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How She Sleeps at Night

Alexandra Malouf

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Michael Lavers, Chair  
Kimberly Johnson  
Lance Larsen

Department of English  
Brigham Young University

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## ABSTRACT

### How She Sleeps at Night

Alexandra Malouf  
Department of English, BYU  
Master of Fine Arts

*How She Sleeps At Night* is a collection of lyric poetry constellated around experiences of disability, trauma, and womanhood. A critical essay introduces the collection by elucidating the experiences and theoretical underpinnings that shaped the body of these poems. The introductory essay distills the principles that informed my cardinal poetic goals as I wrote: to create poems that can be read again and again over a lifetime, which connect with readers' common humanity, and which acknowledge the nuances and complexities of being alive.

Keywords: creative writing, lyric poetry, poetic theory, devotional poetry, erasure, trauma

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe thanks to many without whom I may not have completed this collection. In no universe could the words I say in this little space ever repay the debts I owe, but I nonetheless offer my gratitude.

First, to Michael Lavers, who has continually proven himself one of the most ambitious and humble people I know, for patiently talking through my often lengthy concerns. Above all else, Michael has helped me to believe in myself as an artist. They don't pay him enough.

To Kim Johnson and John Talbot, for opening my mind to the nuanced potential of poetic form, and Lance Larsen, for challenging me to climb out from beneath blankets into poetic territories I'd left previously unexplored.

I also acknowledge Hagop Moutafian, Grigor Amalian, and *The Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute Foundation*, whose words make up the source texts for this collection's erasure poems. And I thank my ancestors in the Pirinian family, who survived the Genocide and gave me life.

There are so many quiet angels to whom I find myself indebted, a few of which I leave my last thanks—my fellow poet and husband, Danny Daw, who daily lives with my absurdity and loves me for it; my therapist, Lisa, who's succored my trudge through miles of emotional cud; and finally, the many who've given me the accommodations necessary to survive graduate school with a chronic illness.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

TITLE .....	i
ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iv
INTRODUCTION .....	1
Works Cited .....	13
Too Tight .....	15
Thirty Ways to Break a Wheelchair.....	16
Hair Fall .....	17
[My Ancestors Speak From Unmarked Graves].....	18
[The Dead, Floating Toward Syria] .....	19
[A Survivor, To Her Savior] .....	20
Woman With The Issue of Blood .....	22
Walking Past Dusk.....	24
How She Sleeps At Night .....	25
Concerto In C Minor .....	26
How It Was .....	27
Sisters .....	31
Our planet angles her curve toward shadow .....	32

Rabbit Shelter in Autumn .....	33
Dear One, Floating in My Calm Round.....	34
Rosa Bonheur, Her Ménagerie.....	35
Carpenter Bee.....	36
Daughter.....	37
Walking Alone .....	38
Holding .....	39
Hi neighbor, .....	40
A Brief History of My Failings.....	41
Diagnosis.....	42

## INTRODUCTION

I haven't always known how to express why I love poems, and it wasn't until I was under pressure to do so that I found the words. As a clammy-handed Poetry Editor for *Inscape Journal*, I found myself needing to distill for undergraduate interns what makes a great poem. While there are many ways to teach how to assess poems, I settled on a series of "litmus" questions designed to get them thinking critically about a poem's power. These were questions I often found myself asking as I narrowed down which collections deserved space on my graduate reading list, questions that ultimately helped me to identify why certain poems spoke to me while others didn't.

The first few focused on the larger concern, *Does the poem have re-read value?* I asked them to consider: does your mind return to it after you've finished reading? And do you enjoy it equally, if not more, when you read it again—even years later, when you've matured and changed? Next, I asked them to ponder, *Does the poem sit with complexity in a purposeful way?* In other words, does it paint its subject with nuance and tension rather than neatly wrapping it up with a bow and matching paper? And finally, *Do you feel when you read it, that you're connecting with another being (i.e. human, nature, God) in some meaningful way?* I told my interns to think of these questions as ideals to which the best poems aspire. Two poems of very different formal dimensions—say an Elizabethan sonnet and a meandering meditation in free-verse—can achieve these qualities through starkly different methods. It's not so much the strategy that matters, but the appropriateness of a strategy to its poetic situation.

The poem that made me want to write poetry was not only immensely connective and re-readable, but also altered the trajectory of my life. At the time I read it, my feet were pointed towards creative nonfiction. Barely beginning to consider grad school, I was fighting the start of

what became an exponential decline of my mental and physical health. I struggled especially with the desire to do more than I believed my body would allow. Knowing no one else who was chronically ill, I felt alone and invisible. On a whim, I asked a visiting professor to let me sit in on his Studies in Poetry seminar, where I fell in love with this new magic. I mean the magic to which Elizabeth Bishop refers when she says that after reading a good poem “the world looks like that poem for 24 hours” (Bishop 409).

Adrienne Rich’s poem, “Power,” cast this kind of magic on my world for much longer than 24 hours. Of Marie Curie, she wrote:

she must have known she suffered from radiation sickness  
her body bombarded for years by the element  
she had purified  
It seemed she denied to the end  
the source of the cataracts on her eyes  
the cracked and suppurating skin of her finger-ends  
till she could no longer hold a test-tube or a pencil

She died a famous woman denying  
her wounds  
denying  
her wounds came from the same source as her power (“Power” 443)

In these words, I saw not only linguistic beauty, but myself reflected. Hers was the first poem I read and thought: *this poem is about me*. I saw in Rich’s description a woman who, like me, was unendingly ill, her illness made worse by her desire to do more than her body could withstand. I saw too, a woman who was not stopped by the forces working against her. Only after reading her poem did I realize that illness didn’t have to stop me from attending graduate school. I decided then that I would go, and that I would study poetry.

