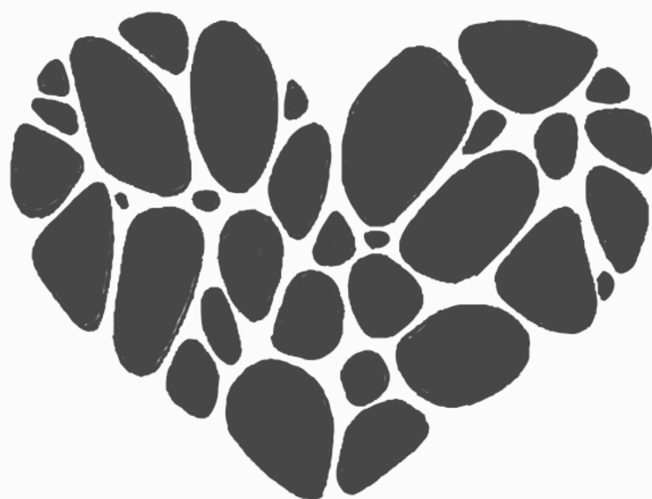

THE STONES OF TARU VILLAGE

by Jeffrey Gibbs

“THAT fountain is all that’s left of our house,” she says. “The army drove us outside then bombed it from the air. Then they bombed the neighbors on either side of us. The ones they didn’t blow up, they sprayed with gas and burned to the ground.”

And so the village of Taru passed into history—for a while at least. Now a few families are trickling back. Haydar and his wife, Suzan, who is telling me this story, live in Izmir now, on the Aegean coast, but they are rebuilding a home here in their birth village, out in the Kurdish region of Eastern Anatolia—one of eight families to do so. They come to work on their house every summer during vacation. Haydar is a retired architect and

designed their new house himself. Inside, it is modern—with a dishwasher, a flat screen television, and a Western style toilet and shower. But the walls outside are symbolically made with the rubble of their first house—rock and stone hewn hundreds of years ago from the mountain itself. They spent months gathering the fragments from the weed and briar of the abandoned village. It's a poetic gesture—one that has brought my wife, her grandfather, her uncle and me here on a clear August afternoon. As Suzan talks, two rather well kept goats come to the front door. One, clearly the leader, pokes his head inside while his companion hangs back at his flanks. Their bells tinkle.

"Little by little," Suzan says with a glance at the goats, "We're coming back. And so are our animals."

The animals. I hear this again and again from the Kurds around Conag—the village in Bingöl province where my wife is from. The greatest loss is the herds of goats, sheep, mules, and cattle that used to be the pulse of this culture. Animals were the rhythm of life. The livestock determined when people woke and slept. Their blood was a gift to the spirits that haunted here, their meat and milk sustenance and the basis for a dozen different dishes. Once, when we drove out of the mountains and into the plains of Muş, we came upon a shepherd with hundreds of sheep herding across a

pasture of dried yellow grass. Every one of my urban, Kurdish in-laws pressed their faces to the passenger side window and sighed with a palpable longing. “Oh Dede look,” my wife whispered to her grandfather, as if she might disturb the sheep. “Just look at their animals.”

I don’t ask Suzan why the Turkish army destroyed Taru—the crime was always the same, aiding and abetting terrorists, i.e., the PKK. And the charge was somewhat true. Everyone in these villages feels a sympathy with the guerillas in the mountains—a sympathy they cannot easily admit among strangers. There’s always the danger someone will rat you out. This person bought two hungry guerillas a pound of bulgur. That one fed a whole brigade with bags of flour. I met a man who, as a kid, used to ferry letters between PKK groups unable to move because of the presence of soldiers. A few performed these tasks unwillingly, but most saw it as a duty. Again and again, I hear guilt-ridden people lamenting that they themselves did not go and join the fight against a state that had banned their music, forbidden their language, and bombed their villages. “How could we turn away these young people when they came to us for help?” they ask.

Taru was destroyed in 1994.

"Our village was already dying by the time the planes came," Haydar says. "A friend of mine—his parents ventured out one night with a flashlight to visit him on the other side of the village. You see how tiny it is here. It couldn't have been more than five minutes away, but they were old and it took some time. They passed through a soldier checkpoint without incident. On the way back, an hour or two later, they were shot on approach at the same checkpoint. Murdered just like that. The soldier who pulled the trigger said he thought they were 'terrorists' when he saw the light of their flashlight bobbing along the trail, the exact same flashlight he had let through just an hour before. It never became news of course."

