

Echoes of Armenia

by

Cate Touryan

"To be born Armenian is to become a remnant," my grandfather once told me. I sat on his shoulders as we walked through the highlands.

"What are remnants?"

"Autumn flowers. The reds and browns of dead seasons." He picked a flower, crushed the rusted petals, and held the sweetness to my nose.

*"Ashes," he said. "And scents."**

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Though both child and grandfather are now dead, the memories remain. *The water goes, the sand stays*, sighs an Armenian proverb. In my hands, the sand becomes story, my grandfather's memory of his grandfather, echo of an echo. But not memory alone. Memory and myth, the imagined and the known, all conspiring to beckon, to call across time to an ancestral homeland. Such is the call of homeland for many: collective and personal truths woven into memory and shared in unexpected moments, in unexpected ways, generation to generation, not always with words, but always present, often celebrated, but more often concealed, awaiting discovery or begging not to be discovered. For me, memory was a furtive whisper buried beneath the American dream that housed me, built by my maternal grandparents, childhood survivors of the century's first genocide, a memory I gently unearthed, brushed off, and set to story—a story of remnants, of ashes and scents.

**excerpts from "The Last Dove" acn/ct*

Before I knew even my own address—2127 El Molino Avenue, Pasadena, California, a mouthful of syllables signifying nothing to me but apparently necessary for the school bus driver—I knew Armenia. I knew it in the rhythmic, lilting language my mother spoke, I knew it in the heaping platters of stuffed grape leaves and hummus my grandmother served, I knew it in the playful pony rides over the highlands of my grandfather’s knee, and I knew it in the warning glances and precipitous silences of aunts and uncles at the mention of the 1915 massacres. I knew it as memory and myth, as mystery and imaginings, along a continuum of unhurried childhood, alluring, ethereal, elusive, ever and only known to my grandparents. The mapped nation of Armenia, hemmed in by Turkey, Iran, Georgia, I could never know, had no desire to know, now swallowed into the Soviet Union, annexed by Bolshevik Russia in 1922, sealed off from the rest of the world, from us. The Armenians of the diaspora had no homeland to return to. My grandparents’ Armenia existed only in the echoes of their past, in ashes and scents.

Then the unexpected happened. In 1991, the world witnessed the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the declaration of independence of its republics. Armenia was her own again. Where I had known my ancestral homeland only in imaginings, I could now know it as substance, as earth and sky, as pot-holed streets beneath my feet, as sidewalk cafes in Republic Square, as rock-hewn monasteries carved with khachkars, stone slabs inscribed with the cross, as soup kitchens and crowded orphanages, many funded by Americans. The Armenia of my grandparents, the Armenia that existed within memory, myth, and story did not exist in the world of the real, that I knew. But a real Armenia existed—and beckoned.

In April 2001, ten years after the fall of the Soviet Union, ten years after my grandparents died, we made the pilgrimage to Armenia—aunts, uncles, cousins, mother, daughter, a collective tribute, a caravan back across time, not across deserts on foot as had the death caravans of World War 1, but across continents in Boeing 747s, a return to the childhood of my grandparents, a return they could never make.

Discovering the land of Armenia while studying in a Mekhitarist monastery on the Venetian island of San Lazzaro, Lord Byron wrote, "If the Scriptures are rightly understood, it was in Armenia that Paradise was placed. . . . It was in Armenia that the flood first abated, and the dove alighted." Armenia—*Hayastan*—the biblical land of Ararat, source of the Tigris and Euphrates, land of Byron's Eden, sits on the highlands of Eurasia, south of the Caucasus Mountains, cradled between the Caspian and Black Seas. Its once vast empire reached to the Mediterranean and boasted Mount Ararat, the peak upon which Noah's ark landed. Today, Armenia comprises one-tenth the land of historical Armenia, and its beloved Mount Ararat gazes from across the Turkish border, unreachable. The Armenia of my childhood had been spun from the Genesis account of creation and the great flood as much as from the genocide account of my grandfather, who at seven years old alone survived the deportation and massacre of his village.

They asked the bird where her nest was. "Ask the wind," she replied. So goes another Armenian proverb. The wind of genocide blew my grandfather first to Turkey, then to Greece, to Egypt, to Palestine, and then, with the breakout of the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, to Lebanon, and finally in a furious gust, across the sea to Pasadena.

We are the remnants, ashes and scents.

