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War and Return

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WAR AND RETURN

By

Alexander Vartan Gubbins

THESIS

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Title of Thesis: War and Return

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ABSTRACT

WAR AND RETURN

By

Alexander Vartan Gubbins

War and Return is a collection of poetry that pivots on the conflict between loss of human life, sometimes even whole cities, and reinvention of cultural identity. In these poems, I search for and shape my own identity as a poet, while revealing my experiences as a soldier in the US War in Iraq and as the grandson of an Armenian who survived the 1915 Armenian Genocide in Turkey. These narrative poems are mainly in open form with a few in closed form as well. As I write in open form, I am not bound by line length or sound repetition. Other elements such as imagery, cataloging, and metaphor are my primary concern. With the ghazal form, however, one rooted in the Middle East, I am bound by steadfast tradition and, in these, I reach for my Armenian-ness that may have been otherwise inaccessible. On the whole, the poems in this thesis give shape to the unseen and the forgotten, for victims of war are continually discovered.

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2014

For my love Emily, who makes everything worth it.

Dedicated to Hagop, Heranoush, and Puzant.

Thank you Doctor Beverly Matherne.

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INTRODUCTION

In this thesis, I revisit both my own experiences as a soldier in Iraq and (my own perception of) what my grandfather experienced during the Armenian genocide. However, I do not classify my poetry as strictly autobiographical, as if trying to recount exactly what happened; no, I do not write non-fiction. Rather, I agree with Yusef Komunyakaa, who in an interview with Kristin Naca, responds to the question, “What’s your idea of an autobiographical poem?”

I suppose for me it’s a poem that comes together, fusing a number of facts—in this way it is autobiography, though it is constantly changing. I asked my brothers about moments we experienced, and often they see them entirely differently than I do. So autobiography is also filled through with a number of hallways, like places on a map—sometimes there’s a kind of clarity; rights, wrongs—that make themselves known, other times there’s a more blurred reality.

Since my time in Iraq, my memories of atrocities often resurface. This distinguishes my thinking and being from those of others. It takes an effort to cope, and as poetry offers a safe space to negotiate how memories influence my current moments, I structure my poems to get optimum emotional impact from my audience, rather than simply to record how those moments unfolded exactly.

In my open-form poem “In the Guardtower,” for example, I follow Komunyakaa’s advice and retrace my nights on guard duty without concern that all moments in the poem should be taken as historical. My poem intends to provide the audience a sense of danger in the battlefield. In addition, rather than having the speaker—myself—reveal a flashback in the present time of post-war, which is what Stuart O’nan, editor of *The Vietnam Reader*, considers as “the common device” in war writing, I write war time as present time, giving my audience the chance to feel the moments as through they are happening when they are receiving the poem. Komunyakaa’s

poem “Somewhere Near Phu Bai,” opens with the moonlight illuminating the Vietnam jungle. The way he does this has influenced how I build the first image in my own poem.

Mortar landings flash on the night airfield in threes,
the way votive candles flicker in a drafty cathedral.

In this way, Komunyakaa’s poetry has taught me to tell stories using descriptive images, to work logically from moment to moment, rather than have the audience guess at the poem’s thematic succession. For this reason, in the second line, I take advantage of the image of “a drafty cathedral,” further heightening the emotional tone of the poem with a brief prayer, “Hail Mary Mother of Wind, don’t blow our way.” Here, “Wind” stands in place of the expected “God.” Thus, my appeal to nature’s element, “wind,” to have control over battlefield threats, demonstrates my understanding that nature carries the powers of judge and jury. If the wind blows in my direction, then the mortars will hit the guardtower, where I am posted.

In another poem, “Motion,” a prose poem, I ground the audience in a moment that connects past time of a veteran in the military and present time in the Wisconsin woods. I elect not to use a flashback but, instead, reveal the soldier trying to cope with memories difficult to suppress.

His pruners fit more snug in his palm than the M-16 he had for 8 years. At
night, near County Q, when no cars drum the gravel and cows lie on hay,
he trims branches.

In the opening sentence that moves smoothly across the page with a few heavy syllables, the veteran’s body immediately connects past and present through the common experience of *holding*. The phrase “more snug” displays a hierarchy of comfort between the past object of war, his “M-16,” and the present object of peace, his “pruners.” Thus, it is through the sense of touch that the veteran reveals preference for a peaceful experience over haunting war memories. In the second sentence, his preference for peace is further grounded through images of pastoral

landscape instead of military technology: “no cars drum the gravel” and “cows lie on hay.” On a conscious level, the veteran is trying to forget war by leaving technology behind and immersing himself in nature, but he is not succeeding. As he actively labors to care for nature by “trimming,” he is not only cutting away dead parts of the tree but also, symbolically, trying to sever his own unwanted memories of war.

Although I do not put the veteran’s voice in first person singular but rather in third person singular, I have still interjected some of my desire to forget my own war experiences. I am that veteran trying to forget; I was issued an M-16 for eight years; and I trimmed tree branches after I returned from Iraq, turning to nature. Moreover, this poem brings awareness of how the act of forgetting is also remembrance.

Still, the unnamed veteran could be any veteran trying to forget war. For veterans who experienced war and are still distraught by suppressed memories, this poem encourages them to talk with someone (e.g. friend, family member, professional counselor) about their emotional pain. Veterans of war do not want to admit that war trauma makes a difference in their everyday life. This poem will push them to say, “Yes, that’s how it is,” then their healing begins. In the poem, the unnamed veteran’s instinct is to transfer soldiering tendencies from the battlefield to a peaceful landscape.

It’s not Hajji, he says, it’s not Hajji. If it were, the safest spot’s behind a tree
or a rivet in the dirt. Without his gun, he’d use his pruners. He’d keep quiet,
wait for the advance, lunge and snip in a single motion.

This poem brings attention to how a soldier recreates the warzone in a peaceful post-war environment. Long fluid lines let the audience invest a continued stream of emotion from one moment to the next the way a soldier brings his emotions from warfront to homefront; emotions of the past do not stop at the border. Although I did not intend to compose long lines at the onset

of this poem, that I did proves David Baker and Ann Townsend correct in their contention that the long line is more suited to the needs of “narrative and meditation” because of its “sustained syntax and tone” (71-72). If I intend anything here, it is that past and present memories constantly cross each other’s paths, in the desert and also in the forest. In this poem, as in all my veteran poems, I emphasize personal experience.

