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Arts & Literature: Songs of My Ancestors

Kristina Gorcheva-Newberry

About the Piece

As an immigrant writer who's been living in the U.S. since 1995, I've often struggled to reconcile my cultural heritage with my newly adopted identity. Several years ago, my son and I travelled to Yerevan to meet my father's family and to participate in AGBU's (Armenian Global Benevolent Union) summer music program. Toward the end of the trip, we visited Komitas Museum-Institute and the Armenian Genocide Memorial complex, both of which left me speechless. Surrounded by other people's memories and testimonies, the photos of those murdered, tortured, and misplaced Armenians, I felt as though I'd been one of them. I wrote this story in their honor.

— Kristina Gorcheva-Newberry, author of *What Isn't Remembered* and *The Orchard*.

Songs of My Ancestors

Armen had never seen his father. Or if he had, he couldn't remember. He was eight months old when his mother discovered that another woman, a neighbor, had gotten pregnant by his father. A plump voracious infant, whose only concern was breastmilk and warmth, Armen slept through it all—his mother's flight from Yerevan to Moscow, the painful divorce, her grief and tears. In the following years, his father hadn't called or voiced any desire to meet Armen. There were no birthday or holiday gifts, or money, other than the meager child-support allowance. When Armen was old enough to know the truth, his mother had already remarried a tall hairy-chested stranger, and for the next decade, the three of them shared a rather happy uncomplicated existence, filled with garlicky borsch, classical piano lessons, and weekend movies. His last name, Sarkisyan, was still his father's, betraying his Armenian identity, the fact that he was someone else's child, but Armen could've changed it as soon as he graduated and turned eighteen. And maybe he would've done just that had it not been for perestroika and the collapse of the Soviet Union and a sudden, much-coveted, opportunity to attend a conservatory in the U.S.A.

To Armen, America represented the land of the daring and the escaped. There, no one cared about his nationality, and many girls found his looks exotic and his accent irresistible. During his second year at James Madison University, Armen fell in love with a part-Native American woman, a singer, AllStar Shining, whose skin was a beautiful nutmeg-brown, just like Armen's. It was a short blissful union built on tenderness and much laughter. Armen didn't know English in all its magnanimity and kept mispronouncing words and confusing body parts. AllStar Shining had blackberry nipples and a pebble-smooth belly and gorgeous hair, a waterfall that streamed down her arched back when she rode Armen in the dark. After she left, unexpectedly and without any warning, any fights or surliness, Armen discovered a long strand of shiny black hair coiling on her pillow. But nothing else.

Armen felt bereft, but also embarrassed because he didn't know much about her, where she came from, or whether she would return. All he knew was that she loved salmon and hated cheese, and that her spirit animal was a squirrel. When Armen called his mother, she said that Native Americans were nomads, just like Armenians. They couldn't stay long in one place.

"They'd been forced to leave," Armen said. "Their land had been stolen from them."

“She isn’t coming back, though.”

“Don’t say that. Not everything is terminal.”

In the following years, while mourning the loss of his girlfriend, Armen made a life-changing discovery—he wanted to play jazz. Even back in Russia, his mother had a few records of Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Oscar Peterson, and Charlie Parker. Their music allowed the freedom classical music lacked. It spoke to Armen even though he didn’t understand how to improvise beyond the first primitive chords. Still, he had strong technique and grew inspired by that music, the need to express himself through it. In Joplin’s first ragtime compositions Armen recognized famous waltzes and marches, ballades resembled some of the early Tchaikovsky’s pieces, and the embellishment of the melody with ornaments reminded him of Bach. And then—there were throaty, soul-crushing blues. Armen was introduced to a dazzle of singers in bars and clubs, but sleeping with them made Armen even lonelier. None had AllStar Shining’s hair or body or her sense of humor.

