

To Say with Passion:

Why Am I Here?

by

Tenny Arlen

Գիշեր | Night (p. 7)

The night was still.

I was sleeping soundly by a soft brook.

Dreams were playing in my head like a fiddle;

suddenly, I awoke to hear footsteps on the ground.

She was beside me.

Her breath was like flowers,

her skin smelled like the brook's moss.

When she spoke, she didn't use words,

but rather, her words like stars fell into my hands.

I created heavens with these stars.

I am the creator, I am the master.

Բանաստեղծություն | Poetry (p. 8–9)

I don't have a voice for prose.

prose, with its complete thought,

with its predictable punctuation, with its linear movement.

The words walk across the page,

they start and end perfectly between the margins.

But poetry is a delicate dance.

Words and letters dance

across the page

up

and

down.

It expresses

my mind—

disjointed

my life—

it is a delicate dance,

up

and

down.

Պատումը | The Narration (p. 10–11)

Moments strike with force.

Moments,

and their fleeting happiness, pain,

their impermanent joy, solitude.

After the fall, it is the silence

that tries to repress.

After the fall, it is the moment without sound.

We die through silence.

Like dust that falls to the windowsill,

that slowly rests,

the dust by stillness and time

buries the moments,

buries the history.

The words' obliteration;

life's meaninglessness;

and the world breaks to pieces.

When suddenly—through speaking—

The words' birth;

the world's rebirth.

The word, the breath from the mouth

moves, stirs the dust,

and uncovers the windowsill.

The silenced narrative has been told.

We live by those who tell,

who give a voice,

who give breath

in the immense silence.

၎ူ၎ူ၎ူ | Words (p. 12–13)

And above all,
life is lonely.

After all the glittering celebrations,
after the conversations without meaning,
after the promises and waiting,
you find yourself in an empty room.

Noiseless, breathing, confused thoughts,
the world's vivacity is dead,
and you –
are you
are you.

Your eyes close and the world's theatre disappears,
your eyes open and you're an actor,
and suddenly you are in a crowd with masks;
masks
that conceal faces.

And how do you say to the masks
lonely

alone

broken.

The words fall like rocks,
tired and stale and unaccustomed
from your mouth.

Your mouth,
that cave where words mix
with meaning, with memory, with forgetfulness.

Distorted from disuse,
the words walk in the air like phantoms.

These words, invisible
can't offer consolation.

Արծաթէ սանդուխը | The Silver Staircase (p. 14–15)

Patient, attentive, taciturn;
the moon.
Its round eye sends forth silver rope
to the ground, to the lake, to the forest.
The moon in the dark night reveals
the quiet
 traveler,
the gentle ripples,
the sleeping trees.
An eternal guardian.
Tonight, I run with hungry eyes.
Life is lost in inexplicable questions,
in bright lights,
in plastic castles.
Tonight my eyes look up—
two moons that meet the moon—
and life vanishes
impermanence falls
and the permanent shines.
If I could climb these silver ropes like a silver staircase,
Would I have the answers?

Uḥuḥu | My Mind (p. 16–17)

My mind tried to rest,
it tried to be quiet.
I took it to distant mountains,
to wheat fields and blue oceans I led it,
Plato, Nietzsche, and Kant I fed it,
and it drank painters and authors and poets.
But it always ran quickly from these things;
you; it ran to you.
Because your shoulders are like two mountains,
your hair is wheat-colored,
your eyes are more blue than the oceans,
your mind is already full of philosophy and poetry.
Thus, each place my mind wanders, it wanders again to you.

Անվերջ սկիզբ | Endless Beginning (p. 18)

My life's story will not end with my death.
When I was born, my story began.
People say to us that "one day we will die."
But this isn't true.
Our lives are like circles,
giving new stories and beginnings to each thing we touch.
Every word we speak is a little new beginning;
each word we write is a little new beginning;
each word we read is a new thought or musing in our minds.
We give new beginnings to others by speaking and writing.
When we die, our traces continue in this life and in other men.
Therefore, death never comes to us.