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My birthplace was California, but I couldn't forget Armenia, so what is one's country? Is it land or the earth, in a specific place? Rivers there? Lakes? The sky there? The way the moon comes up there? And the sun? Is one's country the trees, the vineyards, the grass, the birds, the rocks, the hills and summer and winter? Is it the animal rhythm of the living there? The hut and houses, the streets of cities, the tables and chairs, and the drinking of tea and talking? Is it the peach ripening in summer heat on the bough? Is it the dead in the earth there?

~ William Saroyan

We walked slowly under shady trees in Pasadena, my grandfather holding my hand.

"When God made the world, he dipped his ladle into the stew of an enormous kettle. Out from the soup kettle he drew soaring mountains, lush valleys, and rippling rivers. With these, God created all the world's countries, but one. Dipping his ladle in a last time, God scraped from the bottom what was left. And what was left was pebbles. With these pebbles, God formed the country of Armenia, landlocked, strewn with boulders and granite rocks, a land to behold, my child."

"To see only boulders and rocks?"

"To see much more than boulders and rocks. To see a sapphire mountain lake and the majestic peak of Mount Ararat. These God drew from the kettle with his own hands."

"Will I ever see this land?"

"No. Nor will I. It is lost."

We walk in silence.

"You do know, don't you, *anoushig*, the language we will all speak in heaven?"

I nod. He has told me this before.

"Armenian," he says. "It is the language of God."

He does not know, apparently, this language of God is not so easy to master; of the alphabet, Lord Byron wrote, "I have about mastered thirty of the thirty-eight cursed scratches."

That my grandfather could even believe in a God after the 1915 massacres of the Armenians during World War I struck me as both courageous and unfathomable, even then as a child. But believe, he did, despite a ten-day forced march from his village through the Turkish deserts, despite the ambush by the mountain tribes, despite the last frantic cries of his sister, mother, grandfather, still echoing in his ears, his family now numbered among the dead of the century's first genocide. He alone, a child of seven, survived to hold my hand and tell me stories beneath the shady trees of our street in southern California. Years later, I recount the labored breaths on his deathbed, and into those breaths I set his story, echoed from the caravans of Armenia.

They crash down the rocky slopes toward the caravan, a landslide of Kurdish tribes.

"Grandpa!" The boy grasps at the old man's neck.

"They cannot kill the soul, child." A bayonet pierces him.

Above them, a horse rears, three children astride. "Remove the boys," the gendarme commands his soldier. The girl snatches at him, time only to save one.

The old man's soul.

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I wanted to see the country, the place of my father and my ancestors, and to breathe the air which all of us had breathed for centuries...Armenians are addicted to their land, their geography, the air they breathe, all the rest of the special truth of patrie, as the French put it, the homeland.

~ William Saroyan

I am on a small, trembling plane, decades later, gazing out the small window at an endless sky, the far horizon a blurred arc of Earth. My teenage daughter sits behind me, face pressed against the crusted glass. We float, strangely suspended yet speeding over continents unseen, on our way to a memory freed from Soviet borders. From nowhere a cloud appears, splits the pale skies, white, stark, blinding. I wipe my breath from the window pane, stare harder. This cloud is no cloud, but the snow-capped peak of Mount Ararat, soaring above the land of soap pebbles and sapphire lakes, myth made truth. As we fly above the rugged volcanic cone, this sacred symbol of Armenia, I hear my grandfather's voice welcome me to the land of his childhood—of my childhood—in the language of heaven.

I turn to the marked page in the guidebook, *Lonely Planet*: "The simply extraordinary collection of medieval monasteries scattered across the country is the number-one attraction, closely followed by a dramatically beautiful landscape that is perfectly suited to hiking and other outdoor activities. And then there's the unexpected delight of Yerevan—one of Europe's most exuberant and endearing cities." Yerevan, founded in 782 BC, the world's oldest city to have documented the date of its birth. But can poetry or story or memory or tourist guidebook or bus rides to 6th-century ruins capture place? Isn't place less what we inhabit and more what inhabits

us? What can *Lonely Planet* know of my memory of my grandfather's memory, or of the myth that truth informs? Of ashes and scents? Of the echo of his voice through mine.

Winter blew ice and dark shadows on the province of Erzerum. We saw the rugged mountains lose their peaks in snow, then clouds, then snow and more clouds, until we no longer knew mountains from sky. Bitter winds whipped the snow into flurries, whistled off the crags, swept the meadows with a cold that bit into our flesh, chilled our bones. We walked less, then no more, skated instead ponds sheathed in white crystal. The tips of icicles numbed our tongues, stung the clear waters of the mountain streams, froze the flow of the rivers into the Euphrates. Our plateau bore the snows of Turkey in silence. The autumn flowers died; the ashes scattered; the scents mingled and lingered.