In my five years of trauma therapy (2017 to 2022), I’ve spoken about Adrienne Rich’s poem in session more than once. This is in no small part due to its willingness to do as I told my *Inscape* interns: sit with complexity. I wanted to understand it—why it felt true, and why it



continued to matter to me when so much else no longer did. Initially, I couldn't discern the full meaning of the poem's last line, but it remained one of the only things I'd encountered that made me feel seen. T.S. Eliot remarks that "Genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood," and despite my not understanding it, Rich's poem did this for me (Eliot 200). Even to my unconscious mind, the pauses elicited by the caesura after "wounds" and the line-ending at "power" suggested a link between two things I was trying to reconcile in my own life. Something about that linkage made me feel capable, as though the wounds in me were accompanied by a greater power.

Many of the poems I read in those early days of therapy have since faded into the less-worn pages of my books, but Rich's poem continues to evolve in its meaningfulness to me. Through nuance, it stands the test of time that I asked my interns to consider, so much that I've spent years teasing out its meaning. In a recent session, the poem resurfaced when my therapist expressed that were I not an empathetic person, I wouldn't have been the target of my particular ilk of trauma. She added that because I responded to my traumas by not allowing my compassion to be crushed, that compassion rather grew stronger.

A statement of Anne Sexton's once shook me when I read it. She reflects that "Suicide is the opposite of the poem," and when I think about poetry's impact on my own life, I can't help believing her (*No Evil* 92). During the years of depression that consumed her adult life, she was advised by her therapist to write poetry—a fact which quickly deterred me from considering poetry as a viable form of therapy. I didn't want to end up early-dead. However, Anne Sexton's friend, Maxine Kumin, was "convinced that poetry kept Anne alive for eighteen years of her creative endeavors" (Kumin xxiii-xxiv). Poetry is essential to living on this earth. It exists to revive us, to display life anew, and to remind us—in a myriad of ways—why we should keep on

living. And I would go so far as to ask, as Czeslaw Miłosz does, "What is poetry which does not save / Nations or people?" (42).

Nonetheless, I may go to my grave arguing that poetry is not therapy. Opposing Kumin, Anne Sexton regarded poetry not as her sole saving balm, but as a potent medicine taken in combination with a variety of other treatments. To W.D. Snodgrass, she wrote, "Once, I said to Dr. Martin that I didn't care if I were crazy forever if I could only write well. Somewhere, sometime...this plan seemed to fall down. Everyone seemed to like my poetry and the doctor was right. It [poetry] isn't enough..." (*Anne Sexton* 35). For me, poetry and clinical treatment are not interchangeable. Poetry cannot aid my brain in processing trauma with the efficacy of EMDR treatment, nor is it a drug that I gulp down habitually with my SSRIs. I stand entirely with Paisley Rekdal when she says that "[she has] never treated poetry as a therapeutic activity; I doubt any serious poet does" ("Introduction" xxx).

While I don't write poetry with the hope of curing my wounds, I do write with the hope of providing solace for someone else. As Adam Zagajewski wrote:

Only in the beauty created  
by others is there consolation,  
in the music of others and in others' poems.  
Only others save us,  
even though solitude tastes like  
opium. The others are not hell,  
if you see them early, with their  
foreheads pure, cleansed by dreams.  
That is why I wonder what  
word should be used, "he" or "you." Every "he"  
betrays a certain "you" (Zagajewski 127)

Poetry can do one thing that therapy and mood-stabilizing drugs aren't designed to do: spark public conversations that bring shared feelings into the open. Dimitri Shostakovich wrote that when people read the poem, "Babi Yar," by Yevgeny Yevtushenko, "the silence was broken. Art

destroys silence” (158-159). A similar opening of quiet hearts occurred in response to American Confessionalism. Why? The answer is in Zagajewski’s poem: they turned every “I” into a “you.” In humanizing their own mental illness, relationships and identities, the Confessional poets’ reach beyond the page increased. "For a time, it seemed that psychiatrists all over the country were referring their patients to Anne[ Sexton]’s work,” Kumin wrote, “as if it could provide the balm in Gilead for every troubled person" (Kumin xxvi). Decades later, the Confessional’s nuanced portraits of human woundedness provide me with the sense that my unseen life has meaning. While I don’t suggest that reading poetry can be a substitute for therapy, I regard it as a healing source of community.

Though I hesitate to label my poetry as upper-case-C “Confessional,” my poems have been influenced by that school, often conveying private experiences with relationships, trauma, and mental illness. In my first poetry workshop, fellow students observed similarities between my mode of writing and Sylvia Plath’s, and in that same semester, I witnessed a literature class in uproar, full of animosity toward her. I realized quickly that whether for sensible reasons or bigoted ones, it was popular to hate the Confessional Poets. Central to this divide was these poets’ overt display of personal wounds. While many acknowledge these wounds as someone’s reason for needing poetry, others are not ready to be present with such wounds.

