan and cook it for about 30 minutes on very low heat. While cooking, read the following:

*What lovely body, crimson heart, amazing esse (it must be said), perhaps we'll never meet again under the sun, nor by the sea, nor on this earth
(my little "esse," welcome here, into my text, a foreign girl, my newcome bride, nomadic sister, may you be lucky for my lines)*

*I know, we'll never meet again under the sun, nor by the sea, nor on this earth
But I would like to spend ten years just kissing you to get enough,
I've got no choice, I must be brief, I must condense, and zip the files to fit them in,
I'll turn ten years into ten months, I'll turn ten months into ten days, I'll turn ten days into ten hours, ten hours-a single day of love
That day of love is all I've got, a winning ticket, large and small,
Today we'll have ten years of love, tomorrow-bye, tomorrow-gone
....*

Can't get enough, I'll say again:

*My cute today
my nookienow, tomorrowdone and goneaway
my butterfly for just one day
cash on the side, my throwaway*

*a potent kiss, your touches-right,
a hurried feast, without respite
your black well-matching t my white*

*My instantaneous and concise
The instant's gift, a worthy prize*

*A breeze gone gently light at heart,
hard to ingest, forgetyounot,
the secretkeeper, lips-on-guard,
a love-synopsis, loving-shard*

He doesn't get it, stares, quiet... So you don't get it, stare, quiet? Chin on my knee, he's looking up without a sound, and has no clue what my words mean. Try as I might, I can't be quiet, I always love to love with words.

I'll say again:

Since early this morning, when I first saw you having breakfast at the hotel on this newly-mapped land, where we've all been stranded in transit (having narrowly escaped from the terrorist-threatened planes), I-from Yerevan, you-on a return trip from Paris to Congo.

Yes, ever since this morning, despite the uncomfortable airport, the machine-gun-clad guys, the cheap trinkets-decorations of the brute customs' officials misery, greed, and vulgarity, despite the dreary streets laden with portraits of the barely-elect, the locals with persistent eyes, who want (no different from people back home) to transform your-foreigner's-eyes into mirrors; where you able to notice, you, the stranger from abroad, if they reflected the locals' teeny-tiny essences?

They reminded me of my homeland.

Ever since this morning, I've been fantasizing about seeing your black-curled head imprisoned between my thighs,

And I longed to feel your pink tongue inside me, invigorating like a timely cup of coffee,

And your bright-white teeth, tearing the bread with cheese layered on top of it and then sunk into the flesh of the plump and shiny olive (sending shivers down my spine). Then came the pastry with the thick filling, and how the sweet juice of the custard-and-cherry filling burst out suddenly, painting your protruding, untamed mouth with milk and blood,

Greedy piggy, insatiable, you also reached for a slice of cake and bit into its chilly softness... And the white soufflé framed within the dark chocolate of the cake opened up like teeth revealed in a smile-the "African Kiss."

Abruptly, you lifted your eyes from your plate, sensing my gaze fixed on you, and what scorching lava... , The white in the abyss of your eyes, oh, those caves filled with mystery, sparkling like a festival of ivory, Then you blinked your eyes, ever so lightly, and, as your eyelids touched each other, I could feel a dense Nile wave striking against the bank-side reeds, and a crocodile slid and dissolved in the watery depths, the hissing snake hisssssssed with a long ssssss, rippling and coiling in the soft sand, and a black leopard over there!-gone in an instant, emerged and immediately disappeared in the thickets along the river... . Ever since this morning... .

Now you're here, in my warm room,

I can't understand a word you've said, my chin buried in your knees, I can only look up at you and listen to the aspirated, voiced, plosive, guttural sounds you make,

Say nothing, just stand and walk around, naked, now lift up your arm, tilt your head to one side, bend over, sit down, hand me that cup, move that towel away, stand up, turn, hop up and down, turn back... . Let me admire the glistening of your skin as you move, the harmonious rippling of your muscles. Enough now, turn off the light.

How should I love you, my black deity, perhaps kneeling, with my palms on your thighs, a sinning worshipper receiving communion?

Perhaps lying under you, a fresh warm fissure of earth tamed by the plough,

Or maybe I should undulate over you in a ritualistic dance... .

You are black velvet and I am an ivory rose that's tossed upon you,

You are black coal, I am the ash that whitens growing cold inside you,

You are the black satin of a poem, painstakingly drawn in black italics, I am the

white page sprawled under you... .

You are a black darkness inside this dark room (you are practically indistinguishable from its dusk), I can't see your body, I only see your bright-red tongue, which flickers, like lightning, a blood-stained flag of our liberation², fanning the fire between my thighs... .

You know, in our country we don't have any people who look like you, and when I tell the other woman of my land about savoring you, they'll envy me-the lucky one, for I have tasted the freshness of the exotic fruit that they can only get in cans... .

Black olive, shiny and polished, a bubble-butt, a big, sturdy olive,

Let me sink my teeth-remember, when at breakfast yours sunk into an olive, sending shivers down my spine, how I suddenly dropped the spoon and blushed-into your flesh, my otherworldly, black olive, I will nibble you slowly, with pleasure, I will devour you crumb by crumb and morsel by morsel (I am famished!), I will swallow your delectable flesh and I will squeeze out your coveted juice, oh, bitter and sweet³... .

