SONA VAN

**A LIBRETTO FOR THE DESERT**

POEMS

Dedicated to the centenary of the Armenian Genocide

Translated by Shushan Avagyan

Yerevan 2015

INSTEAD OF AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Each time when with a leap of imagination I begin walking with the human convoys marching to their death in the Der Zor desert, or with the activation of my sensory ability my breasts feel the cold weight of a newborn child because there is no more milk left in them, or due to my emotional memory I start panting like a virgin girl running away from the sword, my complacent pen, charged with fury, coils through the yellow memory of sand until it hits the first bone and halts. That is when a skull inside of me cackles loudly, mocking my audacity that I might know anything about the beastly form of human abjection and the deviant measure of this unutterable suffering, and that I might know it all so well that I might dare to translate this experience into concrete lines and forms. And because I strongly believe that nobody has the right to touch this subject except for the survivor who has witnessed the event, I tear my writing into pieces and throw it in the garbage can like someone caught red-handed. I am certain that this attempt at an autobiography rooted in the Medz Eghern (Great Catastrophe) would have a similar fate if its recipients were my pretentious imagination or my ranting muse and not the silence of the jaws filled with sand for a hundred years, the alarming reality and the impaired, synthetic murmur of the river of blood.

I was born in Yerevan, in the family of the physicist Anushavan Ter-Hovhannisian. My father was born in Van and he must have been one or two years old in 1915 when his family escaped to the town called Nor Bayazed (present-day Gavar) in Eastern Armenia. His father, Hovhannes Ter-Hovhannisian, was a priest in Van who had studied religion and philosophy in Germany. His mother, Mariam, was the daughter of a wealthy merchant from Adana. They arrived in Nor Bayazed with their three children—my father, his brother, Hrachya, who was seven or eight years old, and their eighteen-year-old sister, Pepronia. They had also brought with them two of their three servants, Mekhak, who had nowhere else to go and who had become part of their family, and Vahan, with whom Pepronia had fallen in love and to whom she was betrothed. The other servant, Berfin, who was Turkish, had stayed behind in my grandfather’s house and promised to look after the property till their return. Seeing that it was impossible to change my aunt’s decision, in terms of the unsuitability of her choice of a husband, my grandfather had sent Vahan to Constantinople to study banking and accounting, and he was still there when the political persecutions began. After the third house search, my grandfather, who had been blacklisted, was taken to prison “for using the church as a gathering place for political meetings, for hiding weapons, and for preaching revolt.” As an intellectual who knew many languages and who was one of the most authoritative men in the region, my grandfather had many non-Armenian friends and followers, one of whom was a Turkish mullah named Mustafa, who was a frequent guest in my grandfather’s house. My grandfather mentions Mustafa in his diary, describing him as “a brilliant mind and a man of free thought, who had not lost his reason in an atmosphere of fanatics and had preserved his conscience among the beasts . . .” Mustafa grew up in a family of government officials and had powerful ties in the legal system. At the time, his son, Said, was studying at a German military academy. Knowing about the plan of the Young Turk Party “to get rid of minorities,” the mullah had warned my grandfather a while back, but the atmosphere had seemed peaceful then and the Armenians believed they were under the protection of the Turkish and German governments. There was a rise in social and cultural activism and that also seemed suspicious to my grandfather, so he tried to warn his people, tell them that something horrible was happening on the other side of the curtain. The government found out about his actions and my grandfather became an unwanted element. Mustafa was also aware of the situation and he was asking my grandfather “to leave for Europe on the next ship.” The idea of abandoning his people for the sake of saving his own life was a betrayal for my grandfather: “I couldn’t live with myself.” He had not yet recovered from the Adana massacres during which his father, who was also a priest, had been killed on the threshold of his church. His wife’s mother and her twin sisters had also been killed during those massacres. Mustafa was trying to persuade my grandfather that he couldn’t change the course of events and would lose his life and put his family at risk. Mustafa warned my grandfather that thousands of criminals had been freed from the prison to form killing squads. Soon after, one of those Turkish militiamen arrived at my grandfather’s house and found him in the corner of his big garden with a beekeeper’s net over his face. (Beekeeping was one of my grandfather’s favorite pastimes. He believed that the beehive was the prototype of an ideal society. He had brought two books with him from Germany, a guide for beekeepers and a book on theology and ethics, which my physicist father called “the anatomy of sin.”) The armed man was about to arrest my grandfather when he was attacked by bees. As my grandfather joked, “God has a thousand ways of saving a person if it is His will.” During their next visit, the militiamen didn’t find my grandfather in the house. He had gone to the cemetery to pray. After searching the house and not finding anything, the youngest of the militiamen noticed my aunt’s wedding dress hanging on the wall and mocked her for having “an appetite for love, when the world is out for blood.” “Let people fight if they want to fight, and let people love if they want to love,” my aunt retorted spontaneously as though speaking to herself. The militiaman crumpled the veil and kicking the household cat left with a promise not to be so generous next time.

When my grandfather returned from the cemetery and learned about the incident, he realized how serious things had become, although he hid his anxiety by making a joke: “I have been praying to the living God my whole life, but it was a stranger’s tomb that came to my rescue in this critical hour.” When his friend Mustafa heard about the visit, he urged my grandfather again to leave the country with his family: “We both know that this is not a time for philosophizing but a time to save yourself and your family. Don’t wait to be saved a third time. Believe me, the worst is yet to come. And don’t think that it is easy for me to lose you; I can’t stand the thought of enduring the great loss of our friendship,” Mustafa said with great emotion. My aunt, on the other hand, was completely unperturbed by the visit of the militiamen and after the initial scare went back to her wistful state of anticipation, arranging and rearranging the wooden bureau her mother had given her as a present (this is the same oval-shaped bureau made of expensive wood that my grandfather managed to transport along with other family belongings, such as carpets and books, to Eastern Armenia where it is currently exhibited in the Gavar Museum as part of the exposition “Armenian Ancestral Homes in Van”). “Soon Vahan will return from Constantinople and nothing will stand between us and perfect happiness,” my aunt thought. But her time for love, beauty and happiness had coincided with the bloody games of the world powers. Jumping up at every approaching footstep, she waited in vain for her beloved to come with flowers in his hands.

Instead, the door was kicked open by militiamen. The armed men forced themselves into the house, but my grandparents were not at home. My aunt was engaged in her morning toilette. One of the men went to search in the other wings of the house, while the younger man, whom my aunt recognized from the last visit, stayed with her in the room. “Where is your wedding dress,” the man had asked with derision looking at the veil. “Did they already cut the throat of your betrothed?” “My betrothed is not in town, and my wedding dress is in the wardrobe,” my aunt answered like a good student, feeling confused and not really understanding the connection between the weapons they were searching and the wedding dress. The criminal opened the wardrobe and lifting the dress with his gun, said to my aunt: “Put it on.” Not understanding what was going on, my aunt asked him naively: “Are you going to kill me?” The militiaman mumbled retorts coupled with insulting swears, “The Sultan wouldn’t forgive me, you are a great item for the harem.” He then pushed her against the wall: “Put it on, I said!” Finally realizing what was going on, my aunt tried to free herself by offering the criminal her golden necklace, hoping that the Turkish servant, Berfin, would enter the room with a tray of tea and this whole nightmare would come to an end. But when Berfin entered the room after hearing Pepronia’s loud screams, it was already too late: my aunt was on the floor, the wedding dress on her was all ripped and she was lying on the carpet with an open bleeding chest, nearly passed out. “Allah will punish you! You’ve spilled an innocent person’s blood!” Berfin shouted in anger and knelt beside my aunt. “You’re the one who’ll be punished for bowing down to an infidel, you dog!” Looking at their watches, the militiamen left, as Berfin was trying to bring my aunt back to her senses. After bandaging her chest, Berfin went to see Mustafa to ask for some help.[[1]](#footnote-1)\*

When Mustafa learned about the attack, he brought the family to his house and hid them there. That same evening two militiamen had gone to the church, and found and arrested my grandfather. They tied his eyes and arms and put him in a carriage. All the while, he was trying to guess by which roads they were taking him in order to stay alert. Although in the end it didn’t really matter where they were taking him or what kind of hell they had prepared for him. My grandfather, who had linked his dignity and fate with the dignity and fate of his people, and who was prepared to sacrifice himself for the sake of his flock, cared little about his final destination.

They pushed him into a cell and, after untying his hands and eyes, mocked him: “You are free now. Call on your God as much as you like.” “There was only one chair, a small rug for praying, a metal washbasin clumsily attached to the wall, and a disproportionately large and dirty mirror,” my grandfather wrote in his diary. They took off his clerical frock and other garments, cut his hair and shaved his beard, using the frock as a barber’s cape, and gave him a prisoner’s uniform. Then they threw the hair-covered frock onto the floor, next to my grandfather’s cross and Bible, which a soldier had taken before tying his hands. “When they left the cell I approached the dirty mirror and looked at myself—a different man was staring back at me. I didn’t recognize him. I was there, strewn on the floor under the frock. I had become invisible. The thought terrified me at first, then it excited me. Being invisible was liberating . . . It’s so good that I am not this man. That these things are not happening to me.” This is how my grandfather tried to construe the terrible loss of his identity. Then he heard the accusations of his keepers, who shouted: “You are charged with political treason. Not even your God hanging from the cross will be able to save you from punishment.”

