

A Drop in the Sea

Armenian
Contemporary
Prose



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BEFORE SUNRISE

for h.s.

The long silence is broken by a buzz of invading words about how the day stretches like a deformed piece of chewing gum. You lost the taste between your teeth, leaving behind a couplet: you bled like the fountains of Julfa when I had just returned from Kars. And the little boy poked around in the bloody pit with a wooden ice cream stick, dividing it in two like the Red Sea, performing a unique miracle. You bled after the gym with your ripped muscles from the heavy weights, and with that sweaty mole on your eyelid from the treadmill, and after Paris, when you threw up in the courtyard of the most beautiful museum and washed yourself with the water of a drinking fountain.

At the beginning of the city are people sitting near mounds of garbage, who, gazing idly and bitterly through a terrible cloud of construction dust immediately recognize you as a foreign el-

ement standing by the newly erected red buildings. Among the ruins that surround me, towers have risen. Cats meow lazily in their shade. But Kars begins with the fortress and ends at the front of the door of the Apostolic church. I wrap myself in a flowery cloth, and I'm given permission to enter. When I enter I will ask: "Father of mine, are you still here?"

You don't believe in any kind of salvation, because the premature fetus was removed from you and thrown into an empty bucket. From the beginning, I accepted the continuation of your birth and played with your dense hair when the kerchief of the woman on the motorcycle rippled in the air and prevented the crows from flying. She squints at people, flees, and again pushes herself towards the man, and like a mongoose boy a miracle arises: she silently approaches my rocking chair sunk in the sand of the lakeshore to serve fresh fish soup. Like a tiny-hooved animal leaving a weak track on soft sand, she climbs up the spiral staircase of the minaret decorated with mosaics in a thousand colors, turning around on every tread to make sure they follow her to the top, to look from the highest point at the little sea and the clustered island in the distance that calls them, with its inner peals of Sunday bells, to come by ferry with rowing natives who have woven legends about the island and about love.

In the evenings, when the hounded trolleybus makes its routine rounds to reach its final destination, nightclubs turn on their red lights, and posters of women with raised hips appear in the windows. We reach the square by circumventing pickpockets, thieves, dark and narrow passages, and male prostitutes who wait for phone calls, because "slut" is not, in any way, a female monopoly.

“Don’t rape that woman.”

“...?”

“She’s got AIDS.”

The squares never intersect, never disappear – they are crowded with foreigners, with children, with crying women, with fountains that sprinkle salty drops out of the weakness of women born out of their inability to give love. Crying is one of women’s habits, not crying is an expression of conceit, thinking that the exception belongs to me and that I have easily found the otherness of existence, ending up in a nursing home, without children, dreaming of white foamy bread in oblivion: loneliness is me. Now you’re probably roaming the streets in the hopes of finding a job, in the absence of your former friends, without the familiar noisy greetings, with your indecisive gaze cast down on your unfastened buckles. You continue to walk monotonously – be careful, don’t fall: he is inside of you. Feel the rumble of the underground train with the whole surface of your feet. Moving in unclear directions, the trains transport unusually large, waterproof containers – their expiration date, eternity. They give authority to the people, they turn them into widows, they destroy high-rise buildings, they rip the earth’s ozone layer. The crust of the earth shakes with the rumble of the state-owned trains, but the governmental bodies are too busy with their electoral campaigns. It is imperative to follow the safety instructions, to turn off televisions during lightning storms, leave behind a half-watched movie, and go to the elections without knowing the details of the candidates’ biographies. Your name on the voters’ list is next to those of dead people, and before the law, with equal rights, you will cast your vote, because it is no longer possible

to live without the hope of rebirth, when half-naked Venuses wonder at the beauty of their bodies under the secret gaze of sturdy men peering from behind thick curtains. M. follows me from the fifth floor of the opposite apartment block, especially when I open the fridge and hold up an entire portion of nutrition in front of him – enough to sustain me for a few more days. Crashed face down on the bed, I'm shaking with fear. Answer my call, please, I want to tell you that the mosque in Yazd has been blown up. There will still be earthquakes.