Afterwards, after I've satiated myself, all that will remain of you is a shriveled pit on the sheet... .

the results:

If you have read through:

Lines 25-35

You are governed by reason. Before acting on your emotions, you take a long time to think, you rationalize and never lose your head, nor do you allow yourself to be guided by feelings. You are convinced that the only way to happiness is by listening to reason. You consider the raptures of romantic love childish, nothing but amusement. Change is definitely not for you. You firmly hold on to whatever you have even if it is not clear whether it makes you happy or not. You believe neither in chance nor in the fact that fate might be kind to you as well. You prefer to cling on to the old and not to change a situation to which you have grown accustomed, or to change it through clearly defined, specific new steps.

Lines 35-45

You are impressionable, and feelings are important to you, although life has taught you that they should not be your top priority. It is possible for your soul to be conquered by love, but you are not one to quickly lose your head. You are a realist, and, as a rule, your brain rules your heart. You are also a proud person, and people often mistake that for cold-heartedness. You try not to confine yourself with narrow guidelines, and are rarely satisfied with what you've created for yourself, striving for better, bigger things. When something bores or irritates you, you simply get up and leave, abandoning everything you have, but you don't burn all your bridges. You are not afraid of change and believe in yourself and your abilities, but sometimes you conserve your energy.

Lines 35-55

You are very sensitive. You give yourself to your loved one completely and are not reticent about displaying your feelings. But if you feel that your love and your loyalty are not appreciated, your feelings cause you suffering. You like change more than anyone else. You never sit still for long, you always strive to change your life, your dress, your job, your favorite restaurant or sauna. You throw yourself into new and unusual sources of fun; you will dish out as much money as the next guy makes in two months for wild, unusual pleasures. You shirk from responsibility. People around you have long concluded that they cannot depend on you in anything. Whenever you feel disenchanting, you immediately drop everything and leave and never try to fix or change things.

Lines 55 and over

If you have been reading all this time and never even smelled that something was burning, if even the smoke

coming out of your oven didn't distract you from being absorbed in your diversion, all we can say is that by this point the cake has burned and once again you will not get to enjoy the delectable "African Kiss."

Translator's notes:

- ¹. The title is an allusion to a cake known as "Negri zhpit" or "Negri hambuyr" (literally, a black person's smile or a black person's kiss), made of dark chocolate battered layered with white filling
- ². "A blood-stained flag of our liberation" is a reference to the opening lines of a national patriotic song, dating back to the years of Armenian resistance to Turkish oppression.
- ³. Reference to a poem by Vahan Teryan (1885-1920), one of Armenia's most celebrated lyrical poets. The poem's title and first line is "Oh, homeland, bitter and sweet."

The City

A pliant, predatory glue, a noxious mush, abrasive nectar, the ring of evil, flesh-eating flower, its petals closing over me, a black aquarium, a mausoleum, an ever-changing magic rug lining the floor of a deep well, or is it... what else should it be, what other names can I invoke?

Look, how flies have settled on its face—but its cheek won't move...

Look, how I've held a mirror up against its breath—and there's no fog...

Look, how I lift its closed lids, and the pupils have turned inside...

But it's not dead.

It's laughing.

It will beat you ten times over, in mourning-black, with foe and woe, with ice and fear, with a bewitching, blinding, cuffing tongue-twister, will lure you in with wondrous sparks, and should you quiver to break free, it strikes you back, it clasps you with its magic death-ring, it coils around you like a snake, and should you even grow some wings, it's an embrace you won't escape. Hush, it's watching you, it will find you even with its eyes closed, laugh at you with its lips shut, grumble with its spinal cord.

The fair is foul and foul is fair, fair is foul and foul is fair, the fair's not fair, the foul's not foul'...

My stepmother took me to the woods to get me lost there. I scattered my beads in my path and then, once the moon came out, I gathered the shining little balls and found my way home.

My stepmother took me to a giant library to get me lost there. I pulled a thread out of my blouse and tied it to the cover of the very first book I saw, and isle by isle, undoing the fabric and getting naked line by line, I roamed the hallways of the written word and then, winding the thread into a ball, I traced my steps to escape that labyrinth and found my home.

My stepmother took me to the City to get me lost there. My necklace gone, my blouse undone. I'll tell my brother², I went to the right, and the snake charmer charmed me, robbed me, oh, how he robbed me. He played the kind of music that—string by string, that ring by ring, that waive by waive, was coaxing words straight from my throat, the stream of words, the luscious nouns, the kind that melt right on your tongue, the lasting adjectives that find their place and never leave, so many names

one cannot name, that brush the palate's gentle base, that flutter in your palate's veins but never get beyond the lips... .

I'll tell my brother, I went to the left, the rope-walked enchanted me, robbed me, oh how he robbed me. And from my agile, yielding body, he coaxed out movements, string by string, then ring by ring then waive by waive, he tightened me tight as a rope, he bounced me up, then brought me down, he lay me prone, I tumbled down, head first, and leapt back up, he balanced me right on the edge of the abyss, he rocked me so... .

I'll tell my brother I went up, a star struck me, I came back down, slammed on a rock, the grass stung me, the water whipped me. And I was left, head hanging low, my bearings gone, my soul deaf, my path unsure, begging my bread, tongue-tied and tired, my voice subdued, my heart gone cold, my thoughts washed out... .

Tousled by water, tossed by the winds, divorced and wanton, lost and confused, I raised the heat around my City... .

The city must have been big.

What big if one's successive lovers always know each other.

Then your lovers must be few and very notable.

What notable if all of them have the same face and bear the same ancient escutcheon, and what few if they would drink a river dry if all of them got thirsty at the same time.