I write poems, therefore, to address my own trauma as an enlisted counselor in the US War in Iraq, with the hope that they will release the loss buried deeply in the hearts of others. I agree with the words of Kevin Young, editor of *The Art of Losing: Poems of Grief and Healing*, “Remembrance and the rituals of mourning sustain us individually.” If I can mollify emotional wounds by writing a poetry of remembrance, then both my audience and I heal.

As for the poems about my Armenian heritage, I thought at first, like a historicist, I would *recover* my grandfather’s troubled past objectively, but instead I *reinvent* his Armenia. During this process, I embrace my own Armenian identity and come to terms with my personal connection to the diaspora, the loss of my homeland in 1915. To reclaim my now occupied land, I turn to anti-colonial critics of literature who focus on land annexation. Edward Said, for example, in his essay “Yeats and Decolonization,” advises recovering “the land” first “through the imagination” (77). These thoughts motivated me to imagine Yozgat as much as possible with the aid of my grandfather’s incomplete stories on paper, my mother’s and uncle’s recollections of my grandfather’s experiences and personality, and images of Yozgat via the Internet. Another anti-colonial critic with beneficial advice is Terri De Young, who argues that when reclaiming a lost homeland, “[i]t may be useful to sketch out briefly some of the possible typologies for [the] . . . struggle in order to come to grips with their implications for the representation of place in the

literature of colonialism” (2). These thoughts made me consider how my poems, after I write and release them into the mainstream, might be viewed in Turkey, the colonizer.

I discovered that in Turkey it is illegal to “denigrate Turkishness” in violation of Article 301 of the Turkish Penal Code. The mere mention of the Armenian genocide could get a Turkish citizen imprisoned for a minimum of six months. Just recently, in 2005, the Turkish government charged Orhan Pamuk, Nobel Prize winning author, for insinuating the Armenian genocide in his novel, *Snow*. The Turkish court dropped the charges after the case gained international attention. In 2006, the Turkish court prosecuted Journalist Hrant Dink, who published several articles on the Armenian genocide. The court charged him with a six-month suspended sentence. Soon after, radical Turkish nationalists killed him. These actions prove that the Turkish government and people have yet to come to grips with the truth of their murderous history. Needless to say, I should not expect my poems to be accepted in Turkey, much of it land that was formerly Turkish-Armenia. It was no surprise when I searched but found no Turkish literature on the city of Yozgat. I found mention only of Yozgat’s destruction in Armenian-American literature, now archived in the Armenian genocide Museum-Institute in Yerevan, Armenia. However, not a single narrative has been written on Yozgat. My poetry is the first.

To embody the spirit of reinventing Armenia, I call upon my grandfather for inspiration, the way Homer did the Greek muses when he composed the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, in my following poem:

GRANDFATHER, LET YOUR SPIRIT SPEAK THROUGH ME

Let my feet touch sandy clay, root of vines
on walls of St. John’s Cathedral where,
to a wide sky, choirs chant Pagan verse
in Christian prayer, summon Vanatur’s rain
and Vahaken’s lightning.

The poem's title should be read with a short pause, going from title to the first line, which immediately starts the poem at a fluid pace. I use enjambment three times in the first four lines to build momentum. In these past few years of studying poetry, I have learned that enjambment should break at a natural pause in the sentence. Uniformly, these lines break after monosyllabic words—"vines," "verse," "rain,"—and before non-content words—"on," "in," "and," leaving weight to the last word of each line. The final word of the enjambed lines are heavily stressed to slow down the pace, giving slight pause to let the readers focus. In these cases, my break at "vines" lets readers put their feet into the soil with me (as poet), the break at "verse" lets them imagine the chanting of pagan song in a Christian prayer, and the break at "rain" lets them consider the mythological world of Vanatur—a pre-Christian God of the Armenians, deity of the New Year feast, and also slightly influential over the rain. This steady movement along with line breaks that create an open space on the page unites with the choir's chanting, rising to the open sky. Their voices flow outward as I read the poem, allowing me to transcend time symbolically.

My allusions to pagan myths embedded in Armenian Christianity sets me apart from post-genocide poets of the Armenian-American diaspora, like Peter Balakian, Diane Der-Hovanesian, and Nancy Kricorian, who all allude to the Christian God at some point in their poetry. I note, however, that the Armenian people had a different religion before their conversion to Christianity in the early 4th century. They were part of the Kingdom of Ararat, also known as Urartu (Chahin 27).

Still, I have not abandoned my roots, for another one of my poems reveals Christianity's importance to Armenians. My narrative poem "*Hera Mer / Our Father*" depicts an Armenian Apostolic Church in the US as a place where survivors gather and find solace in prayer:

Genocide survivors, dressed in black,
sit in the back pews. The deacon,

leaning on a crozier cane, recites
Badarak liturgy, facile as memories of Armenia.

I chose church as place to show that the Turks, despite the diaspora, did not break Armenian devotion to Christianity. Through the use of liturgical language and song from my grandfather's Yozgat, I could depict his own devotion. My mother claims that he enjoyed Armenian Masses because they inspired him to speak afterwards of good times there as a boy. Like my grandfather, I have also felt the spirit of Christian unity after I, very recently, attended an Armenian Mass in the church my grandfather attended for many years.

In this poem's second verse, I recreate the thrill of feeling the spirit at Mass.

A gust descends upon the church,
slams shut a little boy's hymnbook.
His sister whispers into his ear, *hera Mer*.
Christ, King of glory, *hera Mer*.
Incarnate of the Holy Virgin, *hera Mer*.
Who didst rise from the death, *hera Mer*.
Now and ever, world without end, Amen.

The scene becomes rapturous as the wind disrupts the Mass, blows a boy's Bible closed, and his sister whispers a prayer in his ear. Here, I reaffirm Baker and Townsend's conclusion, that the "shorter line is suited to a kind of heightened focus," and compose four successive, economical lines. The words *Hera Mer* are repeated as an epistrophe for four successive lines, like an incanted prayer. This liturgical language I transcribed directly from one of my grandfather's bilingual prayer books in both English and Armenian; by doing this, I recast an authentic language with images of an Armenian Mass in post-genocidal America, giving others a way to gain their own memory, even though they are not necessarily Armenian or old enough to have memory of a post-genocidal America.

In the midst of writing this poem, I became interested in learning about forms that use epistrophe, leading me to discover the ghazal. Epistrophe, a repeated phrase at the end of the

line, is the ghazal's main structural tool employed at the end of each couplet. As Agha Shahid Ali explains, "[t]he ghazal is made up of couplets, each autonomous, thematically and emotionally complete in itself: One couplet may be comic, another tragic, another romantic, another religious, another political" (2). The ghazal has Middle Eastern roots but traveled to Western poetry with the help of German poets in the early 19th Century such as Friedrich Ruckert and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who primarily read Rumi (ibid). By writing in the ghazal form, I take part in a long tradition that allows me to explore my ties to the Middle East. However, when I first began, I encountered difficulties in keeping each couplet thematically independent from others since I also, at the same time, tried to write narratives, which requires ideas to link successively down the page.

