

Odar

The name waited for you on this side of the birth canal
but you never grew into it or found a place among the people
to whom it belonged so like the Jews but with a holocaust few remembered
they only saw *odar* the foreigner
the stranger with their name born of an *odar* father
who grew up French as Aznavourian and singular as the Eiffel Tower
it didn't matter that his name was theirs or that he was a survivor
like they were in the sadness he swallowed like bile he called himself half-breed
never good enough for them or their daughters never sure what
fraction of their blood was his

certain only that he had no strong shouldered *hayr* to call him *deghe*
to bind him to his patrimony the blood apocalypse no almond-eyed bent-backed *nene*
to rock his cradle sing him songs and bind his blood through story
to the blood of Hayk the king who traced his line to Noah

the name became his burden
that he passed on to you but that he eased by teaching you to spell it slowly
for the American strangers he did not know to call *odar*
A is for apple D is for dog J is for James
a simple song of ABC to make intelligible a name
their name in the land of Adams Smith Brown and Jones

you never learned their language your *mamma* from the boot of the world
filled your mouth with Dante's tongue before you ever tasted Shakespeare
or your father's Balzac you never learned to pray like them and say
ez-hats mer hanabazort dour mez aysor forgive us our

trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us

or that history is not dust and death and ruins but living and alive
and a way of loving of hating that burrows like a worm in memory
eating its tail to become heredity being *odar* kept you from all that
just as it kept you from learning how to dream
of ancient Ararat witness to a diminished world from a border
like a gash across the heart or of that saving grace an ark
chilled by the wind rain and snow of ages.

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Poet's Note: "*Odar*" is actually an Armenian word that means "*foreigner*." When applied by an Armenian person to a non-Armenian, it is non-pejorative. However, when used to refer to another Armenian, it is considered something of an insult, along the lines of "*you may have Armenian ancestry, but you don't belong*."