Then the river must be shallow.

What shallow if its waters hide an entire world submerged in them³.

The hearts of myriad virgin girls, high-styled, polite, like many beads strung on a string, flutter together in one key, ring out politely, exquisitely, open and close their valves in unison to feed the transparent blood of love into the veins of the river... .

And thousands and thousands of fertile, full breasts caress the water and press their luscious nipples to the gaping jaws of the water-caves, mixing their life-giving milk with the underwater streams to irrigate the fields of sea-weed... .

And thousands and thousands of learned hetaeras, who thrust their thighs against the gliding of the stream, who ride its penetrating power with perfect, virtuoso moves, who undulate in unison with all the throbbings of its tide, and suck into their open wombs the silent flock that wants to reach their hidden pearl, that, when released, will be baptized with fountains of cascading lust... .

And in thousands and thousands fall the tears of a pale-skinned girl crying endlessly in the tower of her pale-stoned castle perched over the city, and her tears flow into the depths of the river, for hers was the winning lottery ticket, but the wind stole it away, hers was the hot-air balloon floating high in the sky, but the fire burned it to ash, earthen and thick, washed off by the river... .

Stolen by the wind, burned down to ash, washed off by the river... .

The hairless hermit who lived on the sixteenth floor flushes the toilet and turns off the lights. And bubbling, grumbling, gurgling, in full stream, floor by floor, home by home descends that Universal Exile—the human refuse, the hand-coaxed semen, the unprinted word, the drunkard's barf, the unsaid name, the rotten food, the woman's blood, the stillborn kitten, the bald man's secret... . It cascades down, floor by floor, home by home, flight by flight, turn by turn, bubbling, grumbling, gurgling, it spreads over the intestinal sewage grid in the City's innards, and then somewhere bursts open, like a blemish on the City's smooth and hairless head... .

Ah, who will it be when morning comes, to place a foot on the mined surface, who will discard the winning ticket before the lottery begins, and with a bang who'll open up the shutters of the closed heart, sensing the joy and exultation of pleasure given to oneself... .

Lo, what is that noise coming from afar, the threatening Pompeian, rushing onward fast, wreaking smoke and soot, with lava for hair, with lead for her eyes, the voice of Naiades, the soul of a sorceress...

My dearly beloved, don't you heed her call, shut tight your eyes, my body and soul mate, come and hide away in my tender kiss, venomous and sweet, let's get boarded up in the attic of memories, a vault that will resist even an explosion...

Listen, Violet,
Don't you dare stick your nose out the door,
The boogie-man will chew your nose off,
Don't you dare set your foot on the ground,
The ground will chew your foot off,
Don't you dare trust your heart to a man,
The man will chew your heart off.
Listen, Violet.
Don't you dare go showing off,
Prissy-prissy, faking-making,
You'll get your eyes scratched out.
Don't you dare, when you're sad, to give yourself
To the water, to some bug or tadpole,
Watch out, I'll put out your fire.
Don't you dare shoot for the stars,
To reach any heights in this City,
Do you think you're so special?
Do you think it's your birthday?
Do you think you're fitting?
Do you think you've been dealt all the aces?
Do you think you're an adherent?
Do you think it's suddenly springtime?
Little Violet, you silly, mischievous girl,
Defective, damaged and dowerless,
Bare-assed and easy-go-lucky,
Get your wits together fast,
Look around, catch yourself a match,
Get married to him on a faraway island,
Then sit home all day and just spin your spindle.

The virginal Arpenik spins the yarn, the slutty Kara rolls it into a ball, the barren Nune cuts it⁴.
A three-headed, six-armed mayor, a perfect mistress, a housewife, completely frigid, a hermaphrodite—old and creepy.

One head is laughing, one is crying, and the third doesn't make a sound, just stares quietly.
One head is singing, the other bellowing, and the third doesn't make a sound, just stares quietly.
One head is spitting, the other is kissing, and the third one doesn't make a sound, just stares quietly.
One is spinning, the other playfully rolling the yarn, pulling it through hardships, through Paplavok⁵,
through the elections, the regions in the disaster area⁶, through the postabortion anguish of the

woman of Nairi⁷, the hysterical self-congratulation of the poets, through Doka Pizza, through ancient libraries, through the original good fellas, through the dear and unforgettable president, through “always coca-cola,” through I’m Armenian, You’re Armenian⁸, through tripper-infected housewives, the Argishti madness⁹, the parties for show, through Yerevan’s Pretty Girl¹⁰, the melancholy whores, the melodramatic beggars, the soft-spoken pimps, the municipal daycares, the made-up homosexuals, through Brabion floral service, the fair-weather clergy, the scoundrels with many children, the refugees trying to escape themselves... .

The third one cuts the yarn.

You’ve been deprived of the redness of the sun, dear City,
 You’ve been deprived of the green of leafs, dear City,
 You’ve been tossed and tousled by winds and waters, dear City,
 Prettily dressed in red stripes, dear City,
 Rings on your fingers, keys at your heart, dear City,
 War decorations on your chest, stars on your shoulders, dear City,
 A veil ov’r your face, like a new bride, dear City,
 A crown on your head, you—a crowned king, dear City,
 The masses following you, their general, dear City,
 Who jinxed you with an evil eye, who cursed you,
 Scattering your feathers over mountains and plains
 Spreading your bones over boulders and sands,
 You once were the sun, but now you’re dead, dear City,
 You once were a violet, but you withered away, dear City,
 I took too long to come when you called,
 Too lazy, I didn’t run when you called,
 And now I can wail and cry all I want,
 I can beat my chest and pull at my hair,
 But never again will a mother or sister cry over you,
 Oh, but never again will a mother or sister cry over you,
 Woe, never again will a mother or sister cry over¹¹.