Haydar has a sweeping bush of white hair and an equally bushy moustache that covers his upper lip. When he tells a story, I notice he sometimes holds the tip of his tongue on his bottom lip before he delivers the funny part. His wife is a tall elegant woman, with a long face and eyes that retain a somber light even when she smiles. With the tulip glasses of fresh tea, she serves German ginger cookies and cucumbers from their garden, then sits down at the end of the table where I, the foreign *zava* (groom), look completely lost. Everyone is speaking a mix of Turkish,

which I know, and Kurmanji Kurdish, which I don't. And somehow the climax of every story comes in Kurmanji.

"And then you wouldn't believe who I saw coming!" Haydar says. "I swear, you'll die laughing! It was…" *Kurmanji!* Everyone but me erupts into guffaws.

"I feel this land in my bones," Suzan says, giving her husband a quiet smile and then looking back at me. "I'm proud we've come back, but I wasn't born in this village, you know, but in Kumsor—where your wife's ancestors came from a long long time ago. It means *Qızılbaş*, the red heads."

"In Tunceli," I say.

"In Dersim," she corrects.

"So you speak Zaza?"

"I speak Dimilli. And also Kurmanji and Turkish."

She is gentle, but adamant about these corrections. It's not pride but a simple insistence on the truth. In Turkey there are two main branches of Kurd. One is popularly known as the Zazas, who historically immigrated first, probably before the Byzantines arrived. Taru village once stood and stands again on the border of their territory. To the east is the province of

Bingöl, where my wife's village lies hidden in a deep valley just a few kilometers away. To the west, is the province of Tunceli, the land once called Dersim on the maps and still called that by the people who live here—in private at least. It was here, in 1938, that the army of the new Turkish republic massacred tens of thousands of Zaza Kurds when they resisted assimilation.

Dersim was renamed Tunceli in an effort to obliterate its past, and some of its territory was redistributed to other provinces. The people were moved, too—a monstrous feat of social engineering aimed at diluting those that survived the massacres. The locals speak a variant of Kurdish called Zaza by people who aren't Zaza, and increasingly by people who are. The name is supposedly pejorative—a mocking of the z sounds that pervade the language. Dersimlis particular about their culture and history call their language Dimili. Their religion is different, too. They are Alevis, not Sunnis Muslims, and don't celebrate Ramadan or do the *namaz* or have mosques in their villages. Some don't even consider themselves Muslims. My wife can remember her grandmother saying prayers to the moon when she was a girl.

Taru village is named for Mt. Taru (the name means "slope" in Dimilli), a rugged, sharp mountain north of my wife's village. Taru is a

volcanic crag of dark red rock which presides like a god over every settlement in the region along with its partner, Mt. Silbüs, which looms to the north of it—slightly higher but less harrowing. According to one of the many local legends, the two peaks were once lovers—a shepherd boy and his girl, Kurdish and Armenian, frozen now in stone for all time by the magic of a witch. The road over the mountain to the village is so treacherous that at one point, where the left half has washed away down into a ravine and the right side is covered in sharp rocks the size of a human head, I had to stop our tiny Chevrolet and tell my wife, "We can't go on. We'll destroy the car or fall off the edge." It took her five minutes of intense argument to persuade me to move forward, each rocky crunch on the chassis making me grind my teeth.

"The road to Taru has always been horrible," Haydar tells us once we are safe and sound in his dining room. "When I was a kid, I had to walk it all the way down to the town of Xolxol to go to school. Piles of snow and ice, and sometimes bears and wolves. Once I was trudging up the hill and suddenly at the top I noticed a huge wolf watching me approach. I just froze. We regarded each other for a moment—*how do you do?*—and then I slowly eased backward down the hill. I didn't make it to school that day. Absent on account of wolves."

Caves in Taru and Silbüs served as hiding places for Dimilli Kurds fleeing the Dersim massacres in 1938. Fugitives discovered there were bombed to every last man, woman, and child by the Turkish Air Force, led, according to village legend, by Atatürk's adopted daughter, Sabiha Gökçen herself. This is not ancient history to the people of my wife's village. A few nights later, at dinner, one of my wife's cousins relates a story he heard from his grandmother.

"My grandmother remembers the massacres. Her voice still shakes when she tells it. She says that they all knew what was happening. Between the refugees and rumors and the bombings, the whole village figured that their turn was coming. It was September. The army was just on the other side of Silbüs. They heard that they were shooting everyone, so the village met in someone's house to figure out what to do. They decided not to resist—they'd be caught on the road if they tried to run anyway, and all the hiding places in the mountains had been discovered. They all went home that night and locked up their houses—all the doors and windows were shuttered tightly. They said their goodbyes and waited for whatever was to come. My grandma was just a girl. She remembers clinging to her mother and watching the door all night, expecting at any moment someone to kick it in, drive them all outside, and shoot them. But the bullets never came.