Next day everything changed: “If they only could, they would glue my beard and hair back into place,” wrote my grandfather, certain that his friend Mustafa had interceded on his behalf. They moved him into a bigger cell with more light, where there were not only a table and a bed but also books, journals, backgammon and chess. They even offered him special food considering his stomach ulcer, which confirmed his guess that it was Mustafa’s doing. The first five weeks of his imprisonment were described as “being at a health spa,” and five weeks later, “weeks that coincided with the killings of Armenian intellectuals and the defense of Van,” my grandfather was freed and allowed to join his terrified family members hiding in Mustafa’s house. Kept in the dark while in prison, my grandfather learned belatedly about the deaths of much-loved writers and intellectuals, and heroes who had died defending his city, the city of Van, while he had been “sheltered in a place where [he] was able to keep a diet and read books.” They didn’t tell him about the incident with his daughter, that the Turkish barbarian had given her such incurable wounds with his knife and equally sharp teeth that the poor girl would never be able to overcome the trauma even after reaching the seemingly safe shore of the River Arax. My grandfather, who had been immersed in philosophy and theology, and who hadn’t even noticed that his beautiful daughter, his lovely child, had become a young lady and was in love, he didn’t known that she wouldn’t be able to breastfeed her child, wouldn’t experience the joys of her own body, its perfection, its miracle, which she had been anticipating with such a thrill and for which she was ready to relinquish everything and leave her ancestral land.

After their escape to Eastern Armenia, my aunt lost her firstborn, Narek, due to her chest injury. Having already once lost his identity in the Turkish prison, my grandfather mourned the emptiness and shame of the coming days, losing his faith in the possibility of following certain creeds or philosophies, and caring for his family at the same time. His diary is filled with desolate statements signaling the anguish and pain that he carried with him till the last days of his life: “A man who follows an idea has no right to form a family.” Also: “An idea ends where your child’s pain begins.” Or: “Those who perish are called dead, those who fall are called heroes, but what do they call those who live and feel ashamed for their existence?” he writes in a bitter tone. My grandfather, who was a lively conversant, who liked to read and was always cheerful, becomes reclusive in his new home and avoids all kinds of meetings, and calls everything empty, filled with air like a balloon, saying that ideas can only exist in books. He never wished to recover his priestly appearance or to keep a beard, he even rejected the prefix “Ter,” which indicates one’s service to the Lord: “*Ter* was left in that cell, on the floor, under my beard-strewn frock, between the cross and the Bible. *Ter* is someone who died on the cross. My father is a true Ter-Hovhannisian, he died under the cross with his people. What *Ter*-Hovhannisian am I?” He was overcome with despair: “There are many ways of not being, and being dead is the most painless of all.” Although the family had the means to travel to Europe, my grandfather chose to stay in Eastern Armenia, which was closer to their ancestral homeland, where he hoped to return. Mustafa had helped them get across to the border safely, escorting them in person and sparing nothing to make their passage comfortable. When parting, they hoped to see each other again in the future. Leaving their prosperous life behind, the family members embraced the difficult reality of exile. Life nevertheless continued.

It would seem that after their escape from Van the family would find security and a possibility for a dignified life on the other shore of the River Arax, but “the ghost of the barbarians,” who had authored many tangible and intangible wounds, had crossed the border with them hidden in the folds of their memory. Each member of the family had to wrestle individually with this horrific ghost until the very end of his or her life.

People continue to experience the Catastrophe in their individual lives. As my grandfather wrote in his typically laconic style: “. . . I got my share of the catastrophe in the form of salvation.”

Sona Van

I AM THE ETERNAL SPIDER

. . . yes, in spite of all,

Some shape of beauty moves away the pall

 From our dark spirits.

*—John Keats, from “Endymion”*

I AM THE ETERNAL SPIDER

I am the eternal

eight-legged spider

my web stretches between the window

and TV screen

*ad infinitum*

between the hollow time

of real and virtual deaths

I can see everything from my center—

a bud appeared on a branch

a pop star sang a familiar song

on TV

a woman gave birth to a son again

a soldier exploded

before the bud could fully open

you first see the light

then you hear the sound

(the laws of nature never change

unlike the laws of conscience)

the light

the sound

the dust

the shoes

a mother screams and falls down

the soil is an underground museum

here is a soldier four centuries after death

and here—only four hours after

everything repeats identically . . . which means

something must be wrong

I am the eternal mourner

in my four black veils

my grandfather was killed by a Turk

my father was killed by a German

my son was killed by an Azeri

and yesterday my daughter gave birth to a son

all killed

all killed

all killed

history repeats itself identically

it’s time to elect a new Barabbas

I am the four-part choir

of an eternal jeremiad

I am the velvety mezzo-soprano of a virgin

I am the lyrical tenor of a new bride

I am the restrained baritone of a widowed woman

I am the gruff bass of my cataracted grandmother

I am the eternal eight-thighed nothingness

my grandmother knelt and gave birth to a son

my mother knelt and gave birth to a son

I knelt and gave birth to a son

my daughter knelt and gave birth to a son

our sons crawl

 stand up

 and fall dead

the oceans need the drowned

I am the eternal dancer

of time

the same cabaret quartet

the same eight-thighed chain of muscles

and the same dance of death

beneath the flashing lights of guns

my grandmother bends her left knee and looks right

my mother bends her left knee and looks right

I bend my left knee and look right

my daughter bends her left knee and looks right

(how I hate these plagiarized knees)

I am the goddess of war

in a metal-hued

blood-red

camouflage skirt

with bombs instead of breasts

time touches my nipples

and falls down

I will always be around . . . that’s not the question

I just need four moods of sadness

and it’s summer here all year round

\* \* \*

The spring

anointed spy

in camouflage

concealed

like a tyrant

expands its borders

slowly

day by day

and

suddenly

a blood-scented flower

blooms at night—

the war

a metallic chessboard

the boys collide and fall down

with a clanging thud

the border

is on the asphalt

while under the ground

the bones of enemy soldiers

embrace

it’s spring . . . the scent of muscles

the eternal revelries of rats

that have been around since the world’s beginning

in the meantime the hordes of boys will move

slightly more to the north

like the bisons and . . . disappear

time is afraid of nothing but rodents

\* \* \*

My black sister

my sun-tanned

twin

I am still sold each night

by the same gene of slavery

still sleep with the one

whom I do not love

still sell my boys to the war

so they can kill those whom they don’t hate

girls with thick lips

also girls with slanted eyes

 in the cotton fields

or rice

my soul sisters from the whorehouse

our story is the same

 everywhere—

the struggle of innocence against the beast

I will string my words properly one day

and everyone will see at once

the true face of war

my groomed sisters

multiplying by thousands

 in the hairdresser’s mirror

drying your hair

under electric helmets—

poke out your heads

 like hesitant turtles

and I will tell you about

even hotter

 winds

 of the desert

about gas chambers and fire camps

 everywhere

*p.s.*

but in my dream—sisters—

you appear without the hair curlers

you have red faces—terrified

girls who have escaped from hell

and you drag the metal skeleton

of war to court

then together you turn around

with staccato clicks of heels

shaking acrylics in the air and

colorful butterflies from your nails

you leave the court—

and go out

to conquer the world with laughter.

THE WAR ON MY TELEVISION SCREEN

I push a button on the remote control

and I am served the war

along with my coffee

in bed

the shooting is soon interrupted

with an advertisement for a new

kind of lipstick

and then again

a gas mask is swinging from a nail

like an elephant’s trunk

it’s springtime . . . and yet

the blood-red like an aggressor

is gradually taking over my screen

that’s a fallen soldier

that’s not an unripe fruit

underneath the tree

spoiled from hale—

look at those leaves

sweating on the branches

as if they’ve fought all night long

it’s midnight . . . the TV turns off

stopping the metallic scream

of the soldier’s mother

I willingly believe

that I was watching

a movie

and

that now in the backstage

the solder is changing

in front of a mirror

collecting my hair to the side

I caress with my cheek the silk

of my new pillow

it’s springtime . . .

the Earth’s season of violets

is there not a single word

a sigh or a sound

that would put an end

to war at once

like a word before an orgasm

that suddenly ends

the love act?

but it’s still kindergarten

on my screen

the time after lunch

soldiers with childlike faces

lying next to each other in rows

under white sheets

as pure and hermetic

as snow

MY DAY ACCORDING TO THE REMOTE CONTROL

The day comes to an end—the curtain falls

at the usual hour automatically

darkening the screen and

the scream of the soldier’s mother

stops at once

in the lustful air of my bedroom

a hundred millennia had passed

in my dream

and a scientist with bat ears

was trying to decipher

the emails of our time

excited as much

as we are today

when we find a scribbling

in a cave

and

from a single hair preserved from a tail

he cloned again

the war horse

when I awoke from my dream

the war in Iraq

was still on—

an exotic serial drama

with real blood and deaths

made by a wealthy producer—

see the four women

waving their shawls in the air

shiny but not transparent

like the wings of a raven

bending over a corpse

*p.s.*

daybreak . . . the curtain opens automatically

and then the coffee-machine turns on

WAR ETUDE

Spring is here

first . . .

you hear

the long-awaited song

of the lovelorn bird

like a tune from a well-known ballet

then . . .

the false and tasteless

chamber music of the bombs

and my h-e-a-r-i-n-g

is paralyzed with impotence

supposedly it’s spring

and this is supposedly the sound of spring

I

turn four and a half times

on my right leg

ballet-style

silently

and turn my back

against the world

to show

my disgust

I am nauseated . . .