In the poem "Wadi," I try both to follow Ali's guidelines and to write a narrative. In addition, Komunyakaa's images of magical realism, in which ghosts appear in the Vietnam jungles in his book *Dien Cai Dau*, influence this poem. I narrate the US Army's spiritual relationship and mine with an "Iraqi soldier-ghost" who lives in a "wadi," a word borrowed from the Arabic meaning "dry river valley" (Webster 1639). Throughout the poem, I use catalogue to build momentum and to reveal connections between items and places: (1) "An Iraqi soldier-ghost [...] roamed in rocks, rivers, caves in the wadi"; (2) "He [...] would steal their canteens, boots, bullets in the wadi"; (3) "One time, we drove for miles to Baghdad, Basrah, back to Mosul." The alliterations of *r* in "rocks" and "rivers," *b* in "boots" and "bullets," and *b* in "Baghdad" and "Basrah" catalogue items in a unified semblance, an appropriate clue for the audience to identify with military experience, considering much of a soldier's life is spent in dress-right-dress order.

In another ghazal, "My Grandfather's Yozgat," I work away from narrative in an effort to write according to the ghazal's standard requirements. This time, I adhere to Ali's guidelines by

maintaining a strict syllabic count of 12 to 15 per line, an epistrophe at the end of couplets, and (as in all of Ali's ghazals) even repeat a refrain at the end of the first two lines.

Grandfather will never return to his hometown, Yozgat.
When he speaks of it, I smell the poppies of Yozgat.

Here, as in all my poems, I work towards appropriate diction, or word choice, helping me reconstitute vividly my grandfather's hometown, Yozgat. I say the word "return," somewhat defiantly, to underscore that my grandfather had indeed lived in Yozgat, since the Turks will not admit to destroying millions of Armenian birth certificates and property deeds. Thus, this poem re-establishes a record of my grandfather as a citizen of that city. In the second line, I create a causal relationship between sound and smell, in which I reinvent Yozgat through an imaginative metaphor, as if my grandfather's voice actually invokes the olfactory nature of his native soil. Even my own mother never shared any story with me about grandfather's recollection of Yozgat's poppies. Yet, ironically, our family name, "Khash-Khashian," is an Armenian colloquial word for "poppy." Thus, by accentuating "poppy," I reincarnate my family's name-identity through memory of my grandfather's land.

I realize the importance of "re-annexing" Armenia through poetic spaces, as contemporary theorists describe it, for I am aware of how my poetry fits in with that of my contemporaries. This poetic re-annexation is, apparently, a practiced tradition among Armenian writers of the diaspora and their descendants. Leon Srabian Herald wastes no space and reclaims his hometown from Turkey in his poem's title, "Memories from my Village: Put-Aringe, Armenia" (3). The poem illuminates the relationship between his parcel of land and that of his beloved: "The creek running through your orchard/ was just as clear and cool as ours" (ibid). Another poet, Peter Balakian magnifies his aunt's memory of the relationship between the poppy

scent of Armenia and morning light in his poem, “Poppies”: “Bright orange in the morning/
cupping the fragrant air/ of the upstate summer./ All my aunt remembered of Armenia./” (107).

I also align my poetry with poets of other colonized people, such as the Palestinians. As I continue to spread my message, I discover those who will empathize with my suffering. Naomi Shahib Nye, a Palestinian-American reclaims Palestine in her poem “1935,” in which she speaks to her dead father and places him in his hometown stolen by Israel: “You beam as if you owned the whole city, could go anywhere in Jerusalem” (18). When Mahmoud Darwish, whose poetry is exemplar of Palestinian poetry, speaks of return in “If You Return Alone, ” he touches on how time changes the homeland when one is away, “If you return alone, tell yourself:/ Exile has changed its features” (195). Although the Turks exiled my grandfather and not me, I experience loss similar to that of Palestinian Mahmoud Darwish.

Soviet-Armenian poet Hovannes Shiraz helps me realize that my poetry would always lack a substantial level of Armenian culture if I did not learn my mother tongue, for language is culture. In the poem “To the Armenians in the Diaspora,” Hovannes claims: “You may know a myriad languages in the alien world,/ But should your mother tongue be foreign to you,/ You are a bird in a cage with your tongue torn out,/ And you are forever lost to your mother country./” (Kudian 25). When I set forth on a mission to teach myself Armenian, I learned that there are two dialects: Eastern Armenian, the language of authority in present-day Armenia; and Western Armenian, a language spoken mainly by those, like my grandfather, who experienced the diaspora. He did not pass the language down to his children, and so I was left to assimilate in the US. As a result, English is my first language. Unfortunately, I had little reason to learn Armenian, until now. Rather than first learning Eastern Armenia—the language much alive and

thriving, I decided to teach myself Western Armenian—the language moving closer to extinction.

As a result, I embrace a Western Armenian lexicon and syntax by including the poetry of Siamanto in the final stanza of my ghazal “Armenian” that I discuss later in this essay. To develop my craft of the ghazal, I follow the advice of American poet Jim Harrison, who thinks that form should adhere to content: “I hate to use the word, but form must be an ‘organic’ revelation of content or the poem, however otherwise lively, will strike us false or merely tricky, an exercise in wit, crochet, pale embroidery” (26). In his work *Outlyer and Ghazals*, Harrison does not follow the ghazal’s strict meter and, thus, veers from the practice of his American predecessors, like Agha Shahid Ali. The only rule he observes is the use of couplets, excluding the refrain and exact syllabic count per line. After contemplating the reason he deviated from the standard American ghazal, because it felt other than “organic” as he wrote the poem, I realized that my poetic impulse felt inauthentic in my early ghazals. I decided to abandon what felt most hindering: an exact syllabic count. Yet I kept the refrain because, for example, in my poem “Armenian,” I make a political statement by restating the word “Armenian.” I intend the audience to remember Armenian is a language. I do not know how many times people have asked me, poets and other people of letters, what language Armenians speak. In this poem, I also raise the issue of how my deployment to the US War in Iraq motivated me to learn Arabic, but that Armenian, unfortunately, remained on the wayside as one of my interests. In the poem, I show how this grieves me: “I learned the enemy’s language, not Armenian./” As I break the rule that each line’s final punctuation must be end-stopped, I rebel against the inevitability of life’s determined flow, specifically, in the third line: “[...] life kept giving me more/ then war”; and in the eleventh line, where I sing about Armenian awakening in my mouth, “as though my tongue

planted itself in the root of ‘tree,’ *zar*, until my lips popped/ in *p’ap’ouk*, ‘soft and tender . . .’ As I read this poem in public, I hold open vowels of the Armenian words slightly to resonate the freedom my body feels when speaking my mother tongue: “a” in *zar*, and “a” and “ou” in *p’ap’ouk*. In the last four lines, I revive the poetry of the distinguished, martyred poet in the genocide, Siamanto. First, I recite the English, so the audience understands the message. Next, I recite the same two lines in Western Armenian as Siamanto initially composed it. In this way, I revive the Western Armenian of the former Anatolian Armenian, the same language as my grandfather’s Yozgat.