*My grandfather sat evenings in the rocker, stoked the wood stove hot with crackling oak, gathered us to him, drew me in his lap. He told us of Haig, the mighty archer and terrible warlord, whose stride shook the valleys and voice silenced the howling wolves, our first ancestor, the protector of our people, the last of the race of giants. His shoulders spanned seven feet, my grandfather said, and the snows did not stop him. And Bel of Babylon did not stop him. And a thousand armies did not stop him. His bow was made of a gold that blazed like the sun and arched in his arms as though torn apart by an angry wind. There, on the Great Mountain Ararat, high on a cliff, after months of fleeing with his people down bottomless gorges, through thick forests, across iced plateaus, Haig let loose the last arrow, the arrow that sped across two rivers and over a mountain to plunge deep into the heart of Bel, the arrow that freed the people and marked where it fell the boundary of the land of Armenia.**

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In *Seven Bites from a Raisin*, a compilation of Armenian proverbs, author P.M. Manuelian writes, "The proverbs of Armenia...shed light on a traditional agricultural society in which the sights and sounds of donkeys, mules, horses, goats, cows and hens figure prominently." And orphans.

- *He has no home, but he is looking for the door.*
- *An orphan who laughs can't be an orphan.*
- *Land of Armenians, land of orphans.*

In the Hamidian massacres of 1894, between 80,000 to 300,000 Armenians fell under the sword of the Bloody Sultan. In the Turkish massacres of 1915, between 1 and 1.5 million Armenians were slaughtered. In the Spitak earthquake of 1988, more than 25,000 people were killed and 500,000 left homeless. Those children who did not die during these catastrophic events often became orphaned, as did my grandfather.

One estimate puts the total number of Armenian orphans during the Turkish massacres at 150,000, with some 60,000 Armenian children held in Turkish orphanages or Muslim homes through the early 1920s. Once consigned to an orphanage, the children were "enrolled in a ruthless program of 'Turkification,' beginning with a forced conversion of the Christian children to Islam. Their Armenian names were erased from school records and replaced with Muslim names, they were taught to speak Turkish, the boys circumcised and all were indoctrinated with the glories of Turkish nationalism" (John Couretas, <https://stream.org/orphans-of-antoura-remembering-armenian-genocide/>). The kindness of a Turkish official saved my grandfather from the orphanages. His Turkish "father" adopted him, converted him to Islam, taught him Turkish, and wailed publicly when my grandfather with his sister escaped to avoid her upcoming

marriage to the Turkish man's son, the gendarme who had led them ten days through the deserts to fall prey to the Kurdish tribes.

We have been in Armenia a week. We have posed for photos near the fountain in Republic Square, sipped thick coffee at sidewalk cafes, bartered with eager vendors at the outdoor markets, trekked the rocky highlands for stunning views of Greater and Lesser Ararat. We have applauded the symphony in Khachaturian Hall, strolled the corridors of the Dalan Art Gallery, sipped Armenian brandy lakeside in Circular Park. But now it is the orphaned and discarded children we have come to see.

A chartered bus takes us through the streets of Yerevan, through narrow alleys, past bustling marketplaces, across potholed intersections, to the outskirts of town, where we park beside a dull gray building, a Soviet era construction, concrete pillars at the entry, three stacked floors above, rows of postage-stamp windows: Ojantag Boarding School Number 8.

Before we exit the bus, we learn that the Soviets established boarding schools for children with developmental, physical, and emotional disabilities. Though ten years since Armenia declared independence, the state boarding schools remain crowded, economic hardship driving parents to leave their children at doorsteps; these are orphans of economic hardship. The schools, we are told, are overcrowded, understaffed, rife with abuses, repositories for all the unwanted children of Armenia. The school we visit is privately owned, funded by a Christian organization in the United States. These children are lucky.

A gray-haired woman welcomes us inside the stark entry and in earnest Armenian explains the government's desire to wrest the school from the children. While she is alive, she asserts, her heels clicking down a drab corridor, the children will always have a school, a home.

This is her promise to God. We enter a small auditorium with few chairs and watch children skip across the stage, wearing crisp white shirts and serious faces. I do not need to know Armenian to understand the fervor in their recitations, the bravery in their songs, the sincerity in their prayers. How hard they have worked to please us, the school director whispers. After the performance, we take their photos, congratulate them in broken Armenian, return shy hugs. And then we hear their stories: A girl whose father was in prison for killing her baby brother. A boy whose mother had killed herself. Several whose minds were slow but smiles wide. Many without either parent. But all, children reclaiming in Ojantag Boarding School Number 8 that place called childhood.