although supposedly it’s spring outside

and

the trees

are baring their buds

MY UNCLE A DISABLED WAR VETERAN

. . . He would spin his walking stick

demonstratively in the air

three times

every six steps

(he had turned his loss into a ceremony

not to lose the charm of his gait

of a triumphant colonel)

“In the north-east . . . below the river”

—he could show the exact coordinates

of his left leg on the map

\* \* \*

We were facing each other again in a dream

me and the devil of war—

the city has pushed its nipple

into my mouth

interrupting my complaint

to time

here

latched onto the wet nurse’s breast

I am afraid of everything—

rumors

about God’s death

the descent of flying objects

the thinning of the ozone layer

the dangerous gossip of princes

with empty rubber souls

that one day they will resurrect

but most of all I am afraid of war

I will put you in the corner

forever

o time of war

(like a teacher punishing a terrible child)

as soon

as my wet nurse

with her huge

silicone breasts

 falls asleep

\* \* \*

“The cancer

is back again

as expected

and now it has metastasized

everywhere,”

my mother said and wept

unexpectedly

while I thought

she was talking of God

and the Arrival

and

I’d already been secretly rejoicing

my father has been gone for many years now

(chemo . . . pain . . . nausea

radiation . . . headaches . . . death)

while I am in bed

now

with this stranger soldier

who will bomb Iraq stealthily

tomorrow at about this time

and

I remember my father

who had an answer

for everything

(mother only regulated the tone of his voice)

I remember my old worn

Santa Claus doll

stuck at the top of my closet

always falling on my head

unexpectedly

each time I would open the door

*p.s.*

the soldier bends over to kiss my smile

tenderly

and it has nothing to do

with war

father

or

Iraq

ALLAHU AKBAR

*(God is great)*

I am a common Armenian woman

my main character trait—

obedience—

I have worshipped all the gods

my lovers

(love makes me a democrat each time)

sometimes I have prayed to two rival gods

in a single day (to Christ in the morning and

five times to Allah by the mosque

with my head bent almost to the ground)

I remember Faris—

he was like an Egyptian pyramid

broad shoulders

a pointy hat underneath the sheets

he could whistle a tune

and sing another song at the same time—

was a prayer too hard for me?

I was ready to die for him

naked and shameless after making love

(we made love not approximately

but exactly fifty times

as he marked the wall with crosses)

his long hair

would get tangled

in the branches of a tree

he left for the war

to fight for me and the oil fields

and he came back home too soon

in a securely tight zinc box

I didn’t see him after that

he was covered with a star-spangled banner

and I would have liked so much

to wrap his body in linen wrappings

(soaked with the eternal oils of myrrh)

like an Egyptian mummy

I am almost home already

with the Only-born

farewell to you my city

of angels

my Faris

over there

down below an old man

is quietly separating light from darkness

with his shovel

perhaps he *is* the new God

\* \* \*

The soldier was motionless and not breathing

when the golden-haired doctor

came in

there was a promise of resurrection

in her eyes

like in the gaze

of a war goddess

I would’ve liked to be

in medieval Venice

when it was fashionable

to wear masks without occasion

and walk from St. Peter’s Basilica

to St. Mark’s Square

barefooted

and

burn the effigy

of war

(I have been traveling like a pirate for a while

with a black eye-patch across my face

half the number of the dead is enough

to turn me mad—

my heart would burst if it doubled)

God

how many more will have to explode

on this street

for us to call it the “end of the world”?

(why is this number not in the Bible?)

my head will erupt

if I don’t squeeze my temples with my palms

my brain will burst in a fountain—

for in my dream

Kafka is pacing in a small room

and moaning as always

angry Baudelaire is ripping

the thousand-colored flowers of evil

with his back turned Charents

is urinating on the carved door of heaven

it’s morning . . . I wake up in my bed

to see a new explosion on the screen

are the soldier and the doctor

making love

or are they lying dead

embraced in each other’s arms?

A SERIOUS DREAM

Women—

if you don’t want war

don’t look at the soldier

 with admiration

and you’ll see how he’ll put

 his shiny arms

 down

 without delay

as if a child asking for attention

I close my eyes and the boys

are fighting with water guns

 and when the golden field sways

 over the cracked sands of the desert

 it’s the *sabre dance* next

and the boys are fighting

 against locusts

 or they’re driving them out one by one

with giant

multicolored fans

 there is my hero—

 Mushegh

with the most locusts in his bag

my heart is yours

 from now on

hold me tight

let’s make love till dawn

 in the fields of wheat

 that you just saved

*p.s.*

I have a thousand scenarios like this for war’s death

MY FAULT

My dream—

 a wintry battlefield

a shot is heard

 and the snow turns red

 in one spot

it’s the same face in camouflage

 half-smiling

he must have remembered something nice

 before his death

but it’s my fault

 that you are dead now

my mind awoke too late

I should have hid you

 under the tent of my carnival skirt

and I should have told him—

the man who had been patiently leaning against the door

 waiting

(I still can’t figure out what happened . . .

where did the other stocking go?)

in my theatrical voice

 weeping:

 Hamlet—

 o he is no longer with us

 your death is an inflated rumor

 you know how I dislike such tasteless things

 in a dream—o Hamlet

it’s the same person each time

I tear the black piece of paper

 each night

 and leaning over my balcony

 almost split into two

I scatter the pieces in the air like snow

 and wait for you to return

 in vain

 in vain

 one more day

 and my hair

 will reach the rose bush

LAST VACATION IN THE SNOW

Indeed how short

 are the days of love on Earth—

do you remember darling

how you used to throw

 your boots

carelessly by the bed

 in the room full of pheromones

 the wine

and our synchronous movements

under the sheets?

Now you are gone . . . dead

in a city

 that can’t be found on a map

I recall your footsteps

 in the snow

and cry

 (I am a crier don’t you know?)

 while the dog

howls sadly

 cursing God

the moon and everything else

that exists

up there in the sky

*p.s.*

you know I resurrected you

in my dream

 from the snowy pattern of your footstep

 branches on your head

then you died again

 in our room

on my knees this time

AMERICAN NEWS REPORT

I close my eyes

 and the theater of war

 begins

 older than mankind

always the same scenario

 of the soldier walking toward his death

 for the sake of the same myth

 that tomorrow will be a better day

 but the truth is—

 a soldier dies every day

 a veteran shoots himself

every hour

 which amounts to eight thousand

 people per year

says the anchorwoman on TV

 otherwise I am weak at math

 illiterate when it comes to war

I don’t comprehend it at all

*p.s.*

when a bomb explodes somewhere

I close my ears as tight as I can . . .

 like this . . .

I REMEMBER AGHMA FROM PAKISTAN

Let them call me a pompous

 seasonal poet

let my verses

sound childish

I will still write about the arrival of spring

and the end

 of war

 for I still remember you

Aghma

my front-door neighbor from Pakistan

you who had lost your son

 the previous night

and had to go to work the very next morning

getting used to it is *never* an option

—years later

 when you are no longer alive

(first you drowned your body in tears

then you threw yourself out of the window

like a useless thing)

I still see the movement

 of your black-clad ghost

your aimless walking

back and forth

hurried

like a prisoner

in a cell

 and I see you stopping

by the TV which

you had covered with a white cloth

as the body of the deceased

I see you Aghma clearly

 across from the window

 in your mirror

a thousand mourning Aghmas

stretched to infinity

hunched over the black and shiny

sewing machine

like the charred body of a child

nothing has changed—Aghma

 I see from my window

 a pilotless plane

that kills the rest

 impersonally

and remains unmoved in the sky

 like God

I close my eyes

and from the mist

 war is born

 like a drunk mother

who devours her own children

 piece by piece

 like in the legend of the Agave

then the snow comes gently

turning the mound of bones

 into something white and smooth

and I see you again

 in flight

a woman-bird

 with black impenetrable wings

 and bare feet

 buoyant in the wind

 like an airborne leaflet

 I remember your passage

 through the sky

your body against war

THE FLOOD HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH IT

I am reading the Bible in bed—

in the beginning there was the Word after which

 there were wars

 and more wars

an eternal game of chess

 the soldiers

 waiting to fall or

 they have already fallen

history is silent

 like God

like time and anything else

that is un-self-aware

 boys—you are the empty chairs

 in my dream

 mysterious

 like in Van Gogh’s paintings

 time is a self-perpetuating river

of blood

 you can’t step into the same river twice

God is a poet minus the Word

 silence

 disappearing kind

 you are the path

 from now on

the beginning and end of this story

whether “holy”

 or “of the roses”

 it’s the same metallic taste

 on my palate

 the same story

of the limbless solder everywhere

the same folded sleeves on the jacket

 while the arms are kept under the snow

 as seeds for the new war

world

 your king is naked!

