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Jesus Christ Was a First-Generation College Student (100 Years in 3 Days)

Abstract
Evan Krikorian is a first-generation colleg student who is writing about the conflict of not being fluent in his native tongue, Armenian. He considers the difficulties of translation, asserting that the standard protocol of English is "damned." Krikorian shares this piece with hopes that other first-gen students honor their cultures by writing and speaking.

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the product - "Jesus Christ Was a First-Generation College Student (100 Years in Three Days)"

Lise im avotkis:
Listen to my prayer:

Xhuntrem, hesus, tscheke enzi xhemem as soorp choora
Please, Jesus, let me drink this holy water
oo lezem as nore xhoska vontsvor tserki jzagi iroonit
and lick this new word as if it were blood from the holes of your hands
vor keednam yete toon gam yes tseketsin mehneer hayastani mech.
in order to know if it was you or I who they left to die in Armenia.

Pies toon vechetsar, gam menk adank haskatsank,
But you were finished, or so we had understood,
worber spanetseen kesi meghor odari khoski hed
when they killed you one day with words of othering
inchbes mi nizak gidrets ku miset noori keghevi bes
as a spear cut your flesh like pomegranate skin
oo disank worber mean garmeer tapetsir,
and we saw that you bled only in red,
arrants narangakoon vochel gabood.
without any orange or blue.

~~the process -~~

~~as xhoska meean yes keedem, vor meean yes as xhoska kirem:~~

~~zoreheven,~~
~~ganam xhoseem im mamais lesuse~~

~~inchoo?~~
~~auxh pyranes lesnegor weber panam schertoonkes~~
~~oo amen xhosk mernee koolooes en --~~
~~vor eem gankes meean ankalene.~~

lise im avotkis:
listen to my prayer:
xhuntrem, hesus, tscheke enzi xhemem as soorp choora
please, jesus, let me drink this holy water
oo lezem as nore xhoska vontsvor tserki jzagi iroonit
and lick this new word as if it were blood from the holes of your hands
vor keednam yete toon gam yes tseketsin mehneer hayastani mech
in order to know if it was you or I who they left to die in Armenia

~~pies im tserkis che tape meean garmeer,~~
~~pies narangakoon oo gabood~~

toon vechetsar, gam menk adank haskatsank
you were finished, or so we had understood
worber spanetseen kesi meghor odari khoski hed,
when they killed you one day with words of othering,
inchbes mi nizak gidrets ku miset noori keghevi bes
as a spear cut your flesh like pomegranate skin
oo disank worber mean garmeer tapetsir,
and we saw that you bled only in red,
arrants narangakoon vochel gabood
without any orange or blue.

~~yette arav hydroor daree gam yerek or,~~
~~if [I] took a hundred years instead of three days,~~
~~yes der hrashk ginam?~~
~~[would I be a miracle?]~~
~~toon goosayeer vor tarnas?~~
~~would you have wanted to return?~~

meg giragi vor gank arnes, pies hyroor das dareer vor spanveenk
one weekend to gain life, but a hundred ten years for death
inchbes yerek or hyroor das daree tartsav
just as three days became a hundred ten years,

kezi bes, menk artensank
just like you, we awoke
inchbes yerek or
menk bargank hyroor das daree

yes artensa hyroor das daree verchen
i awoke hundred ten years later
lesoos imes cher

ese enzi,
tell me,
ad giragi toon bargar,
sixhme hyroor das daree
toonal abrar

did you, too, live those hundred ten years in three days?

pies mean meg giragi spasetsink vor tarnas
but it only took you a weekend to return

evil words
that twisted and shone red like the skin of a pomegranate

hema, yes spasemgor hyroor das daree vor tarnas
pies megma che byets mer xhoska soorp kirki metch

pies ov byav ku xhoskit yerek ore vech
eseen mezi vor ku verchi khoskit er lisetseen oo spanetseen kesi
oo odar ganchetseen kesi
vor toon che xhosar erents char lesune, pies

~~toon vechetsar ad ora, pies menk~~

~~ku khoskit xhergets kese teraxt~~

~~door enzi ku lezoot~~
~~vor vindrem as ankalenee ghanka im seerdes~~

~~inch oonee ku minket vor ku lezut choone,~~
~~oo inch oonee ku xhoskit vor ku seerdet choone~~?