In conclusion, I find that as I reinvent my grandfather’s Armenia, I also reinvent my own identity as an American-Armenian, an essential part of my identity as a poet. At the same time, I alleviate the pain of the Armenian people by revealing the uniqueness of an Armenian culture that is on the brink of extinction. Similarly, I alleviate my own pain as I write and share poems about my experiences in the US War in Iraq. Yet, as previously stated, the way I feel an experience should be remembered is more important than merely recording facts about how an experience unfolded in the past. I do not sing poems about history but about how my body experiences memory, a more emotionally charged rendition of what happened.

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IN THE GUARDTOWER

Mortar landings flash on the night airfield in threes,
the way votive candles flicker in a drafty cathedral.
Hail Mary mother of wind, don't blow our way.
I count between flashes then strikes,
like I would in thunderstorms when I camped
as a child in spring. The downpour would come,
clouds clear, then a million frogs would sing
for the stars. Tonight, the moon's crescent bends,
like a crooked smile, lights the Apaches above us,
thundering to the enemy's position. In this desert,
some things are certain: the call to prayer five times
a day, mortar attacks when we sleep, and bullets
rain more than water drops from the clouds.

AL-SAQOUR

Mohammed would leave the mosque and walk like his father
down the street shaking hello to the weak and old
who couldn't bow among their brothers and recite Allahu al-Akbar.
This he'd chant as he passed our Hum-V,
M-16s loaded, waiting for the slightest stir. We were luckier
than him. I pinch myself Fridays when he, a flash of feet,
disappears around the corner.

MASS GRAVE AT HAYY AL-SAQOUR

This is harder than finding beacons
in a thick fog, like how
a Captain retraces his ship by
spotting dead crew afloat.
The one with prayer beads still in his grip,
remember him? Sergeant, we won't
report this. The Imam
at the mosque with intel on terrorists
moving into town
appears briefly in a flock of sheep.
He won't stop watching, fuck!
Wind from an IED blows our way;
the blast we hear
won't cease echoing.

HURRY UP AND WAIT

We spend Saturday nights together
but isolated in the same room.
Dickerson reads the newspaper
in a corner chair. De Luna pumps
ten-pound bells at the doorway.
I play solitaire at the desk we liberated
from a junkyard. Hip-hop beats
take off the edge,
cause we know rockets could find us
anytime. Like Velasquez,
hit drawing a supply route on a map
spread out on his Humvee hood. Or Petrie,
who opened the door to spit out his chew.
Bam! Hit by a mortar.

I play solitaire. It comforts me.
I am my only opponent. I risk
aces never showing, Kings
useless in my palms. When I come
to the deck's end, I shuffle the cards,
until my sergeant yells, "Form up!"

RELIEF AT FOB SPEICHER DECEMBER 26TH, 2004:

Like 9-11, the news stops everything
and we gather around the unit's only TV
to watch a reporter point to a map,
circle a blue place in the middle of nowhere,
explain how a few waves are the cause
for thousands of deaths.

PVT Andre sits straight up in his chair,
grunts, then inhales a long breath.

The commander pauses over a stack
of pressing evaluations, pushes them
aside as the news shows the water lifting
a house higher than a telephone pole.

Every muscle in my body relaxes
as I sip a full cup of thick, brown java,
steaming the scent of Columbia.

FROM AN ARMY COUNSELOR

On intake forms, Date Of Birth reminds me
they have mothers. I try to never judge how this place changes
them. Combat would transform anyone. When they come
into my office door, they turn in their M-16s,
not their Hajji cigarettes. They smoke a pack an hour, vent
about their girl and boyfriends, and the close calls they've had.

PVT ANDRE HOLDS A GIRL
AFTER A MARKET BOMBING

As her breath stops, and wind vibrates
her brown hair, Andre gives thanks.

For the quick esophageal tear,
death's advance. Thanks

for the view they shared of blue sky,
the Tigris below. Thanks

for reciting the Koran, fingering
orange beads she found in the garbage

that Friday, when God ignored her request
for sleep filled with promise. Thanks,

but no thanks, for how she watched soldiers
march in ranks down the street, fire

at the innocent. Thanks, but no thanks.
She'll never touch the white mountain

her father spoke of at dinner,
the peak so clear, her eyes would dance.

Thanks, but no thanks.
She'll never know heartbreak, never.

RECREATING VELASQUEZ'S IED

Specialist Velasquez's Humvee blows skyward.
Like dice in a cup, he's shaken up, bouncing wall
to wall. When everything settles, a high frequency
deafens him. He pats his legs, feet, arms—All
there. Screams outside the Humvee aren't as loud
as Specialist Pullman's, who sits at arm's reach,
only he doesn't have a shoulder to touch for consoling.
Velasquez kicks the door open; time to pull guard.
He stares into bright blurriness, fires at echoes
of AK-47 shots and Arabic. His M-4 kicks
in his hands, like a dying dog
with nerves that won't surrender.

CAESURA

The dust storm rages like waterfall through our compound,
engulfing M-16s, clips, Kevlars, socks, sleeping cots.
We crouch low, squint, breathe desert. Grains pile into armpits,
toes, mouths. Wind assaults our eardrums, silences orders
to kill, keeps us from chambering our bullets. We suspend
our anger, wait in darkness in this space we call home.

The enemy, in nearby field, mortar ready, meditates
on a prayer come down centuries ago, from push
and pull between hatred and hunger.

TOWEL HEAD

Our uniforms are green, our skin,
various shades. Black, peach, olive.

Towel Head, I am called in the shower line,
the caller never showing his face.