After each time, after each woman, he returned to his piano and played it in the dark or with his eyes shut. He spent hours and hours, months and months, practicing, listening, transcribing, composing his own inconsolable pieces, which one day accumulated into an album and earned him a Grammy. The name of the album was *Schitsu’umsh: Those Who Are Found Here*. Even though his manager suggested eliminating the Salish word because no one would be able to pronounce it, Armen insisted on keeping it.

Years passed, during which Armen wrote more songs and produced more albums and learned to play anything from “hot” jazz to “cool” jazz, to stride, to swing, to bebop, to bossa nova. He’d performed solo, with big bands, trios and quartets. He accompanied many singers, two of whom he nearly married. Now, at forty-eight, Armen was alone, childless, and without songs. He gained twenty pounds, a lick of silver at the back of his head, and mournful creases around his mouth. He hadn’t gone home for ten years. He’d long stopped dreaming about his former girlfriend or trying to speak English without an accent. He forgot the way AllStar Shinning smelled or how good she made him feel brushing her silky hair against his body, all the way down to his toes as he lay stretched on the bed. When his new manager suggested meeting for lunch that afternoon, Armen voiced a limp request to skip it, but dressed and went out. Located across from Lincoln Center, Boulud’s was a French bistro and wine bar that served sumptuous expensive miniscule dishes. It was late spring, and the city hummed with birds. The weather was moody, with an intermittent promise of sun and rain. Fat squatty clouds in the distance.

After they ordered, his manager—a short skinny bald man in green dragonfly glasses and a black velour jacket—laid a piece of paper on the table. It was a thin creased brochure, showing an ancient church and mountains in the background.

“Armenia,” he said. “Mount Ararat. Noah’s Ark. You’re going on a tour. You’ll perform some, but most of all you’ll hear and learn their songs. Then you’ll come back, improvise, and record a new album. *Songs of My Ancestors*. It’ll be huge. We’ll connect it to the genocide—everyone pays attention to that kind of grief—and wow”—he snapped his fat hairless fingers in assured triumph—“another Grammy.”

Armen studied the man’s face, which was soft, pink, and smug. His skin was so delicate, Armen had doubts he shaved. He touched his own cheeks, which felt like sandpaper. He wondered why he’d bothered to sign with a person who knew less about jazz than Armen knew about Armenia or the 1915 genocide.

“Mount Ararat is in Turkey,” he finally said. “Noah’s Ark doesn’t exist. And I don’t speak Armenian.”

“It’s never too late to learn. Besides, you might want to visit family. It’s always inspirational.”

“I doubt it.”

Armen’s half-brothers had contacted him via Facebook several years ago. He and they exchanged a few messages, but there could never be anything more. For that, he would have to divulge the truth—that their father had slept with their mother while still married to Armen’s. He also wed their mother before obtaining a divorce. Armen understood that by revealing such information he wouldn’t gain back his father, but they would lose theirs, what they knew and loved about him. His half-brothers gave Armen their addresses and phone numbers and told him that their father was sick. Armen thought that perhaps they needed money, but he didn’t offer. He didn’t owe them a thing. They had nothing in common, except for the eyebrows.

“Listen, it’s a great chance—for you, for me, for the world. Tragedy is universal,” his manager said.

“I’m not writing any jazz songs about the genocided Armenian people. Are you crazy?”

The man grinned and poured more wine. “I love to hear you cuss. It’s sounds so resolute, invigorating. I wish we could sell that, too.”

“That’s all you think about.”

“I think about you. I want you to make another great album, like the first one. We should maybe change your looks. Jazz it up. Shoulder-length hair, earrings, maybe one of those tall fur hats?”

“And a picture of me crossing the Syrian desert, barefoot. Uncovering the bones of my murdered ancestors.” Armen swirled the wine about his glass, then drained it in one gulp. He tore a chunk from a warm crusty baguette and pressed it to his nose, inhaling. Suddenly, he remembered AllStar Shining’s fry bread, sweet and greasy.

“What’s your spirit animal?” he asked his manager.

“How would I know?”

“It’s a jackal.”