~~yes gortsusee amen gankis vor keednam asee:~~
~~amen megme lezu litsvee~~

EVAN KRIKORIAN

Living as Process: Confronting the Product Experience in First-Gen Writing, Speech, and Identity

In writing this poem, I experienced a lot of struggle. My biggest source of shame is not being fluent in my home language, Armenian, and my barely proficient use of my native tongue is showcased in the words above. The grammar is surely broken; the phrases I used nonsensical; and, even worse, I wrote a *transliteration* of what I hardly know. I can only speak, not read or write, in the proper alphabet of my people, and, as such, the slow yet encroaching cultural loss of my family is made known through the words I can barely form. This is my first-gen experience: one of linguistic decay, personal embarrassment, and familial disconnect.

Though my poetry is usually surrealist and spacey, this specific poem is anything but. Each line represents a concretized emotion and action, leading into immediate images that are purposefully out of place, strange, and detached. From begging Jesus directly to drink holy water to licking "this new word" as if it were "blood from the holes of [Jesus's] hands," the speaker is immediately cast as being in immense need, even stretching themselves towards corporal and religious guilt (Krikorian 2-3). This insurmountable thirst for knowledge is reflected as a unique problem in first-generation student circles. Scholarship such as Michelle Addison and Victoria Mountford's "Talking the Talk and Fitting In" describes the necessity (or sometimes fixation) of learning, regurgitating, and sounding out words "correctly" as a means of gaining and cementing cultural confirmation. This difference between first-gen speech and native speakers—what is established in accents and other regional pronunciations—causes "some people [to be unable to] escape the stigma that is attached to their own embodied identity" (Addison and Victoria 6). In the case of the speaker within the poem, who almost obsesses over learning this unknown "new word" to the point of sacrilege, there is a growing pressure to either assimilate, as Addison and Victoria describe, or instead "die" in the home country. This is a stark future for first-gen students who simply wish to express themselves (Krikorian 3-4).

It is no wonder that this poem starts off with a direct plea to the audience: "lise im avotkis [listen to my prayer]" (Krikorian 1). Notably, the Armenian declension used here for "listen" may connote that of a command; though the intended action is lost in translation, its purposeful ambiguity distorts the purpose of the upcoming "prayer" itself. As such, the duality of this beginning line—be it one of spiritual hope and longing, or one of forceful demand—showcases the same linguistic disconnect present between perceptions of first-gen students' writing and their own intentions. This semantic tension is further explored in researchers Perumal and Ajit's evaluative survey "An Exploratory Study on the Difficulties Faced by First-Generation Learners in Writing Skills," which seeks to analyze the goals, methods, and attitudes of non-native English speakers in their interactions with academic composition. Just as how meaning was lost from translating my Armenian poem to English, the students in Perumal and Ajit's study expressed challenges moving from de/re-constructing thoughts in their native language to an English lexicon; students "think in their mother tongue first" and

ultimately struggle to "translate their ideas into English[,] whose structure of grammar and nuances of imagery differ" (159). This incongruence between thinking and writing, or, arguably, acting verses being, point to one of many "hearts" of the first-gen experience: equating writing and speech skills as developmental and necessary to the persuasive act of belonging in a place, in a classroom, or even in a paper that you feel inherently out of bounds from. That is, for many of us first-gen students, the process of writing compared to seeking out its product is fully analogous to our own lives, as we look to shape those unfamiliar ways of creating and thinking into the "ideal product" of being anything but what we really are. It is here where my plea stands: in order to combat this isolation and anxiety, we must truly "listen" to the mother tongue before subjecting ourselves to an ever-increasing colonial language.

At its core, this poem itself is an analogy for the loss of identity suffered in post-Christian Armenia, representing the millions of diasporic Armenians trying to mediate their ancestral language, culture, and religion with that of their current lands. This modern Armenian American struggle is analogous to the fractured familial heritages and intersocietal longings discussed in the writings of first-gen authors like Frances Varian. In her essay, "Getting Out," Varian describes a sense of class struggle through a first-gen lens, representing the cultural erasure first-generation peoples often feel in traditional academic environments: "The culture of the people I come from is as valuable as any I have studied. Our language, our unique perspectives, our strengths and weaknesses deserve critical attention" (165). Her words reinforce the power of cultural representation and echo similar sentiments in my own poetry. The speaker of the poem also asserts that "weaknesses deserve critical attention" (Varian 165) and begs to "drink this holy water" in order to understand who (or, in this case, *what*) has died in their native home of Armenia (Krikorian 2; 165). For Varian, vulnerability is not a fault but rather a means of empowering those from first-gen, working-class backgrounds to recognize their own abilities and succeed in spite of insurmountable odds.