 a thief of cradles

 a fag

 a hermaphrodite

 who lusts for muscles and facial hair

nobody can drown

 his ballooned up body filled with air

nobody can smash

 his quern-stone heart in this world

nobody—that is—born of men

I am reading the Bible from back to front

the flood can carry off

 all the weapons from the boxes

I let my song fly like a dove

 I’ll return when the blood

 is gone

 and when the grain is as large as an egg

*p.s.*

the flood or the snow have nothing to do with it

it’s what’s inside me that makes me cold

WITHOUT MEMORY

*(for my lover who was killed in the war)*

There is no more memory

it died with you

 in Pakistan

I look at your picture and accordingly

 invent a prayer—like Christ

my gaze—

 a quick bird’s head

 skips left and

 right

turns toward the voice

 or the explosion

intuitively

 like a newborn’s gaze

I can see from the window now

the fog is slowly

lifting

 and

the pieces of life emerge

 someone

on a bicycle—

I see the hat first

then

 the boy

do you remember how we sat

 on the bed cross-legged—lotus style

 shoving pizza

into each other’s mouths

laughing

like two monkeys

with open gums

you shouldn’t think that my memory

 is back

 I simply found a new picture in my diary

the priest asked

the Heavenly God

 (on live television—from Pakistan)

to admit his

 half-servant (the bomb had taken the other half)

the Lord now had

 to raise the remains of the man

there’s no memory—and so

my vision has become unbearably sharper

 I can see more now—

the underworld as it is

the transfiguration of death

 into earthbound time—

 it’s light pink

passing from throat to throat

 translucent like a worm

IN A BOMBED HOUSE NEAR THE BORDER

 My ancestral home

 with a bloomed skin

 with my grandmother’s dreams

 emitting

 from the chimney

 my ancestral home

 and ancestral dog

that like a ritual

 turned his whole body around slowly

 while looking straight into my eyes

(as if for the last time)

and then walked away sadly

like those trained dogs

 (in the movies)

 that sacrifice themselves

 for your sake

my ancestral home

 filled with the light milky scent of aprons

 a stone giant

 with a crumbling chimney

 and

echoing the rusted bells

(as if for the last time)

 a sad howling . . . howling . . .

DREAM OF A FINAL WAR

*(because I adore my ordinary boys so much)*

It’s interesting . . . I’m thinking (rocking my fluid skirt)

the desert gives birth to geniuses

while I—

to ordinary boys

each time

when the lascivious wind

lifts the skirt of the desert

a new prophet

is born

(a Christ . . . a Moses . . . a Muhammad)

and they were all in my dream

around the same table

and

it was the mystical supper

after the final war

and like a teacher

with my back turned to them

I was writing with a chalk in my fist

clearly

legibly

T H E E N D

like in the movies

*p.s.*

and Judas . . . I forgot . . . wasn’t there

he had died heroically

SO THE SOLDIERS CAN TURN AROUND UNDER THE GROUND AND RETURN HOME

At the turn of the century

a million and a half Armenians perished in the desert

four million people died in Congo

seventy thousand died in Darfur

then

in Baku

Iraq

Pakistan

ten million more died at the end of the century

from just starvation and diarrhea

after all of this—

am I a child

to trust our present-day gods

who can spread death everywhere

but who can’t bestow upon us the miracle of Lazarus?

. . . and in my free hours

I search for the Savior as always

peeking through

random windows in my city—

what God I’m thinking

doesn’t have

an ordinary home on Earth?

the church is a house-museum

what I mean is a home

furnished with hope

and love

a place to live in—

do you understand?

a home with a regular table and bed

\* \* \*

Our Father who art dumb

and therefore

sharper is your sense of smell!

how can you bear this stench

of blood

that has collected over millennia?

I wish I lived in ancient Greece

in former

Zeus’s harem of gods

and played those games

that only women gods were allowed

to play

turn me at least into a long-necked swan

o Lord

so I may seduce the new princes

or change your commandment on suicide

so I may throw myself into the sea like Io

God of the lame, who art in labor

to create a thorax without a leg . . . clayey hands

have you always been this reticent

or did you just turn mute?

THE ONLY GOOD NEWS IS . . . SOCHI

Sixty-six people

 died in Ukraine

thirty in Syria

a policeman is dragging

 a soldier’s body

Aleppo is burning in flames

the only bloodless news

 is from Sochi

the Olympic ice of the battlefield

 where couples dance

 for gold

 they turn in the air

 three times

 and win

 they always win

while everyone loses

 at war

henceforth they are my heroes—

 the half-naked girl in the skates

 and the boy

who flawlessly catches the girl’s body

in midair

 and carries her on his strong shoulder

 as a gift

 elegantly gliding

 amid applause

though before

 my hero was Cleopatra

 with her Roman sandals

 black hair

 straight bangs covering her forehead

I can’t say I haven’t dreamed

of lounging on a gilt-edged chair

 carried on the shoulders

 of my four surreptitious lovers

like a demigod

 and to have armies and thousands of elephants

 clashing against each other

 while I sleep with the victor each night

 but that was yesterday

today my newest military dream

 is the shiny smooth ice-rink

 my newest king is the chess king

let them fight from now on

 with their funny crowns

 and let only wooden soldiers die

falling bloodlessly onto their sides

another man died from a bomb in Gaza

taking with him ten others

 Aleppo is still in flames

a firefighter is dragging a soldier’s body

the only bloodless news

 is from Sochi

a place of escape and beauty

what I am most afraid of

is beauty losing meaning

*p.s.*

the referee blows his whistle

 and they move—

 the three Olympic

 gods

my new hero—the half-naked girl in skates

is in the middle

A LIBRETTO FOR THE DESERT

GREETINGS MY SISTERS

Greetings to you, my desert sisters—

brides of the desert—

 warm greetings to you—

a female poet is mixing

with a ladle

 the hellish furnace of Der Zor

and your luminous faces

 are springing up

one by one

out of the dense smoke—

 help me, o muse of the desert,

 without you

I can’t

 rhyme

 the discordant clatter

 of these bones—

 nor the whisper of the wind

 that can be easily tamed into a song

 elsewhere

 listen!

 to my story

buried in silence

greater than God

here—

wasted in the sand

like an eagle’s seed on a stone—

the seed of the most perfect one—

waiting for its hour of bloom

listen! you—

carelessly leaning

against your beloved—

can you listen to my story

without counting the rhymes

of my repeating lines?—

they go back and forth

the wind and the pain are my teachers

both prone to repetition

listen! . . . listen to me!

because

I am the last bride of Der Zor

 my veil—a sandstorm

I run

 pulling the desert

like the train

of my bridal dress

I am the runaway virgin—

with murmuring knees

in the sands

the ghost of your dreams

 in a bloody veil

 let no other virgin in the desert

 be betrothed after me

I am the last bride of Der Zor

a virgin cut short by a scimitar

with talking jaws

 unspeakable

 buried up to my knees in the sand

but I wasn’t always like that:

 I was a mermaid before

 with a varicolored tail

in Armenia stretching from sea to sea

until the evil

dawn of day

when I shed my scales and

 ended up

in this blazing hell

as a refugee in hermetic socks

I am the virgin—concubine and servant

of the pimp-desert

the seller of women—

I am their ghost and their poet

my body didn’t crowd the rivers

and wasn’t anointed

with myrrh

 lucky were the waterlily girls

who like dancers

jumped synchronously

into the waters holding hands

mixing the flowers on their skirts

 with the glistening foam of laughter—

 lucky were those who intuitively

swung their rosy shins

under the sun

filling their breasts

abundantly

with the milky light of dawn—

lucky were those who swam

and then turned motionless

with impenetrable eyes—like a canvas

soaked in watercolors

help me, o muse of the desert

I want to sing for those girls

with thorny braids

who crawled

to their death

on blood-drenched knees under the sun

who still drink with parched lips

the yellow darkness of the sand

*ta-ra-ni-na!*

*ta-ra-ni-na!*

the untalented desert sun

can offer no other chimeras

but the mirage

 of loose haired

virgins running insanely

—endlessly multiplying

 scimitars

like the fish of Christ

in the yellow mirror of the wasteland

the thorns remember

 thorn-picked (like goose flesh)

ask and they’ll prompt if you listen

it’s simply difficult to pay attention

to lend an ear—

who else but me

should do the telling?

I am the last hope

 the last witness

the last female poet of the desert

I am the virgin . . . concubine and servant

of the pimp-desert

seller of women—

lucky are those whose knees

didn’t open out of fear of the scimitar

I am the last bride of Der Zor

the last conductor of this underworld

the winds blow and endlessly

turn

everything

upside down—

I set the tempo

of the one and a half million

I am the ghost in a white frock

moving my baton under the sand

God watches and cannot see

(the old man with cataract)

she

who speaks from hell

can blaspheme even God!

listen!

I am the last witness

the last glance of the desert

I have seen the sky

 in that April

as a terrified mother

 with her stars

 and her moon

 tight

 round

 and

 big

like the belly

of a dying child

I have seen the savage lust

in the bloodshot eyes of the sultan

 and the blackthorn in his veins

listen carefully!

I am the eternal virgin

of the epic poem

my fall is the fall of the female gene

the gene of the East

and

of the West

my defeat is the defeat

of innocence

my end is the end of the universe

under the sky of all geneses

I am the collective ghost

of all the virgins in the sand

my thighs have gathered the dust

of one hundred years

I hold not my beloved’s seed—

I am the concubine of this barren desert

thistle and soil in my thighs

my skirts have been gathering thorns

for one hundred years

there are two kinds of thorns in the desert

those that prick your feet

and those that prick your memory and . . . the rest

I am the last timekeeper

 of the desert

time ends

 beneath my eyelids

I am an hourglass

 with a thin back

time is different here—

it trickles yellow

like the sand

of the shiny bulbous throats

always keeping the same

 hour of death—eternally

I am the last bride of Der Zor

the last sage of the desert

 who can find with closed eyes

 the path to hell

 in the sands—

 who else

could tell this story

better than me?

 and if you don’t care

 about the disappearance

 of the one and a half million in the sand

then what . . . what kind of a *human being*

what kind of a *human being* are you

really?

listen to my story!

the world is numb and God is old—

(she

who speaks from hell

can blaspheme even God)

the wind comes howling

the wind returns

to the crime scene

to spin everything one more time

listen!—

I now conclude the century in a quatrain

. . . there are two kinds of winds in the desert

those that blow from the north and move

 the bones in the sand

and those that blow from the south and move

 the sand in the bones . . .