Armen’s tour turned out to be a lively, crowded, and much-cheered affair. He loved everything about his birth country: the food, the wine, the mountains. He loved that it was small, and green, and proud. That it reminded him of Spokane, Washington, where he’d traveled one summer to look for his ex-girlfriend, who could make him laugh even in the middle of sex. Armenian women, though nothing like her, appeared soft and affable, the forbearers of the culture he didn’t know he missed. In Yerevan, where the city’s skyline was dominated by the snowy peaks of Mount Ararat, the women took his hands while talking about Noah’s Ark and the holy lands, which after the massacres of 1915 had also become the lost lands. While they talked, Armen kept silent, afraid to ask any questions just as he was afraid to ask AllStar Shining about her nearly-extinct tribe or her father, a white man who’d raped her mother when she was sixteen.

Most women Armen met while on tour communicated in Russian or English, with heavy accents, the sound of their voices trailing into the grapevines and apricot trees. The women fed Armen homemade delicacies, walnut and pistachio baklava, wheat *harissa*, strings of *chuchhela*, the sweet gelled red-grape juice. They took him to markets, where he tasted the finest of wines straight out of wooden barrels and browsed through pyramids of succulent fruit engorged with sun and mountain air. He bought a sword and a *taraz* (a man's national costume), a maroon silk shirt and a gray wool coat, and learned that the word *mard* (man) and the word *martik* (warrior) had the same root. He also discovered two used books on Komitas, his biography and the collected Armenian folk songs and dances. A composer, priest, and ethnomusicologist, Komitas had travelled around his native country in the early 1900s, transcribing century-old melodies, dedicated to maintaining the original character of the music he heard. He preserved and arranged indigenous melodies and left detailed instructions in his scores on how to imitate the sounds of traditional instruments—*duduk*, *zurna*, *kanon*, *dhol*, *santur*, *tmbuk*, *oud*, *tar*, *kamancha*, *dap*, *pogh*, *pku*—on piano.

Armen had never heard of those instruments except for *duduk*, a double-reed woodwind flute made from apricot wood. His mother had encountered it for the first time at her own wedding and described it to Armen. The instrument resembled a long brown pipe, with many tiny holes. It was often used in pairs: the first performer played a melody, and the second produced a steady drone; both of which together created a rich haunting sound. Armen felt shivers running through his body as he read the scores with the tips of his fingers, the ancient tunes sprouting through him, weaving vines. He imagined a caravan of people dressed in rags, barefoot, crossing the Syrian desert. Their faces resembled his, even women's and children's: tan skin, brown slightly-drooping eyes, thick brows. No one carried any personal belongings, water or food; a few mothers had sleeping infants tied against their chests. As men and women stepped over rocks, they left bloody footprints, and Armen imagined the entire desert turning red, mapped out with their injured feet.

Two days before the end of his tour, Armen decided to visit his half-brothers, or at least one of them, the youngest, who still lived with his parents and whose address he kept in his phone. The cabdriver had no problem finding the apartment building, and before long Armen stood on a busy, dusty street in the center of the city. The absence of doors in the front of the building suggested a yard entrance, so Armen walked around the block. He wore a pair of khakis and a linen shirt, sunglasses. It was August, hot but not humid. Even before he made a complete turn, Armen heard music, which was similar to other native songs he'd discovered on the trip, the sadness in the melody so palpable. A crowd had gathered in the back yard; men and women dressed in black, crying, wiping their faces with wadded handkerchiefs, and Armen realized that he'd stumbled into a funeral. As he approached, no one paid attention to him, but among the mourners he recognized his half-brothers. They indeed had Armen's eyebrows like bridges hanging over their eyes, but so did most of the men at the funeral. Armen wondered if they were all related. In the older shriveled male faces, he searched for his father's as he remembered it from the only picture in his mother's album. He was lost. All of those men could've been his father.