Fortunately, Varian's call for "critical attention" exists now as a lens of empowerment, urging us to examine the cultural values and labor backgrounds of first-gen students. The ideas presented in "Getting Out" are reflected in first-generation student and scholarly writing, from creative expressions (like my above poetry) to critical and research-orientated studies. Scholars Rease Miles and Dyckhoff Stelzriede, in their article "Defining the First-Generation College Experience," suggest that developing first-gen cognition can "promote success" for first generation students in higher educational settings (6). Specifically, these aspects of de-familiarity with the college setting (or what Varian refers to specifically as "weaknesses") invoke a mix of terms discussed in Rease Miles and Dyckhoff Stelzriede's article. The conditions of imposter syndrome and survivor's guilt can result in students feeling a sense of "inadequacy" in their academic and personal lives as well as "shame and remorse" for surviving traumatic events without injury (Rease Miles and Dyckhoff Stelzriede 5). When taken in tandem, these inflictions can be seen as scars evident in many first-generation students' writings, including my own: much like the speaker of the poem asking who was "left to die" in witnessing both a proverbial and personal gutting of self, the aspects of the first-gen experience Rease Miles and Dyckhoff Stelzriede touch upon help to demystify the ever-present conditions that afflict first-gen student expression (Krikorian 4).

This dichotomic conflict inspired my decision to include two separate versions of my poem: the "product" side and the "process" side. Here, the linguistic, cultural, and non-

assimilatory diaspora takes shape in the writings of myself and other first-generation students, spelled as a literal and figurative cut-out that simultaneously combats yet adheres to the notions of academic English work. The product, which denotes a final and cumulative end goal to one's words, versus the process, a drawn-out stew of cut phrases, sentiments, and awkward literary markings, present two wildly different perspectives on the same piece of work. Arguably, though we first-gen students may often over-strive for perfection (the "product"). Exposing the processes of our writing allows us to bring language use back to ourselves, rather than curtail it for an impossible-to-impress fictional (and oftentimes overly-academic) audience. Forwarding the dented bat analogy introduced by Kenneth Oldfield in his article "Welcoming First-Generation Poor and Working-Class Students to College," language critique for first-gen students should adopt the "paper, not the student" approach as a product-turned-process literary framework (9). In ushering first-gen students to move away from insular product-writing standards to change self-perceived guiltful language inaction to positive linguistic reform, the act of "using" English can be a celebrated, rather than criticized, internal and external dialogue.

Be it writing a cross-cultural poem about some lost lexicon, petitioning to a higher power directly for simple word use, or even just exposing the entire process of drafting academic works, the oddly-embattled situation presented within this essay alone is not unlike millions of other students' writing displaced by dominant languages. However, instead of "dying from words of othering" in fighting between a native versus learned tongue, I call upon my fellow first-gen students to instead drink the "holy water" they already possess through their own voices (Krikorian 2). Poetic references aside, I believe that we can lessen the burden on first-generation students by reevaluating how we expect English to operate within an inherently non-academic English fluent student population, classroom, and institution. Just as what was shown to us by the likes of Varian, Rease Miles and Dyckhoff Stelzriede, and Oldfield, we can continue forcing change from within by using English *for* first-generation students, instead of asking first-gen stories, voices, and even grammatical contentions to be written away for the sake of "proper English." Ultimately, I say this: the standard perceptions of English use have been long-since damned, so we must instead fight to retain all the stylistic variation, grammatical play, and syntactical "differences" that makes our language use and livelihoods unique. As first-generation students, we must truly listen to our own culturally-significant voices by honoring the ways we speak, read, write, and learn as we aim to bridge the gap between our native and non-native tongues.

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When the
corpse fell,
we washed
your feet
like water on a dead branch, cleaning away
the rotten wood. Our people plucked your leaves,
carved out holes from your pores, and scraped sin
from stigmata. This husk we waned for grew naked,
and, in a
hundred years,
our bodies,
too, would
fall from
the cross.
You were
the only one
not forgotten.