I am not writing to those people. If there’s anything therapy has taught me, it’s that you can’t touch a closed heart, not by force, and certainly not by poetry. When you put your vulnerable words out into the world, you will touch only those who are already, in some way, reaching for you. Of the relationship between reader and poet, Adrienne Rich wrote that “Someone writing a poem believes in a reader,... [and] depends on, a delicate, vibrating range of difference, that an ‘I’ can become a ‘we’ without extinguishing others, that a partly common

language exists to which strangers can bring their own heartbeat, memories, images” (“Someone”). Outside the poem, poet and reader live different lives—crowded apartment in the city, white cottage, a grave—yet when we meet on the page, we see life through the same eyes.

As Emerson describes, I “write from the love of imparting certain thoughts and not from the necessity of sale...[I write] always to the unknown friend” (Emerson 231). Like Emerson, I write not to say something in particular, but to connect with an unknown stranger. You might say I write to a girl who used to be me, a girl still out there living in other bodies, perhaps other countries, or is not yet born. This is a girl with no one to confide in, no guardian or sister to hold her, and these she longs for desperately, though too unconsciously to know it. While in many ways “confession,” or the willingness to confront our unique woundedness, acts as one kind of catalyst for connection and conversation, the most potent ingredient in connective poetry is the evocation of a beautiful, shared humanity. When poet and reader meet as “brethren” on a page, the distance between us grows meaningfully smaller, an experience not unlike the meeting of strangers described by Emily Dickinson. In the poem’s first lines, two men recently dead connect over the ideals they died for, one “For Beauty,” the other “for Truth:”

...Themselves are One—  
We Brethren, are,” He said—

And so, as Kinsmen, met a Night—  
We talked between the Rooms—  
Until the Moss had reached our lips—  
And covered up—our names— (Dickinson 7-12)

Paradoxically, it is by revealing idiosyncrasies that these tomb-dwellers find common ground, and connective poems work the same way. Poems bring readers together when they, through imparting and affirming idiosyncrasies, accentuate our similarities. By affirming unique

experiences, writing particularly to the “unknown friend,” they highlight our common humanity, making us aware that we aren’t alone.

In contrast to other arts, poems rely on language to underscore our interbeing—with other humans, the earth, and our bodies. This is possible because the linguistic centers of our brain understand words relationally, according to the real and imagined contexts in which we encounter them. In other words, when we read the word *kick*, we automatically associate it with pain. Psychologists Steven Hayes and Spencer Smith note that the brain, like Plato’s allegorical cave-dweller, experiences the world only as signals sent from outside. It recognizes the word *kick* in the same way it does a real kick (Hayes 17-18). As David Abram remarks, “language’s primary gift is not to re-present the world...but to call ourselves into vital presence of that world—and into deep and attentive presence with one another” (11). For a few moments while reading, time slows as, alert to the moment, our dormant senses revive. We remember, just for a brief respite, how to be curious about the strangeness of living, and in our busy, often disconnected, modern lives, such reminders are needed.

When I say that my favorite poems all invite me into some kind of relationship, I embrace the Native American sense of the word, including not only ‘people,’ but everything with the capacity to speak to our spirits. The Potawatomi writer Robin Wall Kimmerer translates this notion as “the grammar of animacy,” and explains that her people “use the same words to address the living world as [they] use for [their] family. Because they *are* our family” (55; emphasis added). In response to Kimmerer’s youthful frustration with having “no native language...to speak to the plants” a Cheyenne elder once told her that although the plants “love to hear the old language...if you speak it here [in your heart],...They will hear you” (59).

To speak in this heart-language requires drawing meaning from more than just words, from what the poet-theorist Charles Bernstein calls “elements to which [no] relatively fixed connotative or denotative meaning can be ascribed” (Bernstein 12). One such element is sound, which I often curate as an imitative response to soundscapes in the real world, allowing sound to transport the reader into close contact with a poem’s environment. For instance, I use soft consonants (i.e. w, h, n) and onomatopoeias to characterize the quiet vibrations of nature in “Rabbit Shelter In Autumn,” while relying heavily on sharp, crisp combinations (i.e. sh, k, scr) to convey distress in “How She Sleeps At Night.” Rhythm, likewise, serves as a means to ground us in a poem’s environment and convey the emotional state of its speaker. Shorter lines read quickly and can be used to convey urgency, fear, mania or excitement, in contrast to longer lines, which slow the pace of reading to express gentleness, reflection or melancholy. Just as important to meaning-making as sound and rhythm is the poem’s visual space. Words arranged on the page contribute to meaning by inviting the reader to follow a certain path through the text, dictating the order of information. Furthermore, white space enables me to suggest pauses and even shape a poem’s rhythm. By allowing for multiple, synchronous channels of communication, this “extralexical strata of the poem” plaits together with words to create meaning that is immersive on multiple levels (Bernstein). The reader gains not only a cognitive experience with the poem, but one that engages their eyes, ears and hearts. Communicating simultaneously, words and extralexical elements can evoke the presence of a speaker, transport a reader to a unique setting, even console a reader in the wilderness.

To illustrate how I strive for poems of greater meaning, I’ll describe my process of writing the poem “Sisters.” At the time, I was full of gratitude for women in my life who had made me feel seen. While not biologically related to any of them, they felt like sisters in a way



black mud. In fog,  
white envelops our branches.