*p.s.*

help me, o muse

 can’t you see—

the screams muffled in the dust

won’t turn into songs

the medusa of countless bones in the sand

won’t turn into an epic poem

DREAMS FROM THE DESERT

 First it is the ding-dong of the doorbell

 in my dream

 then the specter of the church—

 is someone painting the cross

red

or is it my priest grandfather bleeding

 on the cross?

ding-dong

ding-dong

what did Christ feel on the cross

after he was out of the trance

and when he understood

that pain is real

that the nail is really moving

in his bone

ding-dong—rings the sun

the only dial of the desert

the Lord wouldn’t have

 interrupted

my grandfather’s *hallelujah* with a shot

so who is greater

who is the mightiest of all?

left-right

left-right

three million feet

move

in my dream—

lifting above the sand

then falling back

onto the sand again

mocking the guards

like Lazaruses turned cynical from death

left-right

left-right repeats

the only juggler of the desert

the wind

mixes the bones

then rearranges them in another way

getting God knows how

the same result—

the same skeleton

 each time

A SIMPLE CAPRICE

Christ

 return my sins

 for which I have paid dearly

 and besides

 they are my sins

 after all

it’s unreasonable to talk

about my place in the kingdom of heaven

 now

(can’t you see that heaven is burning under bombs?)

I prefer walking

 through the valley of the dead

 aimlessly

 biting my nails and mumbling

 something rhymed

 in the sleepy ear of time

than hearing passively

 the long preaching

 of the bearded priest

 even if he sounds smart

yes, strike my cheek

I won’t feel bad—if that’s your will

You are my Christ after all

 and I love You

but that doesn’t change

 my choice

to keep my armor on

till the end

 like a turtle

to never trust them

 because if

 they are truly wise

 those bearded men

 why is that cloud aflame

 like a singed lamb

 why doesn’t this story end?

it was wrong from the beginning

(and don’t say no)

so I too will walk like a fool

biting my nails

 and dropping poisonous rhymes

 into the deaf ear of war

\* \* \*

There is a river of blood which

the Bible never mentions

 —this is a parenthetical remark

in reality—I am tired of everything

I want to return to paradise

be shameless and naked like Eve

(my neck is choking in this dress of mourning)

I want to be a woman again

the eternal seducer in this story

I don’t want to be replicated

 as another Pietà

 the mourning mother—cradling on her knees

 the dead body of her only son

 I don’t want to live in vain

 climbing up

 like Sisyphus

 the hill of war

I am telling you this—because I know—

I have been conversing with them in my dream

 calling their ghosts one by one to the table

for I have walked for forty days

 across the valley of the dead

 to Der Zor

ready to strip naked for a palmful of water

(anguish does not always sublimate)

 and I too have felt betrayed as a girl

I too have turned around and thrown

 my newborn into the Euphrates

 like a flower

\* \* \*

I am dreaming of Der Zor again

and we are running again—but this time

the Savior

is with us

 His eyes glaring with wrath

golden hair—it’s

the same Christ

at the height of his beauty—

looking left and right

 my ingenious grandmother

 smears mud

 on both of our faces

 and saves us

 by pulling us under her wings

\* \* \*

My dear friend—

have you ever seen

 Van’s carmine sun

 the captive mountain

 from the Bible

 the abducted ark

 of the flood

 barbed wires around Eden?

have you seen a crazed moon

have you heard an interrupted *hallelujah*

 and a scream

that resounds for a century?

have you seen the sun walking on a tightrope

with one foot on the cross?

ah Tamar

have you heard the song of the lake

emerald waters in regret

or the *horovel*—the plowing song

that begins

by praising the oxen and stretches

to the red of the horizon—

through the fields of gold?

you haven’t?

why then

are you looking as though

you have also seen

Van’s carmine sun

the granary

the gold

the wheat

the bride’s veil sailing

over the roof

Komitas

Sona

my grandmother

all gathered in one circle dance?

having placed the last branch on their nest

by Mher’s door

two careless cranes

freely flirt in the sky—

 sorry . . . I thought you had seen

 the wind . . .

 the bride’s veil . . .

 my grandmother’s

 tender hair of happiness

 standing on end from the moonlight

WHEN NATURE IS INDIFFERENT TO MY GRIEF

I walk and carry solemnly

 the heavy

silence of my grief

and nothing can be more painful

 than the sun

in the unserious blues of the novice

 a laughing lantern at the center

indiscreet like hiccups

 by the corpse of the young genius

 his one brow raised excessively

 like my father’s brow

I want to ask—“God?” and add nothing else

DREAM METAMORPHOSIS

I am a shepherd full of love—in my dream

sitting on top of a hill

 I play my flute and curly-haired sheep

 gather around me

from all sides

 the small ones mount the big ones

 to see me

 better

 at the center

I close my eyes and see myself ahead

resembling someone else

running

running

running

through the sand furnace of hell

 the wind strings

sharp thorns around my forehead

I am running

 in a long cotton shirt

 rushing to some place

it’s me

there’s no doubt it’s me

 but I look like someone else

—are you saying Christ?

(those are your words

I wouldn’t dare to compare myself to him)

but what really surprised me

 was the abrupt transition

from reverie to nightmare

\* \* \*

My memory—a blind plowshare

moves in the darkness

until it hits

a beloved bone

under the sand

and gets stuck . . . stops

unexpectedly

Der Zor

an underground orphanage

 weeping

 weeping

I will stay here today

(I’m fixing the sand

 like my bed)

and I will sing a lullaby for those

whom I know from the photographs

of my family—

“this is your grandfather’s sister

Hushik

with white teeth

like pearls

an angel she died

in the desert

you know . . . you look just like her?

this is Nato

with speckled eyes—a wing-clipped nightingale

you won’t ever hear a voice like hers”

(ah, dear God . . . how I love

my mother’s smile born out of pain

that briefly mingles with the light

before leaving her lips)

a lullaby for the angel Hushik

with white teeth like pearls

a lullaby for fair Nato

the wing-clipped nightingale of the desert

a lullaby for pretty Shushik

a lullaby for everyone

and

I rock

the colossal cradle—Der Zor

\* \* \*

. . . The weightless images

of my childhood

are like gas-filled balloons—

the barn door was left open—ah!

the cows are flying freely

among the clouds . . .

that’s a dream—while the day

crawls stealthily

like a soldier and

moves forward

nobody speaks at the table

of my half-woman

half-bird grandmother

(a beautiful mythical Harpy)

who had lost her wings

in the desert—the Turk

had broken them first

then burned and scattered the ashes

 in the wind

it’s Thursday—the church is empty

we are alone at last

you and I

dear angel

you looking down

with a half-smile

from your safe height

the ceiling—

Nato wasn’t able to turn into half-bird

 half-grandmother

I have never seen her

never seen my grandmother

the red-haired beauty

not even in my dream

not even for half a second—do you understand?

forgive me

oh church angel

for my reproachful tone

my bitterness—

you are not to blame

for not knowing

 what happens to

the visceral sound of lamentation

 after all

that’s so alien to you

 memory

becomes vulgar from pain

 year after year—

when your mind instinctively digs

with its countless little teeth

into the voluble sand of the desert

SCHEHERAZADE OF THE DESERT

“I am your master,” vows Der Zor

(my second husband with a scimitar)

“I obey,” I lie for the sake of the bones

and I fake my caresses and kisses

 upon the guilty forehead of the desert

soon though

when the yellow devil falls asleep

I will tell you everything that happened

shhh . . . is he sound asleep—

do you hear his snoring?

I sink my right breast

 into the sand

and wait until the last

newborn babe is fed

then I offer myself

passionately to the virgin boys

underneath the sand

now that everyone is happy

I can turn onto my back—

the sky is a Turkish flag

with a crescent moon and a star

“I am your master,” the echo of the words

is heard belatedly

“I obey,” I lie for the sake of the million and a half

in passing

the desert awakens in the morning

everything sings beneath the sand:

the wind sings the sweeping song

the ant sings the carrying song

the skeletons sing a *horovel*—

a labor song under the sand

*I will stay here today*

here is the desert a century later

the sand is a hand-made cover

woven from the bones of my ancestors

pull one out and all will

come undone in rows—

the million and a half

one after another—

like the woolen shawl unraveling

in the nimble hands of my grandmother

my memory—a sand kaleidoscope

the bones rattle

forming first a star

then a triangle

finally a circle

and soon imperceptibly they turn

into a colorful polygon of light

here is the desert a century later

I close my eyes

 and see the Lord

sunk in the sand up to His knees

trying to reach us

 save us

*that’s* His job

but how. . ? you tell me . . . really—how?

BRIDE OF THE DESERT

I am the century-old bride

of the desert

 with blood-red eyes of a madwoman

 I was born out of the fair

maiden Tamar’s

 virginity

taken from her with a scimitar

 today is my wedding—

 *ta-ra-ni-na*!