Look how long this baleful poem has flowed on, its breath—fiery, its panting strong, its little heart ablaze, its soul ever-present... .

Poem, my dear poem, my own dowry, the ER nurse, her saving shot, the hero in a movie plot, my cunning, wily cowboy, my skillful horseman—American boy, my sentimental Decembrist, my immortal superman, my bravely fighting fedain¹², and my beloved president.... Just bear with me a little more, and I’ll be done in a few lines.

If my stepmother hurts me, I won’t cry, I’ll come and quietly sit by your side.

If Paplavok hurts me, I won’t cry,

If flaccid boys hurt me, I won’t cry,

If Doka Pizza hurts me, I won’t cry,

If the president hurts me, I won’t cry,

If Coca-cola hurts me, I won’t cry,

If the bald jerk hurts me, I won’t cry,

If the party hurts me, I won’t cry,

If the toadstool hurts me, I won’t cry, I’ll come and quietly sit by your side, within your comforting breath’s reach, a silent, tame, obedient daughter, a perfect pupil... .

And I will sprawl over your pages, I’ll hide away between the lines, in your words’ boiler or in the attic

of the title, or in the outhouse of the drafts....

Born of one mother or two fathers, we are two orphans, sister and brother, but man and wife we shall become, and be each other's canopy, two bodies welded into one, we'll live in love, in shame and incest, we'll live sex-ridden and diseased, blind to the staring gaze of others, condemned and voiceless outcasts, unwed and sinful, dragged by the water and the wind, wrapped in one skin, boxed in one body, turned into one hermaphrodite....

It will be us, when morning comes, to open with a loud bang the shutters of our closed hearts, sensing the joy and exultation of giving pleasure to ourselves, and we'll discard the winning ticket before the lottery begins, we'll be the first to set our feet on the mined surface, retreat into a tender kiss, which will be venomous and sweet, and we'll explode and burst like ash, like an infected blemish on the city's smooth and hairless face....

Translator's notes:

¹ Reference to the opening scene of William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

² Rhetorical emulation of Armenian folk narrative tradition, elements of which recur throughout the poem.

³ Reference to a fairy-tale by noted Armenian writer Hovhannes Tumanyan (1868-1923) entitled "A Talking Fish."

⁴ Reference to the three Fates of Greek mythology: Clotho, who spins the thread of life, Lachesis, who measures it, and Atropos, who cuts it, determining the length of one's life. Here, the names of the three fates have been replaced with commonplace Armenian names.

⁵ The colloquial Armenian name for 'Poplavok' ('a float' in Russian), a cheap cafe during Soviet period, where actors used to hang out. Now it is a popular hot-spot in Yerevan, famed for its jazz music.

⁶ In 1988, a devastating earthquake practically leveled the second- and third-largest cities in Armenia, leaving behind destruction that until now has not been completely rebuilt.

⁷ Here, Armenian. Nairi, derived from Assyrian, refers to the early Armenian tribes living in the Caucasian region.

⁸ Reference to a song by Armenian pop-singer Aram Asatryan.

⁹ The founder of Erebuni, current-day Yerevan, was the Urartu king Argishti I, left a cuneiform inscription in the city's fortress: "With the power of Khaldi, I, Argishti, Son of Menua, erected this stronghold, and named it Erebuni to the glory of the country of Biaina and to the fear of its enemies."

¹⁰ A reference to a popular Armenian folk song.

¹¹ Emulation of traditional Armenian funereal laments.

¹² Fighter.

Love

a.

Here is the body surrendered to love,
here is the blood running through brazen veins,
rejoice, it's a holiday!
Tonight is a celebration, my body's Sunday
I have spread my womanhood that I saved for a precious guest,
for my lover.

Go ahead, take it, enjoy it already.
see, my darling, how my father's daughter treats you.

Kiss me and...

 you'll never grow old,

kiss me and...

 you'll never get sick,

kiss me and...

 you'll never die.

The love-bed cures everything, doesn't it?
It makes the blind see the writhing of passion,
it makes the mute speak with the drum of his heart,
the lame rises and walks through the body's valleys,
and a kiss will raise the beauty from her sleep.

Kiss me and...

 I'll never die.

See how the moths and rust have gnawed away at the piles of my hidden treasures,
my lovely clothes, my sparkling jewellery, my erudite books.

And the thieves have broken in through the wall and stolen my money.

But your kiss will never get rusty,
your kiss will break through the Chinese wall of my anguish.

I'll bring my mouth close to yours,

I'll cover you with my lips,

And my inquisitive tongue will search your entire body
in order to seek, find, and savor the beehive honey.

Oh, how luscious and sensual are the lips of my love!

The tongue, with a mind of its own, plays a tune on my teeth
adroitly, like on a piano's white keys.

Mother, what should I do?

Should I surrender to love's only inner promise?

Should I fondle it with my warm fingertips?

Should I tickle it with the moist roughness of my tongue?

Should I stroke and caress the rigid stalk

and allow it into my love camp?

I got it for free and give it for free, this body of mine

that fell to my lot, that I won
in an earthly lottery.