By the time I explain that Armenians
do not wear headgear, he wraps

his towel around his head and struts
like a rooster. Other soldiers do the same,

nod to each other. Later that night,
a soldier and I post guard on the roof.

A mortar lands a stone's throw away.

THE WADI

When we came to Mosul, we learned about the wadi.
Units before us lost weapons and armor in the wadi.

We heard about a time wheels fell off a Humvee.
The Sergeant couldn't find them anywhere in the wadi.

An Iraqi soldier-ghost, it was rumored,
roamed in rocks, rivers, caves in the wadi.

He searched for enemies, some said, would steal
their canteens, boots, bullets in the wadi.

Our matches went out, M-16s jammed, desire to kill
disappeared when we passed through the wadi.

One time, we drove for miles to Baghdad, Basrah,
back to Mosul. We broke down in the wadi.

It was nighttime. The wind died. Wild dogs barked.
Then we heard footsteps in the darkness of the wadi.

WE'VE GOT RIGHT ON OUR SIDE

Go on, bet a rocket won't land
On your head on that 50 meter stretch
to the latrine,
Or that a sniper isn't scoping
To place an infidel in his crosshairs.
Go on, pray God blesses your footsteps,
forgives your last sin.

Some bullets echoed
Off the getaway truck Hajji crouched in.
May his ghost feel no need to revenge
Its murderer, unrecognizable
From a hundred-meter distance.

WHY COUNSELOR NICOLE JORDAN ENLISTS IN THE ARMY

She disappoints her mother.
Her father's ashamed of her.
She has no money for food and rent.
Her work as a house cleaner bores her.

Men prefer Jack Daniels over her, that too.

So when a recruiter comes with talk
about how a uniform will make men desire her.
How heroes survive not only snipers, rockets,

but can also be counselors.
When soldiers remember war too well,
hear voices, and brainwaves hiss

like a radio chat in constant playback,
she can tune them back, to fight.
Nicole signs her name, says no goodbyes.

IRAQ: FEMALE SPECIALIST VISITS NICOLE JORDAN,
THE MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELOR

Covering her name tag with her hand,
a dust mask on her face,
the specialist arrives alone.

She asks me if I would need to file
a report about the man who visited her
for a night without permission.
It was after a mission, she says,
speaking to the tiled floor.
I was on my bunk, fresh from a shower,
covered with a towel, when he
suddenly broke in.

He felt like a trowel
and wouldn't stop digging.
I feel like a whore.
I won't have anyone again.
I won't tell any family or friend.

I'll sleep with a chambered M-16.

IRAQ: NICOLE JORDAN WITNESSES THE KNOWING DOGS

The MPs bring the suspects in droves.
The dogs sniff gun powder and metal
grease and death on their clothes.
The stink lingers at the back of their heels
as they step into the holding chamber.
It's so strong the dogs bark and snap
until the MPs hose the suspects down,
burn their clothes. The flames
conjure memories of Saddam,
how he enslaved men by abducting
mothers, brothers, and wives.
So many houses are empty.

THE VICTIMS JORDAN COUNSELS

The women come to her about the men.
Open hearted, they pour their guts and show
the scars. Far away, they say, is a safe shower.
Six months, to be exact. During this time

they travel base as Amazons and guard
latrine doors during showers, hold the line
waiting for chow, form perimeter moving
from booth to booth at night bazaars. Going
off base for mission adds to the dilemma,
where enemy and friendly wear the same
camo, where they cannot rest until the Humvees
reach the gates, where Arabs stare
at their chests. Stare

all you want, Jordan thinks, mine are ready
to trance all lookers like Medusa into stone.
I'll break you to the earth.

LIFE'S EASY

Six months past, six months to go, and Jordan hungers
for morning minced onions in scrambled eggs,
hamburger, pickle, an ice cream cone at Carla's Diner.
She wants to slip into nylons, let herself go at a club dance.
Show some skin, maybe, without breaking army code.
Blow off a day's work, follow her nose anywhere,
see the new flick at Cinema 52, where enemies
rush across screen, bombs explode. She'll pretend
she's making a film. The crumbling walls, a set.
The battlefield, a backdrop. Her M-16, a prop.

IN THE BLOOD

I measure the year I was gone by how North Country
felt when I returned, the lakes too cold, the woods
too dark, the skies gray. After I'd left, I prayed
the same Sunday prayer,
that an IED wouldn't wind up under our feet
as we'd distract ourselves
with fantasies about anything but battle.

I measure absence by how I groaned at first sight
of Superior, how her steel surface slid
under my hands, washed Iraq's black grime,
its red history,
where threat of hot metal shards dictated
our moves, and wind blew silky dust
over us, in twelve inch steps,
as we saluted a pair of empty boots.

In the land of Superior, I am hallowed
into silence, fish on ice, where cold wind burns
my cheeks a purple shale, where waves lick shores
studded with stones, aligned in copper constellations.
In spring, when birds ask earth to dance,
when I lie on the shores, I can hear the rattle,
a piercing gargle, the wanting to return to that moment
before it happened, before the dead became a part
of breath, before the shore's now tainted tune of shells.

MADISON SUMMER, 2005

On State Street a homeless man
gives me a hug. I loathe his
dirty nails on my sunburnt skin,
his soiled uniform wearing rank.

My patches, I ripped off at end of service.
And the barber, I stopped visiting, to let go
even when I contracted lice
from the many days I couldn't shower.

Because of the many days he's begged,
I thought he earned more than booze
and higher than Sergeant.
I buy the man a sirloin, call him Sir.

I tell him I'm heading back up the hill.
Before slumping his face to the gutter,
he manages to utter something I understand:
Watch the roofs. Charlie's behind the walls.

MOTION

On County Q in Southwest Wisconsin

His pruners fit more snug in his palm than the M-16 he had for 8 years. At night, near County Q, when no cars drum the gravel and cows lie on hay, he trims branches. He'll nudge his blade into a cleft, snipping those already dead. It's better this way he says. Sometimes the branch is too stubborn, and he'll cut harder, even if he knows it'll never give in. When leaves rustle, he stills. Maybe a squirrel flies in the upper branches, or the wind rushes the forest from the open pastures. It's not Hajji, he says, it's not Hajji. If it were, the safest spot's behind a tree or a rivet in the dirt. Without his gun, he'd use his pruners. He'd keep quiet, wait for the advance, lunge and snip in a single motion.

GOING OUT TO SHORE

I wanted to help the world,
went to war—sand storms,
mud in rain. Give me ocean
waves, a raft, clear day.

I want to pile pearls into empty shells,
smile sea-wide. Money?
Enough for a hat? A wind
can woo whitecaps to nap.