 Der Zor surges with my veil

 as a single white whole

one and a half million ghosts

dance around me

pleading

that I stay here by their side

and of course I will stay

that’s a given

I have already buried my shoes

in the sand

and started hunting for my roots

at once

with the silver hooks of my heels

 today is my wedding—

 *ta-ra-ni-na*!

 I am rooted in the middle

as a thistle

I won’t leave—

I am a tree

*I am the desert from now on!*

 p.s.

. . . according to the wedding custom—

I throw the bouquet of thorns

 over my shoulder

hoping

that it will disappear

in the black hole of the galaxy

DANCE ON THE SAND

DANCE ON THE SAND

I whirl on the sand

drawing circles with the edge of my skirt

I purr with my skin—my mouth closed

“I am debauched like old Rome”

I am half-woman half-cat in this moment

my elegance is not mere show but it has purpose

my dance is not mere exercise but it’s a stairwell

that spirals me up to heaven

like a young Aztec who thirsts for death

I will fight with my colorful feathered arrows

and maybe fall after a thousand years

(like Rome)

but I’ll never be defeated on a battlefield

my elegance is not a mere show . . .

it’s my ancestors’ battle cry

a feline tattoo on my face . . . reprisal . . . instinct . . .

all the circles on the ground are signs

brought from a distant place—the past

the circle has no beginning and no end

an eternity on the edge of my skirt

it’s not easy, if not impossible, to defeat me . . .

I belong to the tribe . . . of dancers

\* \* \*

It’s a mirage and a cross-patterned

 door

without a church though—

 it’s more like décor

 I open and enter

 the desert

Der Zor—the sand

 is yellow

 unmoving

like dead water

I’m Scheherazade—

I tell a story to the thorns

at dawn the sand gifts me

 a golden necklace

I should be going—sisters

 brides

it’s getting late

 bless your century-old slumber

what potion should I drip

 into the sand’s ear

for you to have sweet dreams?

DER ZOR

Careful . . .

 tread carefully in the desert

this is not just sand

this is . . . a white sand bandage

on one million and a half dreams

you want to know the exact number of the dead?

 that’s not difficult . . .

sift the sand of the desert

 with a fisherman’s net

count

 the terror-stricken eyes

 and divide that number by two

you wish to know the details

 of their dreams?

put your ear to the sand

 and like a chamber orchestra

the bone flutes

 will play their song

 the flutes will play incessantly

and

 one million and a half ghosts

will sway on the sand

 with yellow . . . toothless smiles

until . . . until the first human footsteps

will be heard from afar

 you know . . . here . . . in the desert

the ghosts

 don’t believe . . . in people

A REQUEST

Each time

when my soul slips

 out of my body

I see

 the still innocent desert

the city of Van—the church

 beyond the gates

 the silver body of the Savior on the wall

and my grandfather’s gaze

 straight into the eyes of Christ

 as if staring at a broken watch

I see the impossible attempt

 with which he tried nevertheless

 to fathom

 the unmoving eternity

of time—

 tried to grasp

the right angle of the sunray

 falling on his eyelid

that was there before God

now when

the choice is mine

when the Lord is with me

 finally

and you are gone

tell me—should I ascend

leaning against the priest’s grandiloquent prayer

(so innocent . . . inexperienced and young)

 or

 should I descend

 digging into the ground like a worm

 from under your tombstone all the way down?

please tell me—*go down!*—I beg of you

don’t let me err a second time

 let’s decompose together

under the feral sun

 of Yerevan

\* \* \*

I was born of men

(there’s no doubt about that)

 but I was . . . probably . . .

nursed by panthers . . . later

and now I always see a forest

in my dreams

and beasts with shiny teeth

you know that the lion

 is the god

of jungles . . .

there are no angels

here

no saints or Satan

we are saved or destroyed

 here

 by a shot

and our daily bread

is always

 stained with blood

I was born of men . . . no doubt

 but a lion nursed me—

otherwise

 why do I pray with four hands

 like a beast

and see jungles

 in my dreams?

A REQUIEM FOR POETS

I never

liked

the field of politics

my quarrel

has always

been with the heaven

but I wished

oh

so often

to spit on the face

of some heartless prince

or . . . curse him

I know . . .

this conduct is unbecoming of me

(my realm is the beautiful

I know . . .)

but dear friend

is art worth

my lying

or mixing facts with dreams?

listen

to the requiem of the poets’ armies

moving in the night

with durable rope

in their pockets

this night is . . . indeed . . . not romantic at all

(the cloud won’t turn

into an angel)

instead look over

there . . .

the tower of Babel is rising

MEMORIALS TO THE FEDAYIS

From afar . . .

the field

resembled

a green

chess board

with stone

pieces

but

from up close

the fedayis

clandestinely smiling from

the rows

of tombstones

resemble

students

posing for

their last year’s

high school photograph—

they are

holding their breath . . .

. . . as if holding their breath

if

by miracle

a crown of thorns

appeared

around my head

who would I

choose

of all these men

to be Lazarus?

while in my dream

in my dream

the green board of chess

and my crown of

t

h

o

r

n

s

were covered in snow

in my dream

I

approached

a tomb

and after

dusting the snow

from the soldier’s face

with my fingertips

drew a cross

a

l

o

n

g

the stone

after dusting the snow . . . drew a cross

after dusting the snow . . . drew a cross

my dream

was short

like a winter

day

and

I wasn’t able

to save

anyone . . .

THE BIRTH OF THE ORPHAN

Wait for a little bit—

sad willow

and eternal stars

today my song

is about the endless

row of beggars

with tattered hats

and about the widow

of the fedayi who

fell in the battlefield

a month after their wedding

about the widow who died

on the cold metal table

when giving birth

ivory moon

flickering stars

today my song

is about the orphan

who leaves the maternity ward

alone

and about the world

which inherited

his hands

resembling the poor man’s

tattered hat—

stop for a second

the line

of aborted motherhood

I want to see

the face of the woman

who died

a minute before

being reborn

one more time

but you . . . must wait

my song today

is about the weary

absent God

and about the child

who inherited

his orphanhood

as an incurable

birth defect

white

swans

and azure skies

today my song

is only about the orphan

*at birth*

ARMAGEDDON

When finally

the hot lead night

of the last judgment falls

I know I will miss . . .

the past

when the world was still flat

like a meadow

and

there were no mountains

of anguish

the past . . . filled with the scent of apple

when the gods

were more sinful

than men

competing with magical powers

out of boredom

and

every dead man

was a potential Lazarus

when finally

the hot lead night

of the last judgment falls

and

the elephant blows

his meaty trumpet

in the empty void

loud

for the last time

I know I will miss . . .

those times . . .

\* \* \*

It was morning—

one

of the glorious mornings

in the valley of Ararat

my fore-

fore-

forefather

left the cave

and

never came back

I’m excavating time with a pickaxe in my hand

I can’t find the Golden Age

or the Bronze Age

but only the Prehistoric Age . . .

there he is with a stone in his pocket

“cursed be he

who invented the first weapon!”

weeps

my fore-

fore-

foremother with a hairy chin (in my dream)

“cursed be he . . . be he”

echoes the cave

“. . . be he”

I gathered the curse in my mouth

and awoke

it was morning—

another

glorious morning

in the valley of Ararat

FEZZED THORNS

As April languidly draws near

my dreams become

deafening

filled with screams

of fugitive

girls

and

the impudent groans

of beasts

it’s already April in the garden

the sand reddens in my dream

my sorrow is a boundless savanna

where the grass is taller than me

like a camel’s memory my memory

thirsts—

a discolored saddlebag

filled with distorted images—

the rest is all water

water!

water!

it’s the last week of April

my dream turns cochineal red—

there are fezzed thorns in the desert—

thousands of severed tongues

secretly pray

 under the sand

\* \* \*

A translucent virgin

with loose hair and naked

in the moment of escape

recklessly

hits the sunbeam

and falls down

a ten-armed

ten-membered

*yataghan*

like a scythe

rises and falls

on the sands

of the still desert

April is approaching

and my dreams are filled again with

long-haired girls running

toward the Aras

April is approaching—

and the desert breathes like

a wild beast

in lust

A RECURRING DREAM OF MASIS[[2]](#footnote-2)†

And

who says

that dreams

are *sterile*?

I have been

haunted

by the same

white-haired dream

soaring in the sky

from the other side of the river

that recurs

in sleep or in wakefulness

like

an obsessive

idea that repeats

in the mind of a madman

and

who says

that dreams

are harmless?

the snow-capped

dust of dream

interrupts my

vision

(every five minutes)

like

an advertisement reel

I . . . am not crying

it’s just that

sometimes

something oozes

from the depths of my soul

and like a suppurating

wound on a thumb

my burning eyes

throb numbly

at the moment of the dream

and

who says

that dreams

are *sterile*?

what are you

looking at?

haven’t

you seen

someone who

has the same recurring dream—

a mountain crest

in each eye

I am not crying

only

sometimes

my eyelids

freeze and hang over

the cold mountain crest

at the moment of contact

leave me alone . . . I said!

do you want to see

like a Turk wearing a fez

what someone with a recurring dream

looks like

from the other side of the river?