Though emotional brokenness is suggested by the lexical content of the poem, an abrupt line break and caesura create a formal pun that further enhances the suggestion of brokenness. The break has no denotative or connotative meaning, but communicates visual meaning adjacent to the words in the poem. Another of my extralexical considerations in this poem was the meaning engendered by sound. As a means for evoking presence, I curated the sounds and rhythms of the poem as an imitative response to the landscape I responded to. Crisp consonants and irregular rhythms mirror the river's sounds, while also suggesting, through sharpness, the bends in the trees. When fully grounded in a given environment, we subsume its rhythms, breathe and move with them. Thus, with this sort of imitation, I aim to conjure up the physiological memory of having been really immersed in such soundscapes, and in consequence, transport us into the poem's world. By tapping into multiple avenues for meaning-making, I hope to create a rich reading experience whether encountered silently, visually or read aloud to an audience who cannot see the printed page. In the last draft of this poem, a humanizing title, "Sisters," and enhanced personification form the final bridge that enables readers to connect with my metaphor.

Beyond line breaks and stanzaic arrangement, my visual poetics wouldn't be complete without considering erasure's potential for nuanced irony. My thoughts became preoccupied in 2020 with the cultural excision of my ancestors, Armenians who died or survived ethnic cleansing a century ago. After a few generations, the sparse tree of my lineage juts off suddenly into the fog of a blank page. When I learned the reason, I was—as are most fourth and fifth generation Armenians—horrified. It was one thing for me to read about colonial slavery and the Sho'ah, from which I had a more privileged distance. It was quite another to see photographs of bone-legged survivors who shared a name, sometimes a nose, with my living family members. I



read the survivor accounts over and over: how bodies melted in heaps, pregnant women skewered, their babies left rotting on roadsides. They wrote things that I, despite my own traumas, can scarcely imagine. And perhaps that's why no one told me: genocide's images are the stuff of nightmares, their implication—that humans can curate hell long before facing purgatory.

To write poems about the Genocide in my own words felt disrespectful and privileged, but so did remaining silent. To not speak about it was to reenact its erasure from Ottoman history books and census records. I wanted to create something more nuanced—to sit with trauma without disrespecting its victims. Inspired by Tracy K. Smith's erasures of African-American Civil War letters in *Wade In The Water*, I chose to highlight this literal erasure through poetic erasure. Weighed by the sacredness of this subject, I wanted to avoid what Paisley Rekdal differentiates as *harmful* appropriation: in her words, enacting “cultural theft that leads to material loss, or the proliferation of damaging stereotypes” (Rekdal 32). With this awareness, I diverged from traditional erasure in one crucial way: rather than fully erasing most of the source text, I preserve all of survivors' words on the page, lightening the font and darkening the words of the poem proper.

Clustered in a block around the poem, the slightly-visible words from survivor accounts encourage readers to recognize that a real person's story has been erased. A curious reader will read between the lines and might go searching for additional learning. Meanwhile, the large white spaces between darkened words serve to echo how trauma is remembered and disclosed. Traumatic images or events are recalled disjointedly, and descriptive words pale against the experienced trauma. To use Allen Grossman's definition of metaphor, my arrangement of text attempts to “reduc[e] the unknowability of a fact by eroding its uniqueness” (35). In a poem

reflecting his experience of a concentration camp, Paul Celan uses “digging” as a metaphor both for relentless torture, and for the persistent reenacting of trauma afterward. While the life of a POW remains unfathomable to anyone who has not personally experienced it, “digging” and getting nowhere is familiar enough to stand as a graspable likeness. Though we often discuss metaphor as a purely lexical device, metaphor extends beyond this because standardized language is derivative of a kind of primal metaphor, every word a signifier for something else. Onomatopoeia is the most obvious example: the sounded word born from a sound in life, an approximation of the world’s language. As the essence from which language first arises, metaphor is capable of bridging the gaps where lexical connotation fails to fully communicate. Genocide, a distant concept for most readers, becomes communicable.

This is the sort of poem I hope to have written: a poem that brings you into contact with another’s humanity, a poem that sits meaningfully with the complexity of living, one you will read and love again and again. Of these three ambitions, the most difficult for me is to sit with complexity. In particular, it can be trying to silence the old ‘nun’ in me—that part which is opinionated, stubborn, and sentimentally attached. When she takes the wheel, my poems are in danger of wearing black and white only, of ending in trite morals, and of changing little from one draft to the next. I hope that for the most part, I’ve managed to blot her influence out of these pages in favor of poems that embrace complexity. Whether I succeed is for you to judge and for me to keep chasing.

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## **Too Tight**

Morning: my hair raked into clinched knots,  
the free strands sprayed  
by my mother, till crunchy-hard, taut  
against my skull. My fingers invade,  
loosening tresses to soothe the aching  
while rust-coated cows munch beyond our van.  
My mother, rear-view-spotting  
my messed-up drey, is less than  
thrilled. The skin between her brows  
folds like corrugated iron, while hair  
falls like curling-ribbon over me. How  
nice it is. I hang my head in the highway air  
and let wind flutter me like a streamer.  
I smile at cows: the square mothers, their baby dears.

## Thirty Ways to Break a Wheelchair

Before church,  
Noah Savoie tries to jump  
the curb in his wheelchair.

When asked if he landed it,  
friends say, *he landed it*  
*on his face,* scrubbed red

with road rash.  
On the day he broke  
his spine, he flew thirty-two feet

into the blue  
atmosphere, but today his old bike  
has patinated brown, paint blistering

beneath sun,  
and as the wheelchair dumps him  
face first into the street,

he sees a familiar flash  
of blue.  
Limbs splayed over pavement,

he tastes iron,  
is propped up and told: *Rise.*  
*Take up your chair and roll.*

## **Hair Fall**

Again, my hair has begun falling out  
in clumps, airy wreaths  
that roll like tumbleweed through doors,  
ensnare their knots in drains  
and wheelchair brakes.