Հայ լեզուի խնդիրը | The Problem of the Armenian Language
(p. 19)

The Armenian language survived for many years. Its existence was threatened, its home was shattered. But it lived. The Armenian language, like the erratic wind, traveled through mountains, by rivers, on oceans. Now it lives in different monasteries, in the city, in the village, on the farm. But for what? To say, "house," "meal," "mother," "father," "kitchen"?

Or to say, "nature, the mother who gave me life." To say with passion, "why am I here?"

Զարթոնում | Awakening (p. 20–21)

The possibility never to awake.
My life is this small room
with books and meals and silences.
Outside all is glass,
I was told every day.
But suddenly the window opens,
and the world is there for me.
And these voices,
they are voices of today,
and I am powerless.
I can't listen anymore to the dead voices,
those old voices who
fed my soul
in that room.
The living are here to speak
they whisper,
to give you life.
So speak! speak!
I call from my room.
The night comes
like a dark mystery.
Will the voices speak
before the night?
The waiting, the stillness—
the possibility—O torment!—to never awake.

Տեղատուրթին և մակընթացուրթին | Ebb and Flow (p. 22–
23)

I try to speak with words that have meaning. When I was a child, “I love you,” “I’m tired,” “I’m hungry” meant only one thing. Words were words were words.

But life continues and I am found between two worlds. The ebbing and flowing from my life give hope and death. The friends, the solitary window... the noisy dinner parties, the moon... the conversations, the teakettle’s steam.

I am whatever I create. But I can’t create in words. How do I create the broken? When “a rose” becomes “a rose is a rose is a rose” becomes “a rose est une rose, vart mun e.” My life’s ebbing and flowing creates a creator, and distorts the creation’s tools.

And you. You are you, and I am I, and anyway that a word is spoken, a word is expressed, la creation reste déformée, arbitraire, because you are you and I am I, and our worlds are broken.

Tuesday, May 7

Small nuns, with long white robes, decorated the church's courtyard like silent vapors. I walk around the courtyard's fence; evening becomes night, and the vapors slowly disappear into the church. When I was little, I would sit in church and think that all of these nuns were unhappy, and had sad lives. The silence, the quietness... TV, loud music, where are you? But not today. Today, on this road, I saw fourteen beggars; streets, noisy cars, numerous people, and fourteen beggars. Fourteen empty cups, fourteen weary bodies, twenty-eight hollow eyes that looked at me, looked at me. The night cannot protect me. And this is only one road in this world. The night cannot hide me, but I don't want the morning to come. Tonight, the nuns with their long white robes are singing softly in the church. Candles flicker from the windows. When I was a young girl, I was wrong. In the church, twenty-eight hollow eyes would not follow me.

Friday, May 3

I can't stand this anymore. My house's sounds are too much. It's that keyboard's "click click" sound that I can't bear; the plates and bowls clacking; the neighbor's childrens' shrieks. But I think that perhaps it's more difficult to find quiet in streets. But I must try.

Sunday, May 5

Today is Sunday. Today is the day of rest. My journey continues without rest, without the high ceilings of the church. To travel means that one leaves things behind. And God? Will God remain behind under the tall sacred ceilings when I leave them? Dew drops under tired leaves; sea foam on a ship; a couple's embrace; the moist dirt between the cobblestone pavement... isn't it true that here too there's God? To leave is to be alone is to be uncertain. This is my journey.

ᵄᵁ ᵁᵁ ᵄᵁ | I and I (p. 28–29)

The night was glistening with fog.
We held each other's hands and
felt the sweat.
Each drop from the sweat was a promise to each other.
You and I.
Under the black sky,
you and I,
you and I counted the stars.
the thick fog danced with us,
the flowers nodded to us,
the owls called to us.
Under the moon and on the grass we danced
like fairies.
You and I.