The school director takes us through more gray corridors to the classrooms. As we crowd inside, the children stand as one, solemn and wide-eyed. We take the fresh flowers they offer, sample the apricot candies, admire the many crafts: hand-written calendars, dark-haired dolls, paper-woven baskets. We take more photos, speak simple English with the older children, hug the youngest. We leave the classroom to climb up two flights of stairs into another gray corridor, its narrow doors leading into large rooms filled with cots, metal frame against metal frame, each draped with an army blanket and thin towel, drafty rooms with cracked windows and broken wall furnaces. More metal beds line the hallway to the bathroom, some with two pillows for brother and sister to sleep side by side, some pushed up against window ledges, three floors above weeds and concrete.

"These children are fortunate," the school director tells us. "They have beds with mattresses. They have blankets."

As we board the bus to wind our way back through the streets of Yerevan, I glance back. Pressed against the rows of small windows, tender and wistful, are the faces of the children. I make a promise to God too.

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But with the disappearance of Paradise itself may be dated almost the unhappiness of the country...the satraps of Persia and the pachas of Turkey have alike desolated the region where God created man in his own image.

~ Lord Byron, *Lord Byron's Armenian Exercises and Poetry*, 1817

Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?

~ Adolf Hitler, Obersalzberg speech, August 22, 1939

No trip to Armenia would be complete without a pilgrimage up the hill of Tsitsernakaberd to the Armenian Genocide Memorial. Although we are here in April, we will miss by three days the annual pilgrimage on April 24, when throngs of thousands will gather on Armenia's most somber day, Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day, and the outside world will again argue the truth of a "genocide." We climb the steep path in light rain, passing a low stone wall engraved with the names of towns devastated by massacres and deportations. Few others brave the rainy trek, below us an ever-widening view of Yerevan. We stand below the sleek Memorial Column, an arrow-shaped obelisk soaring into the skies, declaring the rebirth of Armenia and then make our way slowly to the Sanctuary of Eternity, twelve slanted beams positioned in a circle, figures in mourning, perhaps, hovering over an open wound. We climb down the stairs between the pillars into a recessed arena. In the center blazes an eternal flame,

fueled by the memories of the millions lost during the 1915 massacres. We add our long-stemmed roses to the wreath of flowers that encircles the flame. Fifteen years later, pop icon Kim Kardashian and her sister Khloe will be televised making the same pilgrimage, the eyes of a star-struck world upon them as they lay fresh tulips at the flame, for many a revelation of a place known as Armenia, for many others a reminder that there is more to reality than reality stars.

One month after the Kardashians' visit, Pope Francis made the same pilgrimage, penning these words in the memorial guestbook: "Here I pray with pain in my heart, so that never again will there be tragedies like this. May God protect the memory of the Armenian people. Memory should never be watered down or forgotten. Memory is the source of peace and the future." In a speech at the presidential palace the previous night, the Pope angered those unwilling to acknowledge what he affirmed as "the first genocide of the 20th century...that genocide made possible by the twisted racial, ideological, or religious aims that darken the minds of the tormentors, even to the point of planning the annihilation of entire peoples." In outrage, Turkey recalled its envoy to the Vatican, claiming that the deaths—far fewer than reported—were part of a civil conflict triggered by World War 1. In these newspaper accounts, I hear the echo of Hitler's question. I see autumn flowers, the reds and browns of dead seasons. Ashes and scents.

We sat on the roof beneath scattered stars, the scent of mulberries and musk soap on the warm breeze, the shadows of leafy branches across my grandfather's wrinkles.

"There was no mercy with Tamerlane, invader of the 14th century. He swept his great armies across Armenia, burned the villages, slaughtered the men, captured the women and children. Not even the flowers of the meadows were spared. With Armenia conquered, Tamerlane took up rule in a palace on the shores of Lake Sevan beside an ancient monastery.

One day, as he sat on his throne, Tamerlane saw the old priest of the monastery wander down the stone steps, his hands clasped in prayer, his eyes raised to heaven. Tamerlane burst into cruel laughter at the foolish old priest, but suddenly, gasping, leaped from his throne and ran down to the shore. Astonished and afraid, he watched as Father Zareh walked across the waters of the lake.