An invasive species, this ivy owns  
my house. It adorns  
my shower walls, and broods  
in the static between sweaters.  
From pillows, I peel handfuls  
of fluff, slippery with oil.

Danny sweeps up snarls  
and shows them to me,  
feeble trophies for living  
each day with sickness.

While bone grinds  
on bone, feet stiff  
as stone, my hair flutters down,  
and gathers like pear blossoms  
in the fissures of my wilting body.  
Does a branch feel  
a petal falling, or notice only  
what is already lost,  
what new bud fills the empty place?

I need not beg my hair regrow  
the way I beg nerves  
and muscle. Even in my grave  
it will crawl through mold  
just to harbor me, a gold shawl draped  
over my clavicle like a hug spilling  
warmth into my lonely heart-cage.

## [My Ancestors Speak From Unmarked Graves]

There is a hill called Markadé, just a two-hour drive from Der-Zor. According to the testimony of Arab desert tribal chiefs, that name was given precisely by the Arabs at the sight of the slaughter of the Armenians. The name “Markada” is derived from the Arabic word “Rakkadda,” which means “countless piled up corpses.” It is said that the said hill had been formed by the corpses of the Armenians. In fact, up till the present day, if you dig the earth a little bit with your hand, you will find the bones of the Armenian martyrs. On that same place the Chapel of St. Harutyun was built, in 1996, on the relics of our martyrs, which are displayed in show-cases in every corner of the chapel.

A little farther, there is a large cave called “Sheddadié.” Again, according to the testimony of Arab desert men, that name derives from the Arabic word “Shedda,” which means “a place of terribly great tragic event.” The elderly Arab desert men relate that the Turk gendarmes had brought the Armenian deportees, had packed them into that large cave, had shut its entrance and had set fire to it. There remained only the bones of the Armenians reduced to ashes.

Those, who come to Der-Zor, do not go back without seeing these places. But during the past few years, petroleum was found near Sheddadié, consequently the Syrian government has forbidden the visits to those places. But the names of these two localities, Markadé and Sheddadié, were given by the desert Arabs, who had witnessed the massacre of the Armenians with their own eyes. During the massacres many Armenian girls and boys were able to escape, in various ways, from the Turkish murderers and find refuge, naked and hungry, at the Arab desert Bedouins. The latter had tattooed with blue ink the faces of many Armenian girls according to their custom, had made them Moslems and had kept them for years. Most of those Armenians had grown up, had forgotten their mother tongue, had become Arabs, but there are those among them, who still remember that their ancestors were Armenians.



## [The Dead, Floating Toward Syria]

My father's father, Hakob, was forcibly deported with his parents in the days of the Armenian Genocide from the village of Karmounj, near Yedessia. Going on foot, hungry and thirsty, sun-scorched and exhausted, they had reached Der-Zor. There the Turks had started to cut off the heads of the Armenians with axes and to throw them in the Euphrates River. It is said that the water of the Euphrates River was colored red by the Armenians' blood. My grandfather Hakob had miraculously escaped the slaughter. An Arab desert man had taken him as a shepherd to graze his sheep. After many years Hakob had married a girl, an orphan like him, and they had had three sons and two daughters. The three sons had named their firstborn sons Hakob in honor of their father. So, my name is also Hakob after my grandfather.

Our large Moutafian family, numbering 25 souls, lives up till now in Der-Zor and is well-known here by its prosperous situation.

There are also 10-15 other Armenian or semi-Armenian families in Der-Zor. The Armenians are in good friendly relations with the local Arabs. The latter are very kind and hospitable people. The Arab desert tribal chiefs often visit us. They always remember and tell us the narratives about the Armenian deportees they have heard from their fathers and grandfathers, about how the Turkish gendarmes had brought the poor Armenian exiles in groups to Der-Zor; they had massacred them and had thrown their corpses in the Euphrates River. That is why the Armenians erected, in 1991, right in the center of today's Der-Zor the Saint Martyrs' Church-Memorial complex dedicated to the memory of one and a half million innocent Armenian martyrs...

[T]here is a large cave called "Sheddadié." Again, according to the testimony of Arab desert men, that name derives from the Arabic word "Shedda," which means "a place of terribly great tragic event." The elderly Arab desert men relate that the Turk gendarmes had brought the Armenian deportees, had packed them into that large cave, had shut its entrance and had set fire to it. There remained only the bones of the Armenians reduced to ashes...

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## [A Survivor, To Her Savior]

Gevorg akhpar was seven or eight years old during the Armenian Genocide, and now he remembered quite well how they took away his father how they kidnapped his sister (my grandmother), Verzhin Hazarian, from the exile caravan. He remembered so many atrocities, plunder, pillage, crying, and wailing. He remembered the corpses of Armenians on the roadside on which carnivorous birds were feeding

And now he was going there where these atrocities had taken place. He reached Arabkir, their village. He found their house; he walked up and down the house several times, watched the house where his mother had given him birth, where his childhood had passed. It seemed to him that here was a piece of his soul in them. A bleary-eyed old man was watching him. Gevorg akhpar saw in him the killer of his grandfathers, the usurper of their former house. He wanted to fight him, but he controlled himself. The fear of being an Armenian was in his heart. The village, where his sister had been married to [that] mukhtar, was not far. He did not know what to do. He couldn't knock at any door, he couldn't enter any house to eat something. He took a deep breath; "God, help me," he said and went to the village fountain. He couldn't believe his eyes when he saw an old woman by the fountain, for she looked so much like his sister. "That's her, that's her," thought Gevorg akhpar. In spite of so many years – fifty-seven years had passed – they recognized each other. That was the voice of blood, which spoke in them. The moment their gazes embraced each other they shivered. Their weak knees began to tremble.