Now, there is a silence;
the fog rains on me;
the night is very cold.
Solitude and isolation.
I and I.

Լուսանկարներ | Photographs (p. 30–31)

I loved my childhood,
small memories, like photographs;
the bright colors, warm smells, heavy air.
This photograph I loved.
My mother bent over the pot,
her hands in the yeast,
the flour floated in the air like a cloud.
And this photograph;
the flowers' fields,
a warm sun,
the air tasted like cinnamon.
In this photograph,
I was under the stars.
The sky was black, but
to me the sky wasn't dark.
Today I try to think
about my childhood.
But I can't find all my photographs;
I forgot them in my house,
when I was only 13.

Մեծ քաղաքը | The Big City (p. 32–33)

I went to live in the big city. I clearly remember my first thoughts; the morning's glistening roads, the night's glistening lights from homes, giant buildings, the noises from cars and children and salesmen, and the faces and faces and faces... I was like a newborn again.

But who will tell me, when the festivities end, when the songs end, when it becomes midnight and the only thing I have is "I," who will tell me about myself? Who will tell me about the immense solitude, about my aching thoughts in the midst of the crowd? I will come to devour the light, the sound, the apathetic faces, until they are in my soul, another piece in my essence.

Now I know the stale breath and tired eyes. I know the emptiness. To be a naked body and to have the faces pass by me. The faces, faces, faces... and the quiet, the solitary "I."

Ukú | We (p. 34–35)

We were the creators
of our own futures.
In life's small spaces
we were hidden
we were protected.
There, we built a plastic castle,
and we filled it
with stories, with glass memories,
with impermanent towers.
You and *I* became a

We.

Five years—
creators; the castle; us.
The closeness of *we* wasn't enough.
Nine months—
this was true; this was our future.
After all, this was *life*.

...

The breath never came.
I held the pieces of the castle in my hands.
Suddenly, *you* and *I* seem so ugly
without the *we*.

U2n12 | Mist (p. 36–37)

It is the morning's mist,
and you awaken
to old beer smells,
to stale breath,
and to wrinkled newspapers.
This morning's news will become
yesterday's,
so you don't read it.
Your mind turns
to other foggy mornings,
other foggy mornings
when you didn't wake up alone,
and you awoke to fresh tea
and soft lighting.
And now
in the silent morning,
you lie down in bed
and listen to others' softened voices
behind your door.

Մտմտալիկ | Musing (p. 38–39)

The wind, the wind. This wind is running between the trees. The flower smiles, it opens its mouth to a honeybee. To think, that just now I almost stepped on this smiling flower, and that I almost squashed this honeybee. The wind to my face, my hat to the ground, and I looked to the ground.

Wind, wind. Wind, rest, carefulness, kitchen. The kitchen. The wind is my mother's words, in the kitchen. Quickly and wildly. The flour trembles under her words, the kettle's steam is dispersed.

Wind, wind. Wind, rest, care, kitchen, tired. Everyday, I see tired faces with stories. Three years ago, a tired woman walked beside me slowly, and I, I will never forget her black eyes, her face's wrinkles, her white mouth. Her white mouth still whispers to the wind, and I feel her words. They are running now between the trees.

That morning was calm and cool. The sparrows were chirping outside, but a calm was in my house. My first funeral was on a bright spring day. My mother awoke me with her cold hands. She tried to smile.

“It’s time to wake up. Everyone else is ready. I forgot to wake you.”

Quickly, I got ready. I always hated dresses, but today I put on a hot and black dress and I put a ribbon in my hair.

We entered the car quickly. After a silence in the car, my mother said, “Today we will bury your grandmother, and—“ but she didn’t finish her sentence. I didn’t need anymore. Without any more words, we drove slowly to the funeral.

I don’t remember a lot from that day. I mostly remember obscure ideas and colors. The preacher spoke with tired and annoyed words, and each spoken word fell on my grandmother’s coffin like a bomb. The black clothes in the church were like grandmother’s hair, who now was lying quietly in the coffin.