LIKE AN ARALEZ[[3]](#footnote-3)‡

I am on this side of the Arax

again

with my grandmother’s doll

that survived miraculously

hidden under her

blouse

with a terrified gaze

unspeaking

for me the border

is a river—

my gaze drowns

before reaching the shore

and

I am left with nothing but language

to lick the receding shore

like a wound

. . . and the land tells me everything

we are still on this side of the Arax

me and my survivor doll

who like my mother is a virtuoso

in talking without words

NEWS REPORT

Nietzsche was right

God is dead

only I

like Electra

can’t accept

my father’s death

and

my mind rummages

day and night

for new

hypotheses of revenge

humph-pshhhh—my mother is fast asleep

on the chair

her one eye open

I mute the TV

rock-a-bye mother

rock-a-bye

the sky parade

is still on mute

(the soldiers are falling

without a sound)

dozens of iron

birds

with bombs in their beaks

and

under their wings

I wonder if this is the hell

that my grandmother once described

with dread

as if flirting with the tank

the soldier’s shadow is

on the tank

now it’s under the tank—

the news reporter

smiles as usual

it’s not the first time

when an explosion

has transposed the shadows

\*\*\*

Hold my hands!

I woke up

with a pain of loss

a bitter taste

of dried blood

on my lips

I woke up

with a silent plea

of unblinking eyes

a clenched fist

and

wild urge

of a murderer

free my hands!

*p.s.*

I rarely get

very angry

but when I do

the ground shakes

under my feet

SKILLED MOURNERS

*(an April gathering in Glendale Park)*

Like melancholy eyelids

the clouds

hang

over the sky’s immobile face

the angry beggar wind

wipes

the nose of each passer-by

with a bag of sorrow

the limp chairs

in the garden

exchange

the dust of

rusted memories

around the warped tables

and like decrepit old men

without looking into each other’s eyes

they tell

stories to no one

and forget them right away

motionless

comatose

the black shadows

outside the window

like trained hunting dogs

drag slowly

the “wisemen” in dark glasses

in different directions

the soil is saturated

with coagulated blood

while

the wild procession

of skilled

mourners

like

a slow-motion

shot

in an old

silent

film

puts

a new garland

on the ashes of defeated hope

and

departs

noiselessly

like a practiced

mother departs

from the bedside

of a sleeping child

don’t wake the child . . .

what day is today?

LOTUS

I am not afraid of

the road

going right

or upward

as an infant I have passed

through a narrower path

four inches wide—

I don’t need anything

impossible

unfinished

but war

neither do I need

a ready-made heaven

with a pruned

apple-scented garden

like a fragrant flower

rising from waste

(turning the stench into a pleasant odor)

I would rather go to hell

and

turn

with my own hands

the cycle of torment

into happiness

it’s time to go . . . farewell!

farewell!

I embrace my old mother

one last time

happy knowing

that my sisters

are wiser and more practical than me

and so I can be a little

foolish

like a long-haired hippy

all I need is some hashish

ecstasy and justice

but can’t you hear

the sound of bombs . . . ?

the senseless barking of a moonstruck dog?

(or is it a soldier coughing behind his mask?)

nothing frightens me

I swear

nothing frightens me

but fear

\*\*\*

My mind

is a broken camera

the tape keeps rolling

with a rustling sound—

everything is gray

or black

except for uncoagulated blood

everything quivers

and then it’s gone

my grandfather’s house on the hill

the Van cat

my aunt’s lace bridal veil

flies over the roofs

and is miraculously saved

in the neighbor’s

chimney

then the chest full of gold

jumps into the fireplace and disappears

like a chest in a cartoon

the rest is scratched out and all is artifice—

history is a whore

and April—a squeezing belt

around her waist

cross-bearing bodies

lie crisscrossed on top of each other

in twos—

then a brief spell of silence

and again

my grandfather the priest

looks at me quizzingly

from the altar

will Obama say “Genocide”

after the war

advertisement?

my grandmother in the meantime

disappears

and appears

on the embroidered pillow

with washable colors

intermittently

on her side

is the odd-eyed Van cat

with a green and a blue eye

CAMOUFLAGE

*(geniuses dissolved in the sand)*

Is the color of crime

yellow too . . . God?

the same golden yellow

as in Der Zor?

so bright that even

your omniscient eye missed it?

I forgive you . . . well, you didn’t know

but can’t you at least

caress the sand

with your flowing yellow fingers

when the Turk is praying

with his head bowed down

at breakfast?

sand that has unwittingly

become a genius

TRANSACTION

Keep everything that you took . . . Lord

my prosperous house full of laughter

on the hill

my country of gardens

the gold

but give me back my desert

I want to fence it in

weed out the thorns and make even meadows

on my knees

(like my grandmother sewing blankets)

and

finally

I want to clean

the desert

(like a family burial ground)

with abundant soap and pure water

immediately after the muddy rains

don’t be silent . . ! I can see you

—it’s late

(yellow camouflage mantle

thorns on your head

small bones tangled in your beard)

try to protect the tombstone

from the forgetful Turkish wind at least

and

I’ll put a piece of gold

in your velvet-covered plate

from time to time

on Sundays

\*\*\*

War!

I am a woman

 and

from this day on

I declare you

my personal enemy

why bother to explain . . ?

I create children

while you kill them

cruelly

time!

that’s it!

from now on

I will fight against you

by swinging

my aesthete-surgeon’s

sharp knives

in the air

like a Japanese chef

cutting onions

in the kitchen

thin

very thin

until you turn liquid

and flow down

 from the cutting board

 from the table

 from my eyes

then I’ll drink you

(ah . . . I’ll drink you greedily)

like an enemy’s blood

or

better yet

I’ll give you away in small

opaque flasks

to the women of this planet

as an immortal drink

I roll the papers on my table

into an angel’s trumpet

and sing (like an opera singer)

my final will to heaven—

“I don’t need you eternity!

I’d rather live another five-ten years

with another nose that’s much thinner”

A UNIVERSAL CHANGE

Universe—predator-mother, the death of offspring . . .

*—Vahan Vardanyan*

Like a female predator

the Universe

assaults me from all sides

and to save myself

like Whitman’s hero

I transform

completely

into whatever I see

my eyes are dazzling suns

my hair stretched upward

diffuses into infinity

unseen

as a boundless web

with a single glimpse—

You

are in me

I spring shut with a snap

as a hunter’s trap

escape seems useless

we are trapped in each other’s snare,

I am compassion

wonder

love

two stars—in the dimples of my cheeks

Your gaze

is mine already

close Your eyes, Lord . . . I will not leave

I will stay inside of you like Mher

I will wait as long as it will take

though I am slightly

drowsy

NUCLEAR DISASTER IN JAPAN

One year later

the radioactive man

returns

to his destroyed city

of radioactive ghosts

where the only thing that’s working

is the traffic light device—

indifferent to the catastrophe

it continues to change colors

signaling “go” and “stop”

though there’s no one

in this city

besides the cow

that gave birth to a calf (larger than normal)

and now pushes him away

from her udder (larger than normal)

and I wonder if radiation

heightens the maternal instinct

in cows—

is the mother trying to keep her babe away

from the lethal milk—

or is it the opposite?—

the radiation

has totally killed

maternal instinct

after one year

to understand this

I read the gaze

of the only man

who walks among the ruins

quiet and reserved—as God himself

and the city beneath his feet

is like

a Noah’s ark

filled with rotting beasts

in twos

and I think

of the man-made end

of the Earth

man

and

instinct

*p.s.*

these are questions that keep me up all night

SIBERIAN TUNGUSKA

*(or memories on a Russian winter night)*

Have you heard

of the Tunguska blast

one hundred years ago?

the meteor

that didn’t strike Earth

it’s true

but that razed the forest

to the ground—

a deer was killed in the blaze

and a hunter’s clothes

were caught on fire

while he was aiming his gun

in the winter nights

that deer often appears

hanging above my head

cold and big as an enemy’s fist

and the hunter too caught

in his own fire of hell

I tell him—friend . . . do you realize

that Tunguska was one of millions?

and had it slowed down for another five hours

it would have razed the city to the ground . . .

and what of the sky?

the sky was unusually bright that day

though they say there was no moon above . . .

nor sun

A LONG CONVERSATION WITH MY CAT PABLO

The Greeks built citadels

Moses climbed Mount Sinai

the apostles preached

the martyrs suffered greatly

Narekatsi spoke with the Creator

Bach expanded the universe

Komitas raised the plow to the heavens

and yet another hungry child goes to sleep today

yet another cherry garden is bombed again

yet another woman goes to bed loveless . . .

it turns out . . . all of that was not enough . . . Pablo

(we still have a lot to do both you and I)

but I have slipped out of time

I have gone mad

I only respond to the ghost

and the gentle voices coming from the past

do you remember my story

about the paradise (vacation)

on the sea

 the color of Mary’s dress?

everything was a lie there

Pablo

except for the captain’s curse

teach me

how to stretch so gracefully

through the loveless days of nine lives

and yawn

without regrets

the cloud has turned a strange red

—do you hear?

they’re calling you . . . from heaven

have you loved your neighbor

as yourself

Pablo?

have you turned the other cheek?

take me in your mouth—

and secretly raise me too

you are my only hope

how good it is under your tongue

Pablo

I wish I could stay

right here

LUCKY IS THE ONE . . . WHO SEES AND DOES NOT BELIEVE

The beginning—

the word

has been refuted

by intrigues

and

dissipation

the poison trickles into the father’s ear

these are the last days of ancient Rome it seems

all the things

that I love—

humans

flowers

animals

come in twos

and go under my eyelids

as if entering Noah’s ark

and I transport all into another place

everything seems a repetition

empire . . . poison . . . conspiracy

like Claudius

ingenious and concerned

I pretend to be feeble-minded

weak in the knees

and I twitch like a fool

only not to be killed

only to stay alive

and

save all of this

from ruin

DON’T CRY FOR ME YEREVAN

I remember

so vividly

the whispered talk under the wall

of the boys standing shoulder to shoulder

and then—

 the turning of their heads abruptly

all at the same time

(like birds

perched on a frozen clothesline)

and then

my accelerated steps

as if carried by the wind

and it’s true—I don’t remember

 their names now

and I’ve never really known their names

 they were the boys from our yard

 but I’d recognize them with closed eyes

and I’d distinguish from all the winds

 the one

 born from the abrupt movement of their heads

 turning synchronously

 at once

fluttering my pelvis

 all the way to the bus station

 of course I’d recognize them

even now—I can strain my eyes

 and see them

 as they are today

 on that same worn-down street

still whispering

 those boys from the yard all dressed in black

 like women mourning

 an imaginary corpse

THE PHENOMENON OF SONA VAN’S POETRY

By Ani Tadevosyan

*A Libretto for the Desert* is a collection of previously published and unpublished poems by Sona Van, which in their polyphonic arrangement appear to the reader in a completely new narrative—woman against war—a narrative that until this point has been “buried in silence / greater than God / here— / wasted in the sand / . . . waiting for its hour of bloom.”