Armen stood too far away to see the casket. He thought about walking up to his half-siblings and introducing himself, but decided not to. Funerals weren't weddings, where more faces meant more happiness. Rising on his toes, Armen could glimpse the casket and a woman, maybe his mother's age, maybe younger, hugging the dead body. He could also see that one of his half-brothers was patting her back. Armen ventured to step closer, the music swelling in his ears. The melody was sad, beautiful, and raw, as though carrying a piece of someone's heart. In a way, it reminded Armen of his "blues" days, when he played from dusk to dawn, instead of showers, meals, or sleep. All the heartache he wished to drown in his songs. He remembered the summer after AllStar Shinning had left him, when he'd travelled to Spokane and wandered

about the city like a ghost. In some bar, he showed her picture to a few locals, grossly aware of his own pathetic idiocy. Once he gave money, all he had in his pockets, to a homeless man sleeping outside of McDonald's in hopes that he might've seen her, a woman with ink-black hair and cinnamon skin. Another time—he got punched in the face, the picture ripped out of his hands, leaving him with the part that was her hair.

Armen doubted his half-brothers would recognize him. His Facebook photos were old, and he was wearing sunglasses. When the woman leaned against Armen's half-brother and the other brother walked to the casket and kissed the dead man on the forehead, Armen made another overwhelming discovery—the man in the casket was his father. He felt a breath of ghostly air on his neck and shivered. The ridiculousness of such a discovery and such a coincidence made Armen take off his glasses. He wanted to see the man better. To see what he, Armen, would look like when he died. Just as he shuffled forward, his half-brothers and their mother stepped backward, the music stopped playing, and four elderly men fitted the lid over the casket. There would be no viewing at the cemetery either because they were nailing the lid down while the crowd climbed into a funeral bus.

The immediate family rode in a car following the hearse. Armen rode in the funeral bus with the rest. On the outskirts of the city, they passed crumbled domes of half-eroded churches, rocky hills and fruit gardens, where the trees seemed to have grown out of stones. There were creeks and mountain gorges and wineries, miles and miles of grapevines burning with clusters of tight red fruit. The bus was hot and smelled of bodies, human flesh. Armen didn't talk to anyone, and he didn't understand what others were whispering.

Someone passed around a jug of water, but Armen refused, handing it to a young woman.

"Desert water. You have to partake," she said, and Armen was surprised to hear someone speak Russian, almost without an accent.

"Why?" he asked, also in Russian.

"It's like a communion. We wouldn't have made it through the desert, had we not shared."

"But you're Russian, aren't you?"

"Armenian-Russian. My father is over there." She pointed at a brown genial face a few rows ahead. "You?"

"I'm Russian-Armenian," Armen said, and she laughed, quietly, covering her pale velvety mouth.

She had long plum-black hair, loosely braided, and dark deep intimidating eyes. Her breasts were formidable and her hands tiny. She produced a whole walnut from her pocket, and another. "Know how to crack them?" she asked.

"I can try." Armen pressed one nut against the other until they made a crushing sound.

She took two halves, leaving him the rest. He watched her pick the kernel bits out of the shell, then place them in her mouth. She chewed with such envious relish, such diligence; he fingered a soft meaty half from its hard shell and ate it, too.

"You look like a squirrel," he said in a hushed voice.

"And you look like a bird," she said, also in a hushed voice.

"A bird? You mean like a hawk?"

"No. A chickadee."

Armen fell quiet. It was not the most flattering of comparisons. "Can we please start over?" he asked. "Hi, I'm Armen—a jazz pianist, and my spirit animal is a sheep."

"Hi, I'm Arman—a *duduk* player, and my spirit animal is a turtle."

"Are you serious?"

"Are you?"

"I'm indeed a jazz pianist."

"I'm indeed a *duduk* player. My father, too."

"You make a living that way?"

"I write songs."

"For singers?"

"For *duduk*."

Armen laughed out loud and was confronted by two stern men with thick black moustaches like roads splitting above their lips. They gave him a reprimanding stare. He nodded, then touched his finger to his mouth, a silent promise not to open it.