That night I didn’t sleep. I was thinking about my grandmother. In my mind she was still alive and healthy and now at her house she was still cooking for me. Tomorrow I would go to her house and I would speak with her. Nothing would be different. The pastor spoke words that morning and my grandmother didn’t move. But anyone can say words. So finally that night I fell asleep with words to my grandmother on my lips.

Հիւանդանոց | Hospital (p. 43)

I got up and went outside.
Outside, everything was peaceful and calm.
The sunset colored the sky pink and orange and gold.
The fireflies flew between the trees,
like silver sparkling in the twilight.
A gentle wind tickled the trees' leaves,
and the cicadas were chirruping.
The flowers' fragrance floated in the air,
while their fragile petals closed.
I breathed heavily,
I breathed the evening, the wind, the colors,
and with closed eyes I turned back inside.
At the time, I could not speak that place's name—
their cold, lifeless walls;
the doors' creaking;
moths' wings on the windowsill;
and my mother, now sleeping in the bed.

Մինչեւ | Until (p. 44)

Until my heart is full from you,
rest will never come.
Eyes cannot see you,
nose cannot smell you,
ears cannot hear your voice,
fingers cannot touch your hands' wounds,
mouth cannot taste your sweetness.
Still, my spirit is stronger than these,
and it can sense you.
Thus, I cannot rest
until I rest in you.

Անավարտ | Unfinished (p. 45)

I am in this small room,
without words,
without musing.
Here, the entrance
is the mind,
and if up
and further up
I ascend,
it will arrive at vitality.
Home is the exit of my mind,
that place, where
a soul becomes woman.
My mind is un-woman
only a soul.

Եղար | You were (p. 46–47)

I found you.
I was wandering around the flowerbed;
I would often go there
to look at the beauty,
to walk and think.
Life in the flowerbed
was more delicate.
Time walked with the sun,
and the night never came,
while flowers curled
under the wind's warm breath.
I only came for the flowers,
to smell one here and there,
to pick one or two;
I was not searching for you,
but you
were in the petals' beauty
and each flower I picked,
I picked your beauty.
You silently watched me—
you never spoke,
you never moved,
but you were there,
as the flowers will say.
You were there,
amidst the beauty.

Հիւ ու նր | Old and New (p. 48–49)

We came to the old tired house.
It was an early Spring day,
and the scent of wheat and grass was floating in the air.
Large birch trees covered the house,
and ivy crawled on its windows
like snakes.
Suddenly my mother said,
this house will be our new home.
Her voice echoed through the quiet trees.
Our new home...
Tables, dishes, cups, and other things
we would soon bring into the house.
We would soon bring new life.
But this old house
was hiding many stories.
Two lovers lived in this city.
The girl's father hated the boy,
and he banished them to this house.
They never left this place
to go to the city,
and in this old house they died together.
People say that their souls
are still here.
Now I am here.
I know that these things are only stories,
but sometimes,
when I am near the house's fountain,
I think that I can hear quiet whispers from the water.

Կարապետ | Swans (p. 50–53)

1.

There was a silver lake in the woods,
alone, isolated, protected,
without buildings, without people.
Wild ferns and weeping willows were its home,
and oak trees were its roof.
When I found that silver lake for the first time
it was an autumn day.
There was a silence,
there was a peace,
which from trees and from the ground
rose up like a mist.
I was young then,
and life's anxiety,
life's despair
did not appear on my face.

2.

Slowly I came to the lake,
under the oaks and between the willows,
until I stopped at the lake's shore.
Seven swans floated on the water
with circular movements
all in unison,
all in grace.

3.