ذهاب إلى الشاطئ

أردت أن أساعد العالم
ذهبت إلى الحرب—عاصفة ترابية
طين في مطر. أعطيني أمواجاً
محيطياً، طوقاً، يوماً واضحاً.

أريد أن أكوّم اللأثني في أصداف فارغة
ابتساماة واسية بحرية. مال؟
يكفي لقباح؟ الريح
يمكنه تملق عباب الماء إلى النوم.

A RAINY VETERAN'S DAY
HARLOW PARK MEMORIAL, MARQUETTE, MICHIGAN

I thank soldiers I've never met
for days spent with trench rats, jungle snakes,
and sand fleas. I watch a mother push
her baby stroller, turn away, then run my fingertips
over engraved letters, stop at Charles Hilenen.

Perhaps, Hilenen ate a hot meal before the mission, slept
on a comfortable cot, read a note from his sister.
After the bomb hit, perhaps he saw fall leaves:
mauve, rust, and dun. Felt cold bite
his lips, tasted oncoming snow.

SUPERIOR'S GRATIOT SHORES

Superior waves the rocks copper red,
soaks my socks until they're no good.
Best to leave them like driftwood
to sink in underwater rivulets,
dance minuet when the springs rush in,
flail them about a hundred ways,
like centipedes on a hot stone.
Against a gray sky, I soak
Juneberry leaves in bone broth
from the months' catch of Coho, king salmon,
not knowing if my boat's patch will hold
the next time out in the cold current.

MAYBE I'LL GO BACK

Maybe I'll go back, see our compound dismantled,
sit in the downtown square of Al-Saqour
without worrying about Hajji sneaking up.
I could watch the sunset behind the berm, piled high
because of interrogations gone F.U.B.A.R.

The war was worth it, I tell myself.
My Kurdish buddy, Zubayr, no longer hides
from Saddam's Republican Guard, who kicked in
his family's door for food and his virgin sister.
Muljik, my translator friend, can travel to Mecca
for the pilgrimage, cling arms with others
who believe the inner-jihad's most important.
Every Iraqi can watch TV and see something other
than Saddam's face. Shia'as can beat
their own backs bloody in public for Ali
on Ashura, day of their defeat at Karbala
over 1400 years ago.

Here,
in Lake Superior winter, I owe
my purple fingers an apology for scraping
my car windows without gloves, my lungs
an apology for sucking Moroccan Hashish
for a whole summer. I go to Carp River,
where ice breaks, find a coastal trout
reflecting too-cold-to-snow sun
off its beautiful dead skin.

SYMBIOSIS

When we made a home at Speicher,
Camel Spiders spun abodes in our shower
in the high corner above the soap shelf.
We left webs of hunger and protection
hovering over our naked heads
sticky from all day sweats in kevlar helmets.
I envied the unravellers' survival lines
who thread for fresh blood and stored flesh,
keeping necessities in the nest or at bay,
like scorpion and mantis drifters
on the prowl for prey and water droplets.
I would watch the scorpions crawl inside,
happy the Camel's hunger desired
another creature close to its kind,
careful not to bother a conditioned rivalry.

NICOLE JORDAN'S NEVER GOING BACK TO THE U.S.

I'll stay on this beach in Morocco,
let waves crash against rocks and my body.
I'll hashish before and after naps,
drink at night fires of strangers,
listen to tongues I can't untangle.
In angles of stars lighting the sky,
I'll get lost, jam that oud,
soothe the warrior in me,
send concern to far-off horizons.

AMAZEEGH CHANTS IN JAMA'A AL-FENNA SQUARE

At Hotel Hameed, the sky's as dark as coffee grounds,
the roof shakes, and I tap my feet to a Berber drum.
They come from down the mountain top to pluck
an oud, string a violin, bang a tambourine for pennies.
Spare small change a Berber boy asks me
as I stand beside an orange juice cart.
I take a sip, pass him my wad of ones,
refuse my stomach solace, refuse
my bones a glass of milk, my tongue
a taste of cinnamon and saffron chicken.

WAKING UP TO THE EARLY MORNING FAJR (CALL TO PRAYER)
IN SANA'A, YEMEN

Hayyya ila-Salllaaaah

A thousand voices from a thousand mosques call me out of dreams,
Into morning dark and prayer beads draping my window.

Hayyya ila-Salllaaaah

Is a Sana'a canto rattling apart syntactical jaws of English.
I can't distinguish Arabic thought from my Amrikaan mind. My
A,B,C's are dumb and blind to another tune of God.

Allllaaaahu Akbar

Is a voice rapture capturing imagined stereo-typical images
Of deserts, camels, covered women whispering
Oppression's unbearable, and

Allllaaaahu Akbar

Replaces them with long civil lines of congressional complaints
On 26th September, Independence Street because, here,
Revolution is critical.

These transmissions propagate peace in each individual.
Even in me. Even though I don't pray
In this prostrated spiritual way.
And to believe in God is a funny thing to say, but

I've never known my brown eyes are Sana'a brown.
I've never heard so many sandals move in the street with such hope.
I've never worn a robe in such requiescence over my shoulders.
I've never tasted a wine ripe verdure and blue brook with such zest.
I've never sniffed such fresh air with raw tomato and cumin,
And I open the door to tell you:

This. Morning. Breathes.

UNDER THE CRESCENT MOON

Bring me a mosque, a valley
with rock, water, vine
and grape, and a voice
singing surahs of cow.

By the night,
bring me a smooth path to a well
without bullet and blade
and men with stomachs to fill.

By the stars,
bring me a phantom lover,
who'll drum her thighs against mine
when the wind picks up our cries.

See the orphan by the alms box.
For her, milk is a banquet. Lamb
is what kings eat. Hold her cup.

MOTHER OF A BOMB BUILDER

She sits in her room, glancing
at the front page of Al-Hayat.
Another bombing. Five dead.

Her son comes in late, after Isha prayer.
She smells his clothes as he showers,
something and citrus he and his friends
eat as they chat on the corner of Haqq Street.

He comes out, face gleaming, eyes
cast down. I didn't see my friends last night,
he says, I attended a jobs workshop
at the Ministry of Education.

He leaves her
for Fejir prayer, before sunup.
If I am not back for breakfast,
don't worry about me, he says.

ASAD MEETS HIS BELOVED

On rooftops they meet,
where moonlight mists above the Tigris,
where the iris opens to a kiss,
as a widow watches from a window,
recalls the love times.

How, before the children awoke,
she would lose herself in her lover's heat,
fold her soul with life, with death.