Unlock my property with your middle finger,
strip the words of their weightless clothes,
enter my boat with a naked heart, and
drop your anchor in the bay of my body...

I will rinse you with my inner waters
And bless you with the chrism of my hot womb,
I've already baptized you into my following.

The foxes always have burrows,
all the birds of the sky - their nests,
my body and I are your burrow and nest
come live inside me, my love,
your body weighs light and sweet on me.
Climb on my bed, and, as if from a lectern,
orate with body syllables,

body conjugations,
body words,
body language,

recite the saga of love and passion's campaigns,
ask, and you will receive
knock, and it will open;
the door may be narrow, the road may be hard
but, lo, the voice calls from the bed,
I've prepared this road for you
and smoothed out the paths...

So, drive your muscle-made carriage, govern me,
with a thin, leathern, thin, fine, thin strap
guide the untamed course of our passion,
brand my hips with your stamp,
plant your flag in me.

I am a wild river,
I am a tight cluster,
I am fragile air

Enter my stream
hide there inside me,
and inhale and exhale me,
and inhale and exhale me,
and inhale and exhale me,
and deeply inhale me, ah, now exhale,
ah, exhale...

How sweet it is to take you inside me, my love coach, my brazen pillow-mate,
nobody better has ever been born of a woman...

Blessed is my belly that has shivered from the touch of your tongue,
blessed are my nipples that have hardened from the touch of your tongue,
blessed am I, the servant of the Lord, for I was blessed among women...

Mom, don't be angry,
see how healthy I am,

see how fit I've become from the workout of love,
see, happy is my heart and jubilant my tongue,
my body lives with hope,
for I now dwell in the valley of love.
Whoever has eyes, let them see
this enchanting picture -
two intertwined bodies, prostrate on a sheet,
a woven bouquet, a lily in bloom,
an opening seashell, a sea-saw in swing.
Merry wind, my happy companion, rock my boat,
my fearless sailor, my reckless adventurer, rock my boat,
rock me, until I expire entirely,
until I finally run out on my own,
until I stop on my own,
rock me until I reach there - the NO PLACE
Oh, what ecstasy!
Guide me through the labyrinths of my body
like this, step by step, word by word,
detail by detail, pause by pause,
kisses and kisses, movement by movement,
kisses and kisses, sound by sound,
and kisses and kisses.
Take me and lead me over the threshold of my body,
take me to the house of rapture...
Like this, one more step, like this, one more movement,
on a snow-white sheet, like snow-white paper,
the lines of two bodies spelling three words
"And it's done!"

b.

Here is the body surrendered to death.
Here is the blood that has faltered and stopped forever.
Oh, what a desolate feast, what festive mourning,
and our hearts are aching inside us.
We cry,
because this is a wedding,
but the bridegroom's no longer with us,
because this is a wedding,
but the guests are unworthy.
and we rejoice,
for although the kernel has died,
it will sprout into millions of plants.
He took on our illnesses, expunged all our pains,
this Son of Man,
he raised us from the dead, ... but
he contracted death through a human kiss.

and humbly washed our feet,
are pierced with nails,
And those eyes that once brought comfort to our hearts
and filled us with joy,
Are blankly staring out there -
into the NO
PLACE...
The shackles of death have chained you to the prison
of your cold body -
for a three-day repose...
But soon you'll rise up out of your ribcage,
you'll break free,
while we remain here, condemned to our bodies,
to end with our bodies.
Though death may be our cheapest toy -
a two-penny blade, a seven-foot rope,
though we have temporarily frozen death,
stored the preserve of life in the fridge,
though we're free to choose death,
we remain imprisoned forever within
the prisons of our bodies,
with loathsome worms as our mattress
and plump vermin as our blanket.
And when we see the cheap blade approaching,
we stammer, we pale, we shiver,
and inside us, our hearts sink,
and inside us, our thoughts get blurry
and inside us, our stomachs turn,
and inside us, our mouths go dry.
We run to our room, lock the doors,
hide inside
ourselves...
Before the blade we are barefoot and naked, our asses are bare and
our necks
are bowed.
It'll knot us into a knot, make a knot of us,
and toss us, like balls, over there - the NO PLACE...
But you - step by step, but you - word by word,
detail by detail, pause by pause,
unflinchingly walked towards death,
stepped over the threshold and entered
the kingdom of your beloved father.
Our Savior!
Caress us like a mother, give us hope like a sister,
and lead us by our hand, like a brother,
step-step, move by move,
step-step, sound by sound,
step-step,

quickly, pull us out of the dark NO PLACE,
take us over that threshold,
get us to our father's safe haven...
Like this, one more step, like this, one more movement.
The last breath of air in the last spasm
thrust through the lips into the eternal embrace:
"And it's done!"

Worthy reader, after solving the following brain-teaser,
you can compare your answer with the author's version
of same (printed in italic at the end). If yours matches
hers, you win the "Harem Rose" prize (a voucher for one time visit).
You can send other solutions to violet.grigoryan@inknagir.org.
The best answers will be published in our review. Good luck!

7 virgins + 7 spoons + 7 young men + 7 pairs of heels + 7 old hags + 7 mouths + 7 widows =

Translated from the Armenian by Margarit Tadevosyan-Ordukhanyan

Harem Rose

Seven bearded virgins turn in circles round a pot, clanking their seven spoons and stirring the hot, gluey, thick brew, and then, using that sticky sugar as a hair-remover, peel the down from my body (oy, mamma!); seven pairs of hands plying seven epilatory rings are pop-poppingly yanking little hairs out by the roots, epilating my armpits and curly-haired groin and making them shine...