It is autumn again,

and those swans on the silver lake
still swim in my mind
in circles, in circles.
This quiet building is my house,
and this cold wood is my ceiling.
My hands hold nothing and no one,
and my life is filled with empty glass teacups
and with dusty windowsills.
So in my house walking in circles,
I will recite poetry
to forget the time.
Time, that shatters teacups,
that breaks windowsills;
time, that places nothing in my hands.
I will recite, I will recite,
I can stop time,
oh swans, swans!

Ծաղիկ | Flower (p. 54–55)

Women need to be gentle,
my father said to me
one hot August day.
The petals withered in my soul,
the color left my face,
but I tried to smile and say *yes*.
But I couldn't.
My skin was tired
under the warm August sun.
At this time the green hills had left,
and golden ones came.
No, I couldn't.
Because I knew what *gentle* was to my father,
and what this still is to him.
Gentle is the smooth stones
under the uncontrollable river,
the flower that is watered
but is never picked,
the pearl necklace that
is never worn.
But I was not a smooth stone,
I was not a beautiful rose.
I couldn't say this to my father.
A warm wind gently stirred my hair,
while I deeply breathed in the summer scents.

Ἐπιταφία | Dream (p. 56–57)

The street in front of my house
twists through the entire city
where I live.
Each morning, with warm coffee
I walk on this street,
and I look at the faces and faces.
In the nights my dreams are filled
with countless faces—
twisted faces, hungry faces,
faces without noses, without eyebrows—
a child's chubby face, green faces, blue faces.
Suddenly I awaken,
and I can't forget these faces.
So I walk in the street
with hope that I will see at least one dream's face.
I look in the mirror,
I try to make these faces,
but nothing.
Where do these different faces come from,
and why every evening?
I even see them
when I'm awake.

Lnju | Light (p. 58–59)

The sun's wide arms spread over the world,
and the light revealed the earth's different colors and faces.
Blue seas, like peaceful blankets,
rippled from the wind.
Orange leaves fell to the ground one by one,
and children played in green grass.
The light gives life and clarity,
and one time I saw this.
One time I saw the light's beauty.
One time I wanted the light.
But the nights follow me everywhere.
When the sun comes,
shadows follow me.
When the lights turn on
I must close my eyes.
I can see the light in my dreams,
But when I wake, all is foggy.
My mind sees darkness.
How can I return to the light?
How can my soul turn from the shadows to the sun?

Մնաս քարոյ | Farewell (p. 60–61)

And life is strange.

Two years later,

How can I say “farewell”?

“Farewell” to so much beauty,

“farewell” to the lively classroom,

“farewell” to daily illumination.

The way is open,

and although I am blind,

I am not alone.

The words from dead spirits

follow me,

sing to me,

speak to me.

Wherever I go

they come.

The way is not so long

nor dark,

because I carry them

in my soul.

ᑎᑦᑦᑦᑦᑦᑦᑦ | Window (p. 62–63)

They tell me that staying inside is foolish.
In my room and in my house there is nothing.
“There is nothing, there is nothing” they say. “Outside of these four
walls of yours there is life.
Truly, bright colors and green hills and friends are outside.
And, of course, love is outside.
The man who goes outside is better. He has a better life.”
But I have already lived like that and I like to live in my room more.
In my room, there is a window and they don’t know a thing about
this window.
I see and experience more from this window than if I was outside.
From the room’s window, I see an old man in his rose garden.
I see that from his eye a tear falls to the ground.
On the sidewalk, a smiling mother turns her happy face away when
her child trips.
From the window, I have heard many secrets; I have heard singing
birds; I have heard playing children.
I like the little things of life, so I will stay behind my window.

Lnuuufgp | Margin (p. 64–65)

We write our lives on paper.

With pencil and pen we describe from where we have come.

We write pages and pages.

But we leave the margins empty and white.

They look back at us.

The margins make the page's words tidy and the page appears clean.

Every man has margins in his life.

What are yours?

The margins are those extraordinary things that we don't want another to know.

We leave them detached from our lives.

That way our lives appear clean like paper.

But margins are tricksters, and often life becomes disorderly and unpleasant.