The old woman got confused. Her pitcher in her hand, her frozen gaze on the man, she was dumbfounded. She did not know what to do. Their feelings were all upside down: they wanted to rush to each other, to hug each other, kiss each other; how long they had missed each other, but no one should see them. There, by the fountain, they whispered something to each other; they understood each other. They would meet in the darkness of the night.

The ninety-year-old woman kissed her grandchildren for the last time, put them to bed and walked out of the house where she had lived for fifty-seven years. Grandma Verzhin was in deep emotion.

Her memories went back for many decades. She saw a nation which had taken the road of death. She began to shudder. She closed her eyes tightly, but her ears heard the toll of the falling bells, the call of flowing blood. With closed eyes she saw how Armenian maidens were being raped. She saw how, enchanted by her beauty, they had taken her away from their caravan, while she was crying and struggling: "No, I don't want, I'll die." Now, again, they were pulling her by the arm, but this time it was her brother. Verzhin shivered and came round; she regained her consciousness; she walked, leaning on her brother's arm. She walked, carrying the cross of the Armenians on her shoulder. They reached the Syrian border and from there they went to Aleppo.

When they asked her why she had come, what she had seen, she would say: “What shall I tell you, son, I’ve seen a lot. I’m over one hundred years old now. I’m from Arabkir. My husband’s name was Khacher. From him I had three children. Two of them now live in Armenia with their children and grandchildren. During the massacre we had paid a great ransom for my husband, and I was so glad. But the evil day came, and they gathered all the males of the village and took them away. They did not come back, for they had been slaughtered. We saw a lot of sufferings; the Turks had decided to kidnap me but my father-in-law gave me to the village moukhtar in marriage. I cried a lot but I remained. From him I had three sons. I lived there for fifty-seven years, but I said my Armenian prayer, I worshipped my Armenian God. I got news from those who came and went that my brother lived in Aleppo. So, I came here to die as an Armenian.”

## Woman With The Issue of Blood

At all hours, wine  
feathered through fabric,  
seeping, in sleep,  
through my shawl and bedroll.  
Between thighs, a dark iris  
swelled purple,  
pruny, oozing  
the black dregs  
of yesterday's grape,  
at all hours inking my skirt hem,  
at all hours, siphoning  
rosiness from my skin.

Twelve years unclean,  
I'd touched no one, been touched  
only grudgingly. When I brushed  
against that Nazarene's fringe,  
how many onlookers  
washed their hands of me?

All paused then. Nosing earth, I waited  
for stones to batter me, but instead  
my trickle slowed, coarse hands  
raised me gently. He looked  
a nobody, with crows-feet furrowed  
around walnut eyes,  
lips peeling in the heat.  
He but spoke, and my elders  
walked on, curved around me  
as water around stone,  
none touching, though their eyes  
lingered.

Who was he  
to call it faith—  
my daily emptying  
of purse and womb, that final reaching  
for a crowd to hurl stones, crush

my bones—anything  
just to stop feeling  
pain? I stood numb and watched  
the people crawl like bees,  
sun lighting up their edges,  
and the sky cloudless—clean  
and bare and terrifying.

## **Walking Past Dusk**

A woman walking alone  
spreads her shoulders broad and struts  
bitch-glaring like she owns streets  
she's never seen. Swinging a bottle  
with the heft of a flail, she tells roommates  
to expect her at 11:38, selects at random  
her route, sometimes: "hide  
in hair salon," "hail a cab," "light up  
every button in the lift."

Tonight, she carries only  
her black belt heart,  
and rounds the same block twice,  
listening for footfalls.  
Earbuds silent, she hears only the hiss  
of hydroplaning, the city's breathing.  
The sky is a denim haze,  
empty of stars, and still  
as bath water or tea steeping.

## How She Sleeps At Night

### I. Mother

She pounds the mattress  
while her baby's squalling grates  
her ears. A fluffed pillow  
muffles the small  
caterwaul. And she stays put. Enough time,  
and her baby will learn not to cry  
as dogs learn not to bark.

### II. Daughter

It's true, her eyes learn to skip  
over mother, a record needle bumping past  
a gash in vinyl, while her small pudgy hands  
accept cake from nameless neighbors. Alone,  
she's kicking acorns dinging up those ruby

ballet-flats her mother throws out,  
or buying barbies at yard sales with nickels picked  
from gutters, 'till finally she's found by her  
who feels erased from her child's drawing,  
never wondering, *was it my fault?*

The child runs barefoot into wetlands  
behind the house, runs straight  
through brambles that snag and cut.  
She crawls smudged with earth and worm  
into the blackberries, crooning.

## Concerto In C Minor

The eighties:

I am not yet born. In the country,  
my father plucks apples on a ladder  
while in a suburb, my mother listens  
to Rachmaninov, large-handed genius.  
Neither thinks of the other  
though both worlds teem  
with cat fur and acne,  
summer sneezes, and eighty-eight  
piano keys.

Perhaps, in another universe  
they never meet. She never teaches  
his hands to curve  
over black notes. Instead,  
she becomes the concertina.  
Never a doctor, he opens  
the sandwich shop, stays rat poor  
and happy. There is no ending:  
she never says *motherhood*  
*was a mistake*, never feels her spirit  
obliterated by a child's coo.