How, she would dance her heart slow,
let go of prayer and platitude,
imagine herself free to run,
to scream in the streets of Baghdad,
fearing every corner like Layla.

DEAR BROTHER

I visit you, plot one-hundred and twenty-two,
shallow and loosely packed, rest my head
there, through sun and storm and scorpion.
Mother will not come. Sister will not come.
Father buries himself in prayer, and rum.

Today, a year later, Yaseen stops over
to share hummus and codeine,
asks for anything new of the crime.
I respond by watching my cigarette burn
to filter, the pain in his face a comfort to me.
You, Brother, bring the breath of childhood,
when an empty field was a place to play,
when verse of Thunder raised our spirits,
when peanuts and cola were all we craved.
We'd listen for the bread man's bell, run
to mother, the kitchen always bright
and full of her hair, long and black and young.
The kitchen, cardamom and cumin
without the lamb. If pomegranates could talk,
they'd speak of fingers, ours Brother, swollen
and red over the bowl to catch falling seeds.

The neighbor boy still drums on his step.
The street light flickers bright green.

LAYLA AT THE HOSPITAL

Layla must give birth at dusk
on a desk in the waiting room.
A nurse comes, touches her belly,
asks if she drinks filtered water.
Though, she's heard about deformities,

Layla will push it into the world:
sulfide water, moldy okra,
one nurse per hundred births,
murderous imams promising
peace in the streets of Irbil.

The nurse does not ask whether
anyone will join the newborn and her
that afternoon. Layla hopes a doctor,
God willing, will drag himself away
from sewing up soldiers,
stand before her, arms out.

HUSAM, THE BLINDMAN

On the way to the doctor's office, a stranger warns you the walking bridge over the highway is under construction. Let me take you there, he says. You answer, Baarek Allahu Fiik, May God bless you. You stumble at the curb. The stranger catches you before your head hits the pavement. Baarek Allahu Fiik, May God bless you, you say. You pass Al-Qadariyah Shrine, where you and friends used to listen to oud players pick all night, watch dabka dancers kick up their toes. That was before the bomb. You didn't know a pop can could reduce this sacred place to loud exhausts and hard pavement. Since then, you tap a cane in front of you to make the unknown known.

When you open your eyes in heaven, the sun will taste like your first sip of water after years in the desert. A mass of clouds will shroud the sun. Light will thread the field you played in as a child, where you fell, cut your knee on a rock. You'll see your friends, their smiles.

THE END OF PRIVATE ANDRE
AT AL-CHIBAYISH BEACH

Behind a rock,
he lies alone.
Blood runs
from his neck
to the sand.

A piper amuses
itself. Hops
along the waves, plunges
its beak into the water.

هلاك جندي أندري
عند شاطئ جبايش

وراء خلود
اضطجع وحيداً.
جرى الدّم
من عنقه
إلى الرمل.

طيطوي المستنقع يسلي
نفسه. يحجل
قرب الأمواج، يغمس
منقاره في الماء.

WINE CEREMONY AT END OF THE WORLD

Pour me into the tusk horn, then onto the plum table,
where hungry fingers seize pomegranate kabobs, baked
lamb, and brain salad. Let me soak napkins, black wool,
embroidered with bullhorns and grain bruisers, release
farmers from their quiet concern over empty skies, speed
the dahol player's cadence, like sticks cracking, like
a thousand blue butterflies, bursting from trees.
I give fire-watchers' eyes to the blind, the deaf hear
my breathing.

Spirit of Teisheba fills all worshippers.
Their ankle bracelets dip to underground passages,
where soul-keepers live, beyond the body.

THE GUARD PREPARES HRIPSOME
FOR KING TIRIDATES III

Vestal Virgin in chains,
veil detached, hair exposed,
she clutches her tunic, cut
neck to nipple.

Rest your back, says a guard,
The King visits tonight.

She steps into blue water,
honey mead, pig blood.
Rests her scrubbed body
on a mud-caked rug.

She stares at the ceiling,
remembers her life back in Rome,
how she rose before sunrise, kept
Vesta flames burning, baked
bread for monks, who prayed
in the desert, blessed criminals
before crows came for flesh.

My chastity's mine, she thinks.
If I'm buried alive, the cross
on my ankle will glow,
like the Commandments on Sinai,
like full moon, like the sun.

BEFORE THE LORD (ARACHEE KO DER)

When my ancestors were marched to Shaam in 1915,
they looked across sands and asked, Are we before the Lord? (Arachee ko Der?)

They moved their feet, breathed air, green hills, streams.
They believed they stood before the Lord (Arachee ko Der.)

They weren't to speak of what happened, how fathers were taken.
Still, they affirmed in silence, We are before the Lord (Arachee ko Der.)

To their thighs, under tatters, they wrapped bread,
waited for the right time to eat before the Lord (Arachee ko Der.)

When food was gone, holes burned in their stomachs,
they imagined dining in Aleppo before the Lord (Arachee ko Der.)

GRANDFATHER, LET YOUR SPIRIT SPEAK THROUGH ME

Let my feet touch sandy clay, root of vines
on walls of St. John's Cathedral where,
to a wide sky, choirs chant Pagan verse
in Christian prayer, summon Vanatur's rain

and Vahaken's lightning. Let me wake
in the graveyard's bed of flowers, idle in spikelets
of wild goatgrass, ancient Armenian beard.

Let Yozgat apricot run down my chest,
my teeth chip on its seed. Let wind bend
reeds at field's edge in the shade of cypress branches,

sun-scorched, the color of August. Let bees hover
among cones, fill empty broods with nectar,
in a field where young lovers bask
in their own fragrance.

MY GRANDFATHER'S YOZGAT

Grandfather will never return to his hometown, Yozgat.
When he speaks of it, I smell the poppies of Yozgat.

He sows seeds in February, waits for sprouts in May,
when mountain ice melts, washes into Yozgat.

Weavers loom at open windows. At clay ovens, Bakers knead.
Grandfather dyes rugs under the sun, in Yozgat.

He rinses wool, sings to the apricot trees,
hopes for a great yield for the people, of Yozgat.

IN TURKEY

I land smooth and sure
into the photo of my grandfather
and his brother, Garo, on foot to Ankara market.