Երկուք | Two (p. 66–67)

I went to the seashore because I felt lonely.

I wanted to see beauty and art.

The sea was quiet and peaceful.

Then, the sea spoke. It said, *I will give you beauty and art.*

Suddenly, Astghik and Vahagn arrived on the sea.

Astghik was like a star. She was very beautiful.

Her hair was like flowers. Her skin was white.

Vahagn was very strong. There was a lightning bolt in his hand.

His hair and beard were red.

They spoke together, *We, the two of us, are beauty and art.*

Live for us and work for us, and you will have a happy life.

Therefore, I live my life entirely for beauty and I labor for art.

That is the only happy life.

Աստ ւսն | Here there (p. 68–69)

I was a little girl,
and I wanted to know who I was in this world.
I was always living between two worlds,
my father's and my mother's.
I remember how I thought when I was a young girl:
My mother's world was American;
pancakes for dinner,
rebellling against parents,
seeing friends more than family.
My father's world was Armenian;
large noses,
different foods,
giving respect to parents,
family was always first.
Little words
eshoo qlookh!
hos yegoor!
yes kezi g'seerem.
So I looked at Armenians, with American eyes
and I looked at Americans with Armenian eyes.
I could not feel what Americans were feeling,
because I was not *really* American.
and I could not speak Armenian,
so I was not *really* Armenian.
I was a little girl,
and I wanted to know who I was in this world.
I was always between two worlds,
my father's and my mother's.

I was a little girl,
and the word I had in my soul
was

wanderer.

I. The Beginning and The Middle

They are everywhere,

My older sister whispered to me
late at night, back hunched,
long, youthful arms hugging
her round buckled knees.
Her porcelain face was distorted
by the light of the flashlight under the sheets.
The arch of her nose,
the rise of her lips
cast long disfigured shadows
dancing up her eyes and over her forehead,
and she looked
real, trustworthy.
She would not lie.
She was truth.
I was not alone.

And so I would look for the fairies:
under benches and behind trees,
in lampposts and spider webs,
in the reflections from colored glass,
and between the fall leaves the wind blew.
I never saw even one.

But my sister saw them everywhere.
Wings of silk fluttered behind every bush,

fairies left their miniature slippers
under her pillow,
they hung their fairy dust
on the arms of birch trees, and
strings of their golden hair
could be found glinting
in the sun as they
floated down the neighborhood creek.
She would hear whispers in her ear at night
as she fell asleep, and the next morning,
wide-eyed with wonder,
she would tell me what they told her—
and how they wanted
to be found by me too.

Today she looks at me
with spent wonder in her eyes.
Her arms are gangly and stretched,
her knees are knotted and bruised.
And she searches everywhere—
behind the bushes
and tree branches;
beneath her pillow
and by the creek.
She hears them whisper to her
in her ear at night,
and she tells me what they say.
But this cannot be real,
she can't be truth.
And I'm alone.

Hunched over in a knitted blanket,
her face stretched with want,
she tells me she has found them.
She tells me that they say
they still want to be found by me too.

So I look.
And now years later I can see—
they're not what she says.
We are too old for fairies.
Their wings are not made of silk.
Behind the bushes there is no light.
And the whispers in the darkness
are not innocent.

II. The End

Her soul was set free from her body.
But before she was laid in the mossy earth,
She was alive.

She was alive.
And everything was art.
Her hands, like two doves in the sky,
flew across the canvas in a flurry of color.
She would tell me
art for art's sake
was all that mattered.
When she spoke, she didn't use words,

only butterflies
that would dance like Tchaikovsky's swans
out of her mouth,
to tickle and taunt my ears.

The forest was where she would go
when she wanted to be reborn.
She would breathe in the green
and yellows and browns of the leaves and bark,
and she let me follow her and watch
how she did it.
I tried to breathe once,
but I felt fake, not real.
So I watched her from behind a tree.