In that world, her soul expands  
to fill every building she enters. Like smoke  
piling above a candle put out,  
her fragrance seeps into drywall,  
and lingers in students' clothing. Her name  
is lauded everywhere, her opinion  
asked. At night, the moon gleams  
on her roof tiles like stage light,  
and neighbors breastfeeding  
in the cupped palms of armchairs  
hear for hours her heady vibrato, hear  
how she never stops singing.



## How It Was

Did it begin with crockery shards  
on our kitchen floor? Your belt  
cracking my skin? Did it creep  
slowly like numbness  
or fat? There one day, long  
stretch marks squiggling  
a thigh, an ankle sprained  
with no cause? Did it begin with me  
saying no, or the silent yes  
of doing as bidden?

Or did it begin in April,  
your daisies eaten by rabbits  
while I waddled over shag,  
drooling, gnawing Granny Smiths  
and cheddar? Did it begin  
with the blizzards that froze  
engines, with the sludge smearing  
your carpet, my baby prints  
in your candle wax, rats clawing  
at boards beneath our house?

Perhaps it began with you  
sleeping in my bed, or me  
sleeping in the closet.  
Was it when I bit hard  
into your skin, and your hand  
lashed my face, that it began?  
And was it love  
or mercy that so tethered us?

Perhaps it began further back,  
with your red-haired brother  
who vanished from conversations,  
magnolias on your mother's coffin,  
she who poured her father's  
bourbon down drains?  
Him, the World War soldier

stranded three years  
on that nameless island  
only to find his wife  
had married another? Was it Great-  
grandfather fleeing Armenia  
on foot?

## Red Cedar To The Gardener

You've fed me  
water from a tube, cut  
Maisie's name into my coat,  
and buried your cats  
between my roots.  
I swallowed them  
the way I swallow fungi  
and toxins, your water—  
it is all too much. But I devour  
every gift, and if I could speak  
your language,  
I couldn't say to you  
*I never wanted*  
*to be fed.* Not while I guzzle  
your every breath.

In the loam, I crawl  
comfortably blind,  
my clawed feet twining  
with sisters, trading sugar  
for minerals. I hear everything:  
tirade of wind,  
toothed machines, wires buzzing—  
the silence of soil.  
I love the quiet, feeling  
my way around stones,  
dipping in and out of the water line.

As root rot creeps  
into me, my flat fingers  
turn umber and drop dry  
at your feet. You hear  
none of it. How should you  
when you hardly hear  
your own body speaking?  
You shovel and groan, knead  
your supple boughs, or plant yourself  
against my skin and prattle  
like a tireless brook, or look

for God in your bark pages.  
Many days, our shadows  
have melded like clouds,  
growing long over the grass.

If I could speak, I'd tell you  
there is nothing sweeter  
than to live on this earth  
sipping water with you  
beneath my curved arms,  
slender crook-staffs  
herding sun.

## Sisters

Ever since the rage water  
ate up our pine ground,  
we've grown  
                    slanted, our torn up  
roots weaving into one another:  
a thousand grey-brown  
fingers that cinch tighter  
under the heft of our leaning  
trunks. Bent crooked, our mossy necks  
press skyward, refusing to sink  
where the river surges against  
our roots, eating silt, eating grubs,  
black mud. In fog,  
white envelops our branches.

## **Our planet angles her curve toward shadow**

outside branches snag the sill  
birds peck seed  
then flash into wind  
silence overhangs houses and schools  
as the last light trickles below the tree-line

we set our clocks forward as if  
more time  
were enough

candles burn longer into night  
mildew blackens  
window panes where beetles curl  
and die with twilight

leaves drift apart  
like sisters  
their once-warm colors melting  
into sidewalks and imprinting there like  
ghosts

### **Rabbit Shelter in Autumn**

Why this breakneck beating here, these headlong moth wings  
fluttering under skin, quieter than breath clouding  
a window? When I sit  
at the pond's edge twirling spotted leaves,  
and stand sudden (birds *caw* into mist),  
my heartbeats mimic the whirl of wings.

Not a sound, but vibration:  
as when I lie, my ear on the cleft earth listening  
to her hum, rabbits bounding, wind droning  
against brittle sage—*woah-woah*, sounds so soft  
it's easy to miss their muffled pulses.

I scoop the black one from her pen (french lop),  
her itty countdown drumming while she  
tucks her head, grips my wrist. Her long foot slips,  
hind narrowing: who will stop her fall, prey-animal,  
who can slow the agitated heart,  
pattering wild, pattering hushed?

## **Dear One, Floating in My Calm Round**

You must have heard  
my dumb sobs muted by a dim  
under-water thumping  
like far trucks passing.  
You leaped a little  
with each heave.

Soon you too  
will wail like this. Your first cold breath  
will sting your lungs  
(parched pink by fluid clearing),  
and the quiet—  
white peaks pricking  
a black sky—that alone  
will leave you squalling for days.



**Rosa Bonheur, Her Ménagerie**

She chopped her hair at the chin,  
styled it wild like cuts on the men

she out-drew. Her language grew  
from the sounds of animals she knew

in childhood. Like so: ass begins with A, blackbird  
with B. Later on, real hoof-prints smeared

the floors of her home, which she filled with goats  
and chickens, canaries and quail. Their molts

warded off guests, society's mess. In everything,  
there was fur, left for her like little winks

atop buttons of paint she'd spill  
while staring too long into sheep's eyes, obsidian wells,

or after sinking her palms into their matted wool.  
In everything she knew, there was a soul.