They are readying me for the lord of the night.

Seven young eunuchs (yet oh! how they love me, how they caress me with their eyes, their moist, languid eyes), nothing but a loincloth hiding their small behinds (wondrous little body parts); in a large earthenware tub, seven pairs of bare heels are crushing, with precise little steps, seven-hued rose petals; dazed and languishing in the tangled torpid web of rosy

aromas, they wash, applying drops of oil of rose with an infinity of slow gestures (ooh, mama!), my sweaty armpits and the backs of my knees...

They are readying me for the lord of the night.

Seven toothless old hags, nimble-lipped adepts of the techniques of refined oral love, are immersing my fingers in hot henna rice paste, sitting cross-legged in a circle round me and singing, clapping and rocking back and forth, clapping, singing, and rocking back and forth, rocking and singing and clap... clap... My hot fingers, ten snakes, writhe and wrap round my body and draw red streaks of henna across my back, thighs, and breasts, like the marks of a whip burning stripe by stripe...and the harrowing cry of my little heart (water, mama!), when the transparency in the pitcher comes dripping from it like, look!, milk-and-honey (drawing cold-as-ice-cream closer, inching closer to my lips, but transitorily, but grazing flow-and-transitorily, and oh, already passing and past) and fails to touch the tip of my tongue; I approach and it draws back, I writhe and it flies off: ach, a sip of water, just a drop of H₂O... My fingers are ten condemned sinners in hot lava gloves, and the devil (who's deaf) licks them, hell's share, phalanx by beringed phalanx, with his fiery, bumpy, flame-swallowing tongue... Ay, they woke me up (had I dozed off?), the sudden silence woke me up, they're not singing any more, the old hags aren't clapping and rocking any more, they're silently licking my hennaed fingers clean, my blood-red little fingers clean, with long greedy gulps, gasping for breath, they're tonguing them one-by-one...

They are readying me for the lord of the night.

Seven widows who haven't had a man for seven years, who've buried husbands, not in the earth, but in their imaginations alone (gathering, like pieces of a puzzle, suicide attackers' body parts from bombed subways and buildings), knead dough with their spit and tears and rub it into my elbows and joints, pound and soften up my round little heels, massage my skin from top to toe with olive oil, bitter orange peels, and leaves of mint; they rub oil of rose into my sleeping veins, titillate my blood with passion and frenzy, comb out my damp hair with resin and aromatic musk and weave it into forty branching tresses, so that it will lift, forty times over, the forty cubits' desire of my heart's sheik... With shining gold coins and tinkling beads and rustling silk, they adorn my new body, a terminator of the east (I am all color and scent, I am tinkle and glitter and an epicenter scattering sparks and drops of light in the mists of femininity, spiraling round themselves)... They bring the aromatic musk-melons stacked one in the next and, with them, placed every which way, the seven-hued veils, and swathe me in all seven, layer upon layer and fold upon fold, wrap them round, wrap them tight, covering and hiding me until nothing shows, until I'm as promising as a cocoon – as yet a still closed, sober guarantee and a gilded little package, a pleasure-giving cavern with secret doors... Ah, whose hand holds the key? (I have yet to see my lord's face.) When will it enter my lock and open me up to myself (inside, my heart pounds) so that I can cross my own threshold and find him? The one who knows the secret code will undo this dark knot and, stage by stage and line by line, solve, without tremble or pause, my obscure, brain-teasing rebus...

I am ready, look! — a stubborn secret, closed from end to end, sealed from top to toe, a mute whisper, a silent cry... Only my eyes are uncovered (and how I love with my moist, languid eyes, how I am caressed): look this way, amid the carpets, cushions, and pillows, ready to cater to your whims and conquer your heart, as if I were a gift for the little boy's (as in his

stocking under the fir tree) delight, unexpected, glittering, enveloped in seven-layered, tightly wound veils (the heart of a rose nestling in her petals), which will obligingly open as soon as my terrible Lord of the night draws nigh and lightly touches them...

Come sit on your throne, my king of kings, lord of my bosom, sultan of my heart: you are the emperor of this night, ah, *mashallah!*... My mighty sire, my patriarch, learned doctor of the religion of the rose, terrible jailer, keeper of the keys, torch of my soul, master of the way... I am, o mild-tempered oligarch, the favored one among your women, privileged of all twenty, out of turn; let me entertain you in the tent of my body, come play with me, o lord of heart...

Like the rose who plays hide-and-seek with the butterflies, beetles and bees, I have gone into hiding in myself; no-one who finds me shall ever look for anything else... Walk about blindfolded, turn in circles about me, recite your sounding promises, shower me with gold, sing my praises in deep, languorous accents, in lilting, lovely words, delicious, done to perfection, so that, lovingly and willingly, I open the burning box of my love, where dozing, halfasleep, half-awake and drunk with the odor of opium, the virgin rose nods, self-charmed, selfenchanted, rocking herself in her own cradle...