 This leitmotif recurs throughout the book, though it reaches the reader “through the different tonalities of utterance” (poet, playwright Vahan Vardanyan), “the lightness of the watercolors” (poet laureate Inna Lisnyanskaya), “as a whisper, an imparted secret” (literary critic, Charents scholar Davit Gasparyan), “through the intonations of our ancient historians and Goghtan songs” (poet Hovik Hoveyan), “with a staccato and yet flowing timbre” (professor of literature, Ruzan Aristakesyan), and sometimes rather directly, in a pathos not so typical to the author: “War! / I am a woman / and / from now on / I declare you / my personal enemy.”

 Sona Van converses with the reader in a sincere, straightforward manner, forcing the reader to experience something new. As the editor of this volume Samvel Smbatyan notes, “The senses record not only through the visual and linguistic faculties, but also through the means of classical music—death-invoking and yet life-sustaining rhythms, a form of requiem that leads to catharsis—in the manner of Bach’s polyphonic style that distills the energy of repetition.” The poet, translator and literary critic Ilya Falikov describes Van’s style as having “a real sensation of time, which is deeper and even more primordial than historical time.” The poet’s ability to attain such an effect of force through the economy of the word and poetic technique has been addressed by many writers and critics in over seventy articles, which testifies to the fact that Van’s poetic line moves the reader to reflection and dialogue. Straying away from the dense colors and realistic scenes of war and genocide that trigger shock and horror, Van constructs powerful images that, according to the literary critic and poet Norayr Ghazaryan, “. . . complete the mother’s hands, that Arshile Gorky had left unpainted.” Her poetic line insinuates gently but unremittingly, as in Inna Lisnyanskaya’s words, “when reality itself is grotesque, and the historical memory contains more images from hell than poetic imagination could ever contain, the writer’s task becomes saving human imagination by turning the stench of hell into an alluring scent. Sona Van’s talented and empathic pen resolves this issue through the lightness of the watercolors of a great painter. Her works must be seen, without a doubt, among the most powerful and expressive works that evolve around this subject.”

 As a descendant of a Genocide survivor, Van embodies the continuing trauma of the catastrophe and renews the Armenian collective memory, though her approach is quite unique. In her own words, “History is a double-edged sword. It dwells upon the recognition of the crime and its punishment, whereas evil is continuously changing its form. Memory keeps pulling us back and yet it cannot protect us from recurring evils. The continuing wars and genocides in the civilized world are a proof of this. If memory is essential, then only for the purpose of man’s recognition of his potential for bestiality and substitution of this genetic memory of destructive behavior with an ethical system that will help man catch the impulse for evil and neutralize it quickly, so that one can only manage to feel shame for having such an impulse. So that the hand stops in mid air, and the eyes are lowered as a mark of shame. The word “war” must be erased from humanity’s memory, so that it creates a feeling of absurdity when uttered, otherwise the wars and genocides will go on. But the word “war” is not condemned to oblivion; it even appears in phrases alongside other words that evoke associations of kindness and beauty in our minds, perpetuating evil. We say, for example, the “Wars of the Roses,” “sacred wars,” or “friendly missiles.” War, however, is an abnormality, and placing something abnormal next to something beautiful and sublime confuses us and disables our ability to automatically reject the evilness and ugliness in man, and defiles our ethical memory. This is a distortion, a profanation of the Word that was God and the beginning of everything. It is the poet’s task to preserve the Word, as a divine beginning, and not let it be whisked out of the poetic Eden and moved into the realm of interest, gain, and politics.”

 These reflections have found their way into Van’s poetry. She writes, for example, in “American News Report”: “a soldier dies every day / a veteran shoots himself / every hour / which amounts to eight thousand / people per year,” after which she immedialy adds: “says the anchorwoman on TV / otherwise I am weak at math / illiterate when it comes to war / I don’t comprehend it at all.” Van further clarifies this idea in our conversation, “I really *don’t* understand war. It seems that there are no more Cyclopes, Devils, and Dragons, but for some reason our boys are still not returning. I am simply dreaming of a world where nobody will grasp the phenomenon of war, where occupying land would seem as absurd as the idea of occupying the sun or the moon. Perhaps I am most frightened of getting used to suffering and savagery and to the lack of beauty and joy, in other words—turning evil into something pedestrian, which is advantageous to the present-day Dragons and Cyclopes. Our mothers still worship them as demigods and sacrifice their children to them. Fenelon, in the meantime, wrote that they are not demigods, they are not even human . . .”

 In a world of continuing wars and genocides, *A Libretto for the Desert* poses new and important questions around the new hero(ine), echoes of memory, women’s identity, and the affective world. These themes have been condemned to “silence” in Armenian poetry and become revived in Van’s poems in the often mystical, venerated and, at the same time, visible, familiar, and tender personifications of the mother, lover, and wife. Parallel to the feminine instinct of creating a peaceful family, Van’s heroines are also responsible for the peace and justice on Earth.

 The swiftness of Van’s thought, the uniqueness of her perspective and progressivity of her poise have been appreciated by her critics, as is evident from Davit Gasparyan’s words: “The velocity of Sona Van’s thought is greater than the velocity of lightning . . . She arrives as the new Sappho of our time . . . Sona Van represents the 21st century of Armenian poetry.” Her poetic line is prized by the reader not only due to the metaphoric axes and freshness of her thought, but also due to the love, frankness, and empathy with which Van approaches humanity and the universe. It is her quest for aesthetic and spiritual balance in the trinity of Universe-God-Man. According to the poet and professor of world literature Artem Harutyunyan, “Van’s poems speak of man’s fate as Van Gogh’s shoes do . . .” This parallel articulates the mechanism of reparation and balance present in Van’s poetry—when reality seems to be disordered, hopeless, and apocalyptic, her images become more vibrant, lively, and brilliant, her voice sounds hopeful and empathic. And it is not accidental that her work was greeted by several human rights activists, one of whom, the Turkish intellectual Ragıp Zarakolu, who is currently publishing this volume in Istanbul (trans. Hakob Chakryan), has described Van’s poetry as “extremely compelling—a miracle.”

 And finally, I conclude with the Israeli historian, scholar and expert specializing in genocide studies, Yair Auron, who has written to Sona Van: “Your moving poems made me understand and identify with my Armenian brothers and sisters, with your trauma of the genocide and the trauma of denial.”

*Post scriptum*. History is written by victors and it is filled with dry facts and numbers. We learn about real human tragedy and infernally difficult situations from the verses of true poets. In Heinrich Heine’s brilliant words, “A true poet’s heart is the center of the universe—and the tragic rupture of the world passes through his heart.” Only the great minds can continue to witness those catastrophic, agonizing, paralyzing stories, which require decades for representation, and *A Libretto for the Desert* is a testimony of unmatched force.

**About the author**

A native of Yerevan, Armenia, Sona Van (née Ter-Hovhannisian) has been living in California since 1978. She has authored four volumes of poetry, *Pshrankner* (Slivers, 1999), *Yes anun chunem* (I Have No Name, 2003), *Yes dzain em lsum* (I Hear a Voice, 2006) and *Chara anunov trchune* (A Bird Called Chara, 2010), which have been translated into more than a dozen languages, establishing her as a poet of great significance.

She has been awarded gold medals from the Armenian Ministries of Culture and Diaspora and from the Golden Apricot Film Festival. In 2013 the California Chamber of Commerce awarded her with a Woman in Literature Prize. On December 6, 2013, she was also awarded the Armenian Presidential “Movses Khorenatsi” medal for her contributions in preserving the Armenian identity abroad. Van shared both of these honors with the late poet and playwright Vahan Vardanyan, with whom she co-founded the literary journal *Narcissus*. The journal was founded in 2006 with the sponsorship of Van’s husband, the doctor and writer Nubar Janoyan.

1. \* I plan to write a more complete version of this story, as well as a portrait of my aunt Pepronia as the woman who has inspired me the most, in order to reconstruct my family’s history of the Great Catastrophe seen through the colorful personality of my aunt. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. † The Armenian name for the peak of Ararat. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. ‡ According to an Armenian legend from the pre-Christian era, the Aralez were hound-like creatures that could resurrect the dead by licking their wounds. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)