## Carpenter Bee

O, small thing lying in the pavement crack:  
exoskeleton of black,  
wings like window-panes glinting  
in soft light. I lift you white-fingered  
from the ridge of ant dung, weeds, detritus—

In the hollow of hands split  
by over-washing, you settle  
like a street penny  
borne home to bumblebee fuzz  
and hornets,

shaved wasps  
preserved in glass  
little jagged-limbed paintings—  
so that when bees stop falling  
I will still remember.

Ruskin kept insects in bottles,  
shelved moths among books and flowers  
while the aroma of wild garlic bled into pages,

into insect bodies and upholstery fibers.  
In his house I saw myself reflected:  
the compulsion to carry home the whole earth.

O, small thing lying in the pavement crack—  
today I find your body peppered by wind,  
limbs strewn apart from thorax, split head,  
the four wings like scattered glass. No one will notice.  
Tomorrow you become part of the earth.

## **Daughter**

When you died,  
words grew hazy, changed  
their meanings. Now

grief  
is a dry riverbed, desolate  
with shells and echoes of birdcry  
or the wails we made in your place.

Shell  
is what's left when a body shrivels:  
collected in smog, a permanent testament  
to impermanence.

Smog  
is my mind on migraine; nebulous,  
it is the nameless pulp  
of you, never born.

Daughter  
you were gravity, a cosmic glow accreting  
lucent skin and heart thumps,  
sable hair and self.

Self  
is the breath I leave floating  
as I rush alone  
from grief to grief.

## **Walking Alone**

I watch chickadees scratching at the cedars.  
Walking barefoot through weeds,  
or over sun-cracked earth, I crave sleep.  
Under cottonwoods I hear creaking  
like the slow opening of a door at night.

To hamper sneaking, my father once pulled  
my door from its hinges. So often he'd lay  
with his bald head furrowing my quilt,  
the weight of him holding me until still.

Mallards splash into flight  
when I walk near their water, bleating  
like gleeful girls. Sinking my naked toes  
into moss, chilled sponge, I walk through thistles  
and nettles. I let them raze my raw skin.

If caught laughing at night, I slept  
on grainy concrete beside our hatch-back,  
spine rigid, my ears probing  
for the door's soft moan, my father's mild tread.

Some days now, my terrier will seize and fall  
from the couch, his legs stiff and shaking,  
those sepia eyes bulging with alarm. I will hold him  
until still. Still, I hear doors creaking in the trees  
and in the night, and still, I miss my father.

## Holding

He comes to me with coral tongue.  
Paws the size of thumbs  
scratch at my frayed pant-leg, a good dog.  
Dark coffee eyes, he huffs for a glimpse out the high  
window. I lift him, cradle his small  
bum in the crook of my arm.  
While his eyes rove zigzags over thistle  
and canola, his stiff ears twitch  
at thrushes nipping among leaves. The hollow  
in my stomach shrinks: hours  
scrubbing tiles, pining for the door's lisp, my husband  
tripping over the step. For a long time we watch—  
the dog and I—how the Idaho wind  
sends weeds barrelling through the yard.

**Hi neighbor,**

I pause reading to listen  
when your laugh echoes  
in our tinny stairwell—  
if lemonade  
were a sound! Heel-first,

a kind of urgency  
I can't match on crutches,  
though my ceiling bumps along  
to your steps. What enervates  
your feet like that?

What predilection  
awaits you bounding up  
those stairs? Dogeared book—  
your mother's  
sewing machine—a bowing

peace lily? How can I say:  
*I'd like to meet you*  
*passing beneath maple*  
*boughs?* Ha! Imagine me  
tottering beside you  
with your wide,  
chirpy stride.

## **A Brief History of My Failings**

I'll never write a poem  
that rivals a Pootoo bird's song,  
never birth a child who walks,  
(like you) tipping as if ready to fall  
right through the ground. I won't dance  
the Balboa with you, or sing  
with our tea kettle's gall.  
I won't hear when you call me  
beautiful, or ask the name  
of that marshy, hot-dog plant.

I'll promise to go far  
in therapy, but hoard  
loneliness like I hoard plastic spoons  
and half-dead orchids.  
I'll interrupt you mid-  
sentence, mid life-  
crisis. I'll bead the kitchen floor  
with basmati rice, splotch our bathroom  
with menstrual blood, garnish  
our rug with little bits of paper  
and string. I will drench our couch  
in echinacea tea, and lose that damned  
crochet hook every seven minutes.

I'll forget to eat breakfast, burn lentils  
to black, or cool oatmeal  
for two days. I'll forget  
your birthday or the day  
we met: how incidentally,  
our backpacks matched  
how a bird swooped through rain  
into the Dublin airport,  
and the wind mingled ozone  
with nicotine.

## Diagnosis

26 yr/o female  
complains of clouds in her brain  
and bad writing  
too neat she wraps her poems  
in tissue paper and twine  
shows too much and never tells  
she's too attached  
to pretty words and worse  
sprinkles commas like salt  
she can't resist  
obscure allusions to allodynia  
or the victorian hair-rat  
likes old words so much she's tempted  
to write in bonnie scots  
cocky enough to try  
and freeze her voice in amber  
she writes at the pace  
of a slug and does it with one thumb  
tapping a screen while she lies  
cozied under blankets  
wearing only panties  
and holey socks  
a most unpoetic lady