In the winter she would wake up
in the mornings early enough
to look at the frost on the garden plants,
and would stay there for hours until
the frost began to dew and drip off
and she would catch it in her mouth
and drink the water.

Then she saw that Plato, and Aristotle,
Nietzsche, and Mill,
were what it took to survive.
She never returned to her canvas.
She never walked into the woods to be reborn.
She didn't care about the garden anymore;
only her mental garden,

which she cultivated so much
that the flowers withered in her body,
and her blood stopped pulsing.

And she could no longer be alive.
And her soul was set free from her body.
And as she now lies
under the moist earth—
trees sprout forth from her limbs;
earthworms gather in colonies
between her toes.
Moss spreads itself like
daylight after the night,
over the entirety of her.
And she returns once more, to
art for art's sake.

Գեղեցկություն | Beauty (p. 80–81)

How is it—
you exist.

We call you many names,
building tall towers,
constructing crystal castles,
publishing periodicals,
binding books and books of you.

Here you are—
no, there.

You are
what i say
you are—
bacteria, squirming lifeless
beneath microscope's eye—
picked at, spot after spot.

But you
speak—
apricot sunset,
trembling leaf,
a blush from petals,
pregnant terror in storms,
silver lake of moon—

and i

wonder—
at the magnitude,
clinging to existence.

Մենեւածիւն | Stillborn (p. 82–88)

I.

I am
the inability.
I carry it in me,
a basket of unspoken words,
ideas, floating vaguely
in the blue chaos of my I am.
Pregnant,
a life of words is forming—
not as it should be.
Limbs, unaccounted spring—
crooked, sharp teeth—
twenty purple toes.
To abort the growth
is not to unthink.

But to see who I am,
this I see, this I am—
sun through green leaves
speckle a sleeping cheek
like glistening fish scales,
while lilacs and jasmine blush
scents to the wind ;
she carries them, singing,
gently leaving their I am
on the hair of weeping willows and
on the white arms of birch trees;

the moss on the rocks turn
half a face away,
the blue sky bows aside
for a purple magnitude.
Here I breathe, here I drink, here
I am.
Then,

conceived and formed,
shaped and molded,
trained, conditioned,
the birth of your own growth.
Laying neatly,
ordered, arranged,
your I am is
this ; not my chaos.

II.

Yet
I too can call—
I can summon Orpheus,
singing and composing fire,
hand of divinity to bring the rest.
I speak Rilke,
Dickinson,
cummings—
they carry the moon,

angels and petals
and time and space
that sing the
I am
of me.
Through Eliot and Weil,
they gather the past,
dancing trance-like
to the now,
giving life to the dead,
the would be forgotten,
evocation of humanity.
Do you understand
this?

III.

But my I am's
I am—
facing your birthed
swaddled growth,
groomed and healthy—
eyes wide shut,
and mouth open expectantly ;
this would be scream
screams no sound.
Souls unhearing ;
black impotence, devouring.

And though I know

the stars will always
hang each night;
the whisper speaks
in grey heather on green hills;
an ocean's shouting will always
wane to murmuring—

My I am,
my growth—
is stillborn.
And—I am—rendered—
voiceless.

Appendix

Կենրոն | Center (p. 91)

The world was created and man was one small part. But one question was asked by man: “where is the center? If it’s neither animals nor nature, where then?” We are it.

We created beautiful cities and elegant worlds and words. From our high buildings with proud smiles, we look at the animals and at nature. We see the earth’s green lands, forests, and blue seas, and we burn, we saw, we empty.

Our domination never stops. That day when man landed on the moon was a very painful day. The sacred died and the holy was killed.

Բանաստեղծ | Poet (p. 92–93)

God created the world not for any hidden motive or “reason,” but only for creation. The true poet is similar. He/she writes not because of a need to promote anything or anyone, but the poet writes for the sake of creation. Because in this world with hate, fear, murder, and destruction, creation is good; creation is healing; creation is indispensable.

God did