Stand here, hand on your heart, head hanging and barefoot,
Wet your forefinger with your tongue, turn the pages of your heart's quarto one-by-one
and warble eloquent words,

A couplet about my shining eyes,
A couplet about my flawless voice,
A couplet about my amber hair,
A couplet about my milk-white skin,
A couplet about the taste of my lips,
A couplet about my musk-melon breasts,
A couplet about my flower-strewn belly,
A couplet about you, a slave to love,

recite word by word, recite verse by verse, a procession of words strung out like beads;
feed my lips, a spoonful at a time, a sherbet of words, bunches and bunches of your words
deep in my ears, words like morello cherries, like sweet grape molasses... Work the pump of
your wordworks, transform yourself into words, make earnest promises, sprinkle the hot-plate
of my heart with burning blood, sing the praises of all the wondrous parts of my body,
immerse me in the widening gyre of your endless eulogies, shining with spit, and slaughter
me softly, line by line... In the maelstrom of your frenzied odes, the waves of your songs, in
the coils of sound and the rainbowed vortex of the glittering kaleidoscope of your words, I
swim line by line, heart aflutter and gasping for breath...

Leaf page by page through the quarto of your heart and, now and again, blow away the
dust of the old words stacked upside-down, one in the next; wipe it clean sheet by sheet, read
it through leaf by leaf... Sheikh of the night, imam of love, say open sesame, *salam*... Make
your every word a resourceful key, and your vassal's gates will open lovingly and willingly,
gladly and wide...

Commander of the night, pursue me, find me, come look for me, come plumb me; roll after roll, layer after layer, pull off my petals off until you discover my body hidden away at their core, prepared by love's seven mighty helpers, the accredited specialists of love. Come, hurry up, I hunger to be found; come slowly and on tiptoe, as if to kill me, or rip off in a frenzy, one by one,

my blue skirt
(no, not there, it's not there you'll find me)
my yellow skirt
(I'm not there, either; where am I? come see)
my green skirt
(if you find me, my little man, I'm yours for free)
my red skirt
(hurry up, would you please, I'm all fire and flame)
my white skirt
(Can't stand it any longer, I'm already wet and faint)
my pitch-black skirt
my purp... cuckoo, now you see me, now you don't,
now you see me: here I am,
you've found me, my lucky one, my pilgrim votary,

I'm a road, you're a wayfarer,
I'm a love poem, you're a reader,
trample all of me underfoot, o passer-by, learn me by heart, say where all my moles are without looking, and the map of my sky-blue veins, in a languid voice and in rhyme...

Look, look, but what's this? the rhymes are there, but not the words; the languor is there, but not the voice; the read is there, but not the er; the way is there and the y is there, but not the farer or the luck –the luck's nowhere to be seen...

Oh, where are you, my Sun and Moon, my invisible husband? It's already my turn, is that it? my turn to find you, who weave in and out of these lines, this cracked mirror, piece by piece, shattered, only by halves. How well you've hidden, how curious the way you were dismembered and scattered over these pages, silently, bit by bit... Let me touch my knee to the ground, get down on all fours, let me give these lines a good tuning, piece by piece, section by section, let me gather up the pieces of your dismembered body, gather you up sliver by sliver and a toe at a time, to everyone's knowledge and right out loud, gather you up by phoneme and epiphora, suffix and prefix, from this syntagm, this self-investigating enunciation, true and whole and unmixed...

But I can't produce you, reveal you, patch you up from top to toe, put you together and hide you away. Halved once and then halved and halved again, you double and redouble, you multiply; every part of you comes to life until every part of you is you, and whichever one I happen to find is my many-faced husband, too.... I'm a widow with many husbands and cheat on one with the next: now I fornicate with your head, now your leg, now your lips, now your heel, and sometimes I fornicate collectively, sneakily, when the parts of you come toward me together and all at once....

Come lie beside me, my plural one....

Your hot fingers, ten snakes, wrap round my chest and brand me stripe by stripe.... Crush me, choke me, sow ten thick drops of spicy, poisonous medicine from your fountain in me, spill my virgin blood on the carpets, cushions, and pillows, on the seven-hued veils.... Every drop of that blood will come from my womb as a child, like a parade; twins, boy and girl, separate and joined, matériel provided by Allah and purest poison (deathly sherbet) in my mouth, much taller and straighter than the twins of stone, weak and yielding.... There will be no end to them, they will not cease, for as long as I live, an epicenter spewing viruses and spreading death; I shall bear seven times seven generations, of the choicest sort, willing serfs... I shall write eloquently with my engendering pen – page by page and letter by letter, one in the next and strung out one by one – the quarto of my heart, volume upon volume.... And frame by frame in this never-ending serial, twins will keep springing forth, like the phoenix, a terminator forever dying and reborn.... They will be born without end of my rose-colored virgin blood, a word of ill omen written in crimson ink in a sealed, self-enclosed package, my infectious, disease-bearing twins – a stubborn secret, sealed from top to bottom and closed from end to end, with only their eyes uncovered, they will burn and lay waste the green devil’s whole world, a disgusting wound; they will come born two at a time, like Twicks, to destroy this courtyard with its artificial, deceptive roses, like the matrix of a puzzle scrambled and ruined by Allah’s right hand.

Allah akhbar.

Housewife or businesswoman, young or... not so young, whether you’re going through those critical days that only women face or are already past menopause, you are daily endangering the Woman inside you. Worries about your personal life or career and the energy you unreservedly devote to the world of learning or the family are depleting and drying up the eternal, secret spring of your Femininity. Dishpans and computers, diapers and test tubes are robbing you of your mysterious, divine face. Find your true self again! Activate the riddle of Woman and the divine grace that makes you an exception! You don’t think you can? Don’t know where to start? We’ll help you. You deserve it.

