

LORY BEDIKIAN

Ode to Their Leaving

As if the sky which darkened on that monumental day, the day Lebanon
would be left behind for you both, the day all relations, kin, unshaven onlookers
gritted their teeth or the *kyughatsees*, village women, began the ritual of tears
handkerchiefs tied to the trees, the sheep slaughtered for the last feast,
as if the flight above the Atlantic and all the cirrus clouds bowing to the course,
the passport the husband opens and closes over and over again
knowing he may lose them all, to another set of civil unrests, another war
calculated like the backgammon board too large and burdensome to bring along
as if the teeth of the east coast's cold, the stifled air of the small apartments
the lies that led to the losing of jobs they said would replenish
the spent money, as if all of this was not enough of a cauldron, a wingless griffin,
the husband dies first, a year later the wife dies, and these two called
father, mother in one's eeriest and quietest sleep, not birth-like or dream-like,
but the time of post-midnight hallucinatory lullabies and afterthoughts.
Why do you not say who you are? Say it. Say *daughter*. Daughter holding genetics
of immigrant ink stains, holding the small histories of their breakfast blabbering.
And so what did you know of their demise? Father scanned the news of the world,
knew the guilt of countries and mustached biographies, while he never
spoke of his ills. The spine fractured, the valves roadblocked, the vocal cords
bombed. If anger was his food, then food was his poison. The bites didn't
matter, the morsels mother fed him mocked even the smallest capillaries. And Mother,
did you tell him what was coming or did you decide to follow? Is it a daughter's
greatest sin to ask? But look how quiet I am. I watch the world cry itself to sleep.
I pinch the spices into their bowls as you did the day you were married,
as you did on the unbelievable days you died.

Meditation on Fractured Vertebrae

Praise the backbone, praise the lumbar curve,
trust the spine that once held you up behind
the pulpit, that altar of polished oak, black bible in hand,
trust the palm raised toward the stained glass dove.
Father, open your ears to the congregation calling *Babðveli*,
pastor, come and bless us this broken day,
damn it, hear the choir singing their guttural Armenian
raising up *praise God from whom all blessings flow*.
When you bend that way you are headed straight for the ground.
Stand straight as the columns of Baalbek,
those stone exclamations that held the Lebanese sky, legs
of ruined gods rooted, planted into the parched earth,
while we spoke of lost classmates and empires. Black gown
in the closet. Kaleidoscope stole in its petrified spiral.
Beg, Baba, plead, Baba, say take me back to my *Halebtüi*-girl,
her cat glasses leaning off Aleppo's balcony,
rue of dust that will never leave the lung alone,
wife who now wipes your forehead with thunder and psalms
while the dreams come, young again, a bowl of roasted quail
presented after the first sermon, pushed the congregation
to crowded streets, to the confetti of pistachio shells, innocent
ammunition of the boys who hid from the sweat-drenched pews.
Hard to believe blessings flow, when you've come so far
from orphaned tenements. The nurses hoist you
in a wheelchair, feed you food coarse as gravel. Hard
to believe so many relatives have gone
from the earth, through the mouth of war, by the claws
of illness. Unfair. We're so unfair to say

lay hands on each bone, transform them into stalactites,
stalagmites of Jeita Grotto, that white chamber,
those limestone caves you took her to, so far from Beirut,
you thought you'd reached the sun,
she thought you'd reached heaven at last, her headband,
your argyle bowtie, away from the tenor
voices crowding the chorus, away from mosquito
nets of seminary, calligrapher's ink on the splintered sill,
far from the Syrian pine that spied the window.
I call you *baba* again. You hear me now and then.
I mumble *abmen*. The land of amber, turquoise, remains
in the candy wrappers of Mother's purse. This *abmen*
to heal it all, *abmen* for where you grew in the acreage of kings,
where winds mussed your coiled hair, now in hospital beds
of the new world. You're almost gone, the road to Aleppo rises,
Mother's headband in the first pew, hymnals close,
heads bow down, eyes lower when your devotional has begun,
everyone at the call of benediction, you looking straight ahead.

If only he had written his refugee song

If we broke the cliché in half and home
was not where the heart was, but instead
where your body intended to remain,

that machine of pulse and memory,
skin its largest organ, the intricate map
of your life in sun spots, a chosen few

which began on farmland in Lebanon,
some which formed during walks along
the lost apricot orchards of Cupertino,

then perhaps you should have trusted
that broken chassis of yours, trusted all
angles of it and moved it across floor,

shuffle until you began to walk again.
How quiet the house became when you
refused to sing. I entered thinking

I'd find attempts, but there you sat in silence.
Any tent is paradise for the one who
has lost everything. The flap of its mouth

a makeshift threshold. The canvas walls
boundaries of light. I told you to forget
treachery, but your bifocals, skillfully

useless, came on and off to read the news,
to remind you of what had once been home
to you, to kin. I told you to tuck

displacement in the wicker basket,
but you had faith in nothing, except
in the failing of the world. How we hoped

your limbs would burn like red dwarfs,
your mind would forget about highlands
and forgive the halfwits on the pages,

but you rusted in place, your mind drove
the road of the body to pieces, your hands
grasping at nothing but the splintered air.

Theorizing Vahan's Departure

But what if the black hole is home,
what if where he lives now multiplies

song. I'm imagining that sand
doesn't burn even in the brightest hours,

the zenith can be viewed without damage.
Mother, let's not fear entrances and exits.

Instead, shred the photo album, make space
for his new childhood, which is everywhere

at once, resembling the windblown shore
they buried his brothers upon, Lebanon

galactic because it's all he knew, cedars
their own type of kin, lined on roads which

know no differences of seeds, bullets, coins.
Everyone back from diaspora they never asked for.

Maybe the black hole of the sky, the light
years of the mind are the only way

to be swallowed up, released, transferred
into a constellation summoned, the sun

unnecessary, the zodiac, its outstretched words
finally giving us, in starlight, omens, signs.

Mother, maybe our lesions are gold.