The government had called an end to the operations that night. They were saved by a hair's breadth."

But then came the 1980 coup and the Turkish war with the PKK. The local Kurds were tired of being told they didn't exist by the Turkish government. They were tired of being arrested, tired of their culture being illegal, tired of their language being forbidden. All the villages in the area were given Turkish names—mentioning the Kurdish one once would have landed you in prison, charged with "splitting the country."

In 2010, bowing to a new spirit of openness, all the village signs offered up the original—and true—names of the villages in parenthesis. When you turn onto the road to my wife's village, a sign says SARITOSUN—(CONAG). The Turkish authorities have a funny way of putting truth in parentheses and quotes—the Armenian 'genocide' for example—and leaving lies well enough alone.

My wife remembers these times with great bitterness. "We used to bury our cassette tapes of Kurdish music. It wasn't even safe to hide them in the house."

Now, the language has been targeted once more. The Turkish government has declared that it will purge the country of "terrorists and

traitors." Kurdish mayors in eighty-nine Kurdish cities have been forcibly replaced by "trustees" sent from the ruling party. The city halls have been stripped of all signage bearing Kurdish words and festooned with Turkish flags. The images of proud young police and soldiers posing in front of the damage circulate all over Twitter. The bombings in Dersim have resumed as well. Journalists in the region have been detained for filming helicopters dropping explosives on a village.

As I finish editing this back in Istanbul, there is a line of cars outside my window all hysterically honking their horns. Music, fireworks. A few boys from our neighborhood are going into the army. It's eleven at night and everyone is outside shouting "*Asker! En Büyük Asker*" — "Soldiers! Great are our soldiers!" Someone yells out their window, telling the crowd to be quiet, only to have a barrage of curses and threats tossed at them. This is the mindset they are shipping out east to fight guerillas, but also to deal with unsuspecting villagers like the ones who are now my family.

I walk to the bedroom to check on my wife. She sleeps soundly under a pile of blankets. The lights from Istanbul's new high-rises and skyscrapers beyond our balcony fall through the window and over her face like a neon moonlight. She seems to glow, breathtakingly beautiful and utterly fragile looking in her slumber, though I know she's tougher than me, though I know she's witnessed things that would freeze the soul. I want to fold myself over her, be a shield against the patriotic voices pouring into the room from outside. I sometimes wonder what I'll do if the police come for her as they have come for tens of thousands over the past few years? How will I fight in a war no one seems to win?

"What right do we have to our own fear?" she'll ask me if I give voice to these anxieties. "There are millions suffering unbelievable terrors out East. Families burned alive in basements, people drowning in the Aegean trying to escape, and mothers who see their children shot down in the street just going to the supermarket. And they've been doing so for decades." She knows this litany of sins by heart. We all do.

And so I worry in private. There's no one to "vent" to, no such thing as venting here. To open up to a Turkish friend about such things can be dangerous. You never know whose side they're on until you've given away yours. Even this essay puts us in peril. And of course, my wife is right. My

handwringing is merely neurosis about what might come, but probably won't. We hear every day about the real sufferers—the disappeared, the martyred. What right do we have to our own fear?

Before my wife and I leave the village of Taru, I ask Suzan what she and Haydar would do if the army came again. She has us loaded down with gifts—fresh cheese from their goats, eggs from their chickens, and a kind of dried cottage cheese called *torak*. We are standing by the car, looking down over the great sweep of mountain ranges to the west all turned dark maroon and purple in the setting sun.

"We'll start gathering the stones," she says. "They can do what they want but we will always start again."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeffrey Gibbs received his MFA from the University of Arizona where he studied with Oprah Book Club authors Aurelie Sheehan and Barbara Kingsolver. He has had short stories, essays, reviews and poems published in *The Boston Review, The Istanbul Review, The Heat City Review, The Noo Journal, Blood Lotus, 3am, Diagram,* and *Word Riot*. He has also written numerous articles for *Time Out Istanbul* and for various online sites such as *Culinary Backstreets, Hyper Allergic, Mashallah News,* and *Kurdish Rights*. Jeffrey also keeps a well-known travel / culture blog on his experiences in Turkey at istanbulgibbs.blogspot.com.

BT #026

© 2017 Jeffrey Gibbs

Published by LITTLE FICTION | BIG TRUTHS, May 2017. Edited by Troy Palmer + Amanda Leduc. Cover design by Troy Palmer, using images from The Noun Project (credits: Alex Muravev).

Read more stories and essays at littlefiction.com