The “Harem Rose” beauty parlor invites you to take advantage of the services offered by our knowledgeable beauticians, armed with means and methods tested out in the most modern Western laboratories. We work in the following seven areas:

- _ Hair-dressing*
- _ Facials*
- _ Manicures*
- _ Laser hair removal*
- _ Massage*
- _ Shaping*
- _ Fashion and accessory design*

Don’t delay! Come see us right away, today: the key to your charm is in our hands. We

create Woman not from Adam's rib, but from altogether different material. Our specialists' goal is to make you happy. Don't put off your visit! Ring us right now! You deserve to be happy. The "Harem Rose" is open daily from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. (except Mondays). We're working for you.

"Harem Rose": remember the name. It will be your true native soil, your parents, the fatherland you'll never betray, if you come see us just once. Forget the Urartuan's modest savagery and the Cilician's passionate reserve. The "Harem Rose" – a new name for the world's oldest riddle. Daily except Mondays.

Unfinished Ode: Upon the Clitoris

Clit-clit-clitoris mine,
my itty-bitty fidgeter,
my voiceless little stammerer,
my tongueless little twitterer,
my curly-haired baby bull,
my gluttonous little gullet,
my rosy-pink-lipped cuntlet,
my windowless little chamber,
my stuttering baby gurgler,
my pretty little floater,
my giddy little giggler,
my boastful bonsaied puffer,
my naughty itchy toddler,
my ever erect mini-phallus,
my cherub with the golden tresses,
my groggy midget mourner,
my miniature clap-clapper,
my little underground trickster,
at times unshaven and at others
unfeathered and bebarbered,
my dwarfish flat-and-skin-head,
my inarticulate liplet,
my rose-fraganced breathlet,
my silent bashful bridelet,
my hider and lay-lower,
faint-hearted little groaner,
my full-of-nooks-and-crannies,

my coquettish mini-bouquet,
 my: hyacinth, alpine poppylet,
 garden-foundling, night-time warbler,
 sparrow's winglet, fledgling flier —
 my breathless to-and-froer,
 my daredevil madman of Sasun,
 my twirling top and protean satan,
 firing furnace and mini-oven,
 audacious eternal flame,
 my creaker and little cricket,
 my teensy-weensy sweetie,
 little hider of your heartlet,
 valiant child and mountaineer,
 my red-tootsied baby quail,
 my quail-let, my wrap-arounder...

this was when my mother rang and said, my baby, she said, what'd you come back from America for, you could have hung on a little longer, no, and landed a green card? at least you had a job, you were sending back money and all, we were getting by somehow, baba chun. But now there's the electricity and the water and god knows how we're going to come up with the money, what'd they make us put that damn water-meter in for? and your brother doesn't jimmy things the way the locals do, jam a magnet in there or whatever, the damn counter runs and runs like it was a wild animal, my god and it's winter already, where are we going to dig up the money to pay the gas bill with, huh? and all the rest besides, baba chun... the day we turned our backs on Teheran and came to this dump was the day we ran out of luck for good, I didn't want to come, it was that cricky-cracky, your grandma, who was in such a rush she couldn't get her drawers up past her ankles, and she slept out in front of the embassy door at night so she could bring our family to its knees and our house to wrack and ruin, and Serop slipped the ambassador ten thousand tuman, help for the motherland, it was supposed to be, and then we came here and found out that that's what they call a bribe, baba chun.... Remember our Persian neighbor agha Mehrzat, the one whose son Zami's hand you bit so hard you came away with a mouthful of flesh? he used to say, agha Khachig, khanum Ani, shoma kar eshtebahi mikonin be Shoravi mirin, qeshvari qe darhaye vorudisho baz qarde, ama ruye darhaye khorujish ghofl gozashte, nemitune keshvare khubi bashe, baba chun... but who are you telling that to, agha Khachig and his cricky-cracky mama were bonkers, me, I didn't want to come, I used to be a khanum, I came here and turned into a "comrade," a "sister," first time somebody called me that I turned red, good thing they don't know Persian¹... Zhuzhu — that's what we called you when you were little, remember? — I want to tell you something, but don't go and get mad now, Elmira came by and said davai, city hall's giffing out bones wid a little fat on dem for poor people and eenvaleeds to make borsch with, so, Zhuzhu, I said, I'm an invalid and your father's an invalid, let me go ask for help, as for you, you've gone stone blind sitting in front of that computer, you're not bringing in money again, baba chun,² I feel sorry for you, we're a burden on you, aren't we...?

I screamed and threw the receiver at the wall³.

...my eensy-weensy sweetie,
 little hider of your heartlet,
 valiant child and mountaineer,
 my quail-let, my wrap-arounder...

my chubby little brooder

country almond and baby plum...

No, no go, I'm not in the mood any more, adboy, that's it, finito, tamam, finis...

Compiler's notes:

^{1.} Kira," the dialect word for "sister" used here, means "penis" in Persian

^{2.} Farsi: a verbal filler that might be translated "my word."

^{3.} What the mother says here, in this prose passage interspersed in the verse, is written in one of the Persian Armenian dialects: the passage makes use of Farsi words, as well as words used in the family and also personal inventions. At one point, the mother imitates the style of a neighbor from Armenia who mixes Russian and Armenian when she speaks; at another point, she recalls the words, in Farsi, of a Persian neighbor, who says, "Mr. Khachig, Mrs. Ani, you're making a mistake in going to the Soviet Union: a country that has opened the doors of entry wide, but put a lock on the exits, can't be a good one."

Translated from the Armenian by G.M. Goshgarian