Highlanders with fur hats are sitting around a fire cleaning the barrel of their guns and counting the cartridges that they will point at their targets – emptying them into somebody or some bodies. The sparks of fire spatter all around them. Come, let's go up the mountain and eat freshly slaughtered meat. Before the last sunrise, let's form a circle and go around the fire. You move to the middle of the circle and voluntarily rotate your arms, a white embroidered handkerchief squeezed between your fingers. Woman – this or that way you're beautiful – don't turn yourself over to debauchery and gentle smiles. The smooth caresses from all sides are ready to destroy your identity on the couch.

Ostra was saying: an Indian man rejects mercy and, at the solstice, the mercy of a kneeling mendicant next to a mound of fruit is vindictive; he demands retribution for all those who harmed his family. I hate my homeland before the elections. The streets are overrun by crowds of people cheated out of the promise of a good life. After the elections, behind trees and under thatched roofs, sheltered people are killed, left behind like ashes in urns. Newspapers keep silent. Only a handful of witnesses speak to foreigners. Ostra smoked the whole time she

spoke. We had already agreed on the meeting place, the day, the type of cigarettes, but I never met her again. Under the pretext of studying abroad, she never returned to her abandoned homeland; she probably went to the other side of the ocean, hoping to establish a life on a new continent, surrounded by people with unrestrained morals.

Each of us is led to our own hospital, curled up in our own case. The membrane will scratch its way out one day to be photographed in black underwear for the first page of a magazine. Carelessly sitting on the window sill with tightly sealed lips, she holds back her laughter. Her tights border her bent knees. Instead of her absent eyes, the tights end the last miracle that differentiates them from the reflection in the glass. She'll come out to dig her hand in the sun-cracked soil, to tear off a piece of volcanic lava, and to convince herself that powerful civilizations fell, like Pompeii and Herculaneum. She approached the end of her own world, independent of the heretical prophecies, the result of uncultured deliberations. Like rain, they fall on those who often look up to the sky, substituting the blessing of the Supreme Being during the hunting. They follow on the heels of the leopard who has thrown its orangey coat with black spots on the oak dining table as a festive tablecloth for the guests coming to dinner. Like your skin, exhausted from persecution, it has lost the most important ability – to recover. The old scars have already become history and call to mind past descents. I swaddled you in white bandages when you bled at my feet with your helpless body. I rub the medicinal remedy into the deepest wounds and wait for your rebirth, because resurrections have happened in the past – Lazarus, for example, and now those will

be resurrected who are ready to fly off a bridge without letting out a screech. A sensitive woman commits suicide; a thinking woman slowly drowns in eternal sorrow in the streets of Kars.

A donkey tied to a cart gently descends a slope. A woman pierced up to her eyes, sitting cross-legged, quietly sways out of her eternal immobility, like an evil-eye amulet, now from the bumpiness on the road, now from the thoughtless lashes directed at the donkey by its owner. The narrow streets skirt the antiquity of the city, running past flat-roofed houses made of river stones and baths with sharp-edged domes. A white-bearded old man was telling legends about a soldier who had died of an enemy bullet during the defense of the fortress. He swung his cane in the air and simultaneously rained down curses on the killer's heirs and on their own heads into all eternity. The everyday *namaz* carpet was worn, and children with bare feet were running after me screaming in English: "Kars Castle! Our Kars Castle!" The city choking with mosques rises before me in all her otherness and quietly reminds me that I either have to abandon her or to conquer her all over again. I hurry away from Kars, the tall buildings, the church, and the old man, to return, to bathe in the baths, to be cursed again, and to live in the city.

I never thought that the coinciding rumble of shots would shake all the mountaintops with that kind of force. The impression was such that it seemed as if they had been waiting for a long time for that day. They had prepared patiently, and now the wrath of the highlander erupted like a volcano. The never-ending line of the underground trains wasn't that unbearable. It's as if it had received its own justification, especially after the plans of the new station: the architect was whispering that it should be

built so the trains that don't know how to swim in the sea can climb the mountains. At least one time, one last time...

I look for your name on the list of victims growing day by day promising myself that if you die I will torment your body, I will steal it and take it to my hiding place, where you will never be found. I will tightly lock the lid of the coffin on the inside, and lying shoulder to shoulder, we will talk in whispers about politics. The white balloons soaring in the air suffered a sudden death from the burning fire.

I hear a screech. Victory, a new baby is born! A woman throws herself off a bridge.

Then silence and something remarkable: yearning.

Translated by Nairi Hakhverdi