He broke his promise in less than two minutes. "Would you like to have a drink after the burial?" he asked.

"You mean with the family?"

"No. I mean with me. Although I, too, am the family. My father is in that casket."

She furrowed her perfect, pencil-sharp brow.

"I'm sorry," she said. "How come you aren't riding with them?"

"I'm illegitimate." Armen faked a smile.

At the cemetery, the wind whistled through the tombstones. They were mostly red, a few grey, of various lengths, spaced randomly on a hilltop. Armen recognized *khachkars*, with large carved-out crosses surrounded by elaborate patterns of leaves, grapes, pomegranates, and bands of interlace.

"It's the cemetery for the genocide survivors," Arman said. She was standing behind him, *duduk* in hand.

"Is Komitas buried here too?"

“No. In Pantheon, in Shengavit district. But he died in Paris in a psychiatric hospital, where he spent the last fifteen years of his life.”

“I know. I just read about it. He went mad after witnessing the genocide and stopped playing or transcribing music.”

“Some say that he wasn’t mad, that it was his protest, that he became numb from all the pain.”

“Any of your people are buried here?” Armen asked, after a short pause.

“Yes. My two great-grandparents. What about yours?”

“I have no idea.”

“Someone must’ve been, if they’re burying your father here. These tombstones,” she touched one and then another, “they are songs. Songs our people didn’t get to sing.”

“Do you know yours? Do you know what happened to your great-grandparents?”

“Yes. But it’s too tragic.”

“I was raised on gulag stories.”

The wind blew in her face, and her hair had become undone, streaming down her back. She pointed at Mount Ararat. “Over there, on the other side of the mountain, there was a village of Uzunova in the province of Diyarbakir. That’s where my great-grandparents were from. The Ottoman Turks came at night and killed all the men and all the boys, except for my grandfather, who hid in a wine barrel. Then the Turks killed the women and raped the young girls. They loaded them on horses and took off. My great-grandmother, who was barely thirteen, she bled so bad, she lost consciousness and fell off the horse. They didn’t stop to pick her up. My great-grandfather found her that night and dragged her into the house, where they stayed in the cellar until she was strong enough to walk. They crossed the desert together. She had a child she tried to kill.”

Armen felt the weight of her words, like rocks, sinking in his chest. “Are you free tomorrow?” he asked.

“I have another funeral. And then a wedding.”

“Am I allowed to come?”

“If you want.”

Armen nodded.

They walked up the hill, where the casket had been carried and placed at the lip of the grave. The widow cried, and her crying stretched from one tombstone to another. Her sons closed their thick arms around their mother. Gently, Armen pushed through the crowd and stood next to his half-brothers. He patted the men’s shoulders, and they turned, viewed him with their red teary eyes. Their cheeks were hot, suffused with color, and their mouths—so much like his own—thin and dry. Armen bent down and scooped some dirt. It felt parched, like desert sand. He pulled a

handkerchief out of his pocket and filled it with the dirt, then tied a knot, the way his mother had done before he left for America.

Clouds squatted over the cemetery. He heard thunder echoing in the distance, somewhere far away, where the mountain touched the sky. The wind tore the flowers off the casket, and they flew, scattered over the graves. It began to rain, fat drops covering the ground, plopping on the *khachkars*. People rushed to the bus, and Armen searched for Arman, who'd found shelter under a tree. She hid the *duduk* inside her blouse, pressing it against her belly. Armen wished he could've been that flute—warm, loved, protected.

He was soaking wet now, his hair, his clothes, his shoes. The cemetery began to flood; water sloshing against the graves, gathering in large puddles. In the distance, the mountain appeared hunchbacked and fragile, as though forged from glass. Armen squinted and wiped his face, and kept wiping. He thought he could almost see it—a wedge of a hull, a chunk of ancient wood, the lost vessel that was meant to carry them forward, through all the darkness, and the loneliness, and the hurt. Through all the bloody rains.