Grandfather's chokha, blue beaded and silk, covers
the breast scar his mare gave him after a struggle
over reigns. I fly tight, like wind in sails,

worry not about broken glass spread
on the path by Gendarmes, below me the ranks
marching, strung out hundreds of miles long, from Istanbul

through Camlidere Valley, through the Saray Bone Bazaar,
to Ankara, where cavalries camp in hillocks, and watchmen
atop cliffs. Grandfather and Garo do not know

how foot soldiers infest the markets, weeks unbathed, blades
dark red. Were I the breath in lungs of a zurna player. I'd horn
the warning song for Yozgat in the upper octaves
of staccato, like rain echoing the nightingale's call.

HAGOP ESCAPING TURKISH GENDARME

Hagop lurks through bushes, arrives at Yozgat River, sees
Nina, the priest's daughter. A shadow pins her to a tree,
lips to bark, where children play hide-and-seeK,
vanish 'til adults call them for lunch. Dank is the juice
that runs down Nina's legs. Last week, she learned to set
table, fold napkins, sip a glass of Champagne.

GREAT GRANDMA HERANOUSH

She packed her Sunday scarves
from Jerusalem.

Donned herself in layers of silk.
When the gendarme approached,
searching for Armenian males,
She swallowed her rings.

Held the hand
of her son
tighter than the moon's spin
around the tilt of the earth.

RAFI FOLLOWS CONSTELLATION LEPUS
APRIL 1915, TURKEY

I have lost my brother, mother, and father,
who said go to the modest cottage
in the south woods of the Black Sea,
where our cousins cook watercress
in summer. There's stove, soup pot,
flame, bowl of oil on the table,
saffron tea waiting for guests.

I drag my shoeless feet through cabbage,
overgrown acres. Stems burrow
between my toes, split like families
at a wedding. My destination, not Zion,
not a royal bazaar, is five degrees east of Lepus' tail.

Two harvests ago, we lay on short grass, watched
a spoonbill shoo boars from her nest, neck
stretched high, wings splayed. She plunged
and pecked, clawed. The boars retreated.

THE BLIND ARMENIAN ON THE WAY TO TOWN

Haghop Samyan sets out on cobble-stone,
cracks and holes and kids kicking balls
faulting his step. But he'll get to the store for sure.
His old bones need butter and eggs.
A wind blows the scent of lamb and dolma,
different than his first whiff of Mosul,
where open guts rotted the air.
Flies swarmed so thick he breathed blood.
Today, children tug his fingers wanting to touch
his face. He knows he's funny when they laugh.

HAGOP SAMYAN, A YOUNG MAN,
LEARNS THE VALUE OF SOUND

He learns the soldiers' distance by how loud
the shots and shouts echo. He tells himself:
Let go. The next poppy crop he won't harvest.
The hardness in silence he puts in his bag
before he leaves this home. Here, he kept
his mother up through night singing: Vardapet.
Here, the rain hit the roof at bedtime prayer,
as if the downpour was God's drum.
And across the valley, broken and bare,
young lovers moan.

HAGOP SAMYAN, THE BLIND ARMENIAN,
DANCES AT HIS DAUGHTER'S WEDDING

Hagop's hips sway with rhythm as the bride
takes his hands, draws him into the crowd
of laughs and shrieks and feet tapping the floor.
She wears the perfume he gave her from Yerevan,
its streets and glory in every spin.
Violin measures swirl under the moon.
Soon her own will curl up in her arms
and call for kuku. Haghop hears it.
So let the candles burn. This night
welcomes roses, silk gowns, and a boy.

CYPRESS

I exude oil, mix with musk from slopes of Erzerum
and shores of Lake Van. When my needles fall,
they attach to fish scales fishermen spoon off
from the day's catch. At my roots, I shade
fern, cyclamen, orchid. When it rains,
my branches hold water for damselfly and coleoptera.
Drops beat upon wheat grass for the lonely plowman.

ANAHID IN THE RUSHING RIVER

She washes her naked body with purple sands
older than when Zeus descended upon Leda.
Her belly bright as lily pads, her thighs
moist as dew. Her hair, black and thick, opens
upon the surface, her breasts pomegranates.

As she swims, she pretends what's inside her
flushes away. This new feeling though
is part of her every breath. She'll give birth
to a body, call it a name, remember
what her father said before
he was marched out with the rest of the men:
Our people are in our bones.

TOMORROW

Great grandpa knew there'd be no tomorrow.
Yet he knelt down, kissed his boys and said, I'll see you tomorrow.

Great grandma Heranoush had her work cut out. Four years
it took to get the kids to Istanbul, then America, for a tomorrow.

When my brother and I fought over a toy or for fighting's sake,
our mom warned us, Wait until your father gets home tomorrow.

Last fall, mom called me, said we have a distant cousin
in Aleppo. I wonder, Does President Bashar care about tomorrow?

Do I? I volunteered for the US Army, helped occupy a country,
supported those that killed. I didn't consider everyone's tomorrow.

ARMENIAN

For Siamanto*

I've always wanted to know how my blood would turn speaking Armenian.
My mother never learned; the Turks beat out grandpa's desire to teach her Armenian.

For thirty years, I found no time to study my mother tongue. Life kept giving me more
than war. I learned the enemy's language, not Armenian.

Speaking Arabic gives voice to innocent Iraqis wronged during the war,
who cried out warnings to US soldiers in Arabic. Why not speak Armenian?

an old Armenian man asked me in English, in Jerusalem.
Your ancestors were massacred because of their loyalty to Armenian.

So on my guitar I strummed chords by Serj Tankian, sang "Little Stork," Bari Arakeel,
until my letter "a," ayb, sounded right in "land of flowers," manashuk yerkir,

as though my tongue planted itself in the root of "tree," zar, until my lips popped
in p'ap'ouk, "soft and tender"—This is how I feel when I speak Armenian.

"I was alone with my pure-winged dream in the valleys my ancestors walked."
"I ran, all drunk with the deep blue sky, with the light of the glorious days."

Yev makretev yerezees het menak ee hovitneroun mech haiyrenee.
Yev sevartoutyoumb ke vaaze'yee, kapouiten yev oreren boloroven kinov.

*Siamanto was an Armenian poet, killed in 1915 by the Turks in the Armenian Genocide.

HERA MER / OUR FATHER

“That I might live unto God,
I am crucified with Christ.”

Genocide survivors, dressed in black,
sit in the back pews. The deacon,
leaning on a crozier cane, recites
Badarak liturgy, facile as memories of Armenia.
The way pomegranates and poppy
filled stables as rain brushed the crop.

A gust descends upon the church,
slams shut a little boy's hymnbook.
His sister whispers into his ear, hera Mer.
Christ, King of glory, hera Mer.
Incarnate of the Holy Virgin, hera Mer.
Who didst rise from the death, hera Mer.
Now and ever, world without end, Amen.