Tamerlane threw himself to the ground. 'O holy man, hear my plea! For each infidel I have killed, I have found favor in the eyes of Allah, but in the eyes of God I am cursed. So that I may find favor with both the Moslem and the Christian God, you must pray for me. You are a holy man capable of miracles. Do this for me and I shall give you whatever you ask.'

Father Zareh walked across the water to stand before Tamerlane. 'Very well. This I will do, but you must free the people of Armenia.'

'So be it. You may have as many as your monastery can hold.'

Tamerlane commanded his soldiers to take a hundred Armenian prisoners to the monastery. Old men, women, and children, dirty and hungry and in tattered clothes, crawled from their cells and struggled up the monastery steps.

'What? Not full yet?' Tamerlane cried in disbelief. 'More, then! More! The priest is to have as many as his monastery can hold.'

One million Armenians marched into the monastery.

'Am I awake or asleep?' Tamerlane gasped. 'How can the entire Armenian nation enter this monastery?'

Tamerlane rushed up the stone steps and through the heavy doors of the ancient monastery. Inside, he saw Father Zareh on his knees before the altar, his hands and eyes raised to heaven, his beard soaked with tears.

‘O Lord, give your children the wings of doves.’ he prayed, and as he did, the last Armenian prisoners entering the monastery turned into doves and flew out the steeple over the crystal blue waters of Lake Sevan. ’’*

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The first country to adopt Christianity as its state religion in 301 AD—a boast Armenians make within minutes of introducing *odars* to their heritage—Armenia is often referred to as the “land of churches.” More than four thousand monasteries dot the rocky landscape of Armenia, many built on the highlands to protect them from invaders. We have glimpsed their stark silhouettes from our chartered bus, trekked up dirt roads to some, wandered among ruins of others, marveled at the antiquity, the architecture, the intricacies, paid our respects to Echmiadzen, the seat of the Armenian Apostolic Church and the oldest cathedral in the world, but it is within the rock-hewn monastery of Geghard that the voices across time—memory and myth, the imagined and the known—reverberate across centuries, echo and swell, converge and resonate into the truth of Armenia and its people.

Built into the side of a cliff in the 4th century, Geghard is a complex labyrinth of caves and chambers, its main chapel erected in 1215. We crowd into an inner chapel, no more remarkable than many others, dimly lit, the stone walls yellowed and cracked, our conversation muted. I hear a note, pure and clear, and then another. My aunt is singing. I know the tune but not the language. It is the Common Doxology, and now my mother, my aunts and uncles, those a

generation older, raised in Beirut as part of the Armenian diaspora, merge their voices with hers, and the sound that fills the chamber is almost too exquisite to bear, reverberating beneath the stone arches, echoing through the domed ceiling, soaring and permeating, lingering and fading. My aunt begins the chorus again, this time in English, and the moment belongs to Paradise.

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| <i>Օրհնեսալ Տէր Աստուած ունից բոլոր</i> | <i>Praise God from whom all blessings flow.</i> |
| <i>օրհնութիւնները հոսքը.</i> | <i>Praise him all creatures here below.</i> |
| <i>Օրհնեցէք նրան բոլոր էակներին Ստորեւ</i> | <i>Praise him above ye heavenly hosts.</i> |
| <i>Օրհնեցէք նրան վերեւում էք երկնային զօրքերու</i> | <i>Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.</i> |
| <i>Օրհնեսալ Հայր, Որդի եւ Սուրբ Հոգին</i> | |

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Until the Soviet Union collapsed, the only Armenia I knew existed within the memories my grandparents shared, within the home decorated with hand-knotted wool carpets and gilded vases, within my grandmother’s kitchen, redolent with garlic, fresh mint, and exotic spices, within my grandfather’s sermons from the pulpit of the Armenian Evangelical Church, a church he pastored for thirty years. These echoes of memory, myth, imaginings—these were enough. What need did I have to travel to Armenia? And what hope could I ever have, locked away as it was in the Soviet Union?

Lord Byron never had the opportunity to visit Armenia, the land where Paradise was placed, where the flood first abated and the dove alighted, nor did my grandparents ever have the opportunity to return to the land of their birth. But author William Saroyan did, traveling from his hometown of Fresno in 1935. "I was delighted to walk in a city of the world in which

everybody was Armenian," he wrote, "...there was something in each face which said rather clearly: Behold, another Armenian, still alive, still here in our rocky corner of the human world."

What Armenia was before 2001, Armenia still is. What Armenia was in 2001 is memory added to memory. But all memory, all myth, all imaginings take us to our rocky corner of the human world, to our particular place, the place that inhabits us, if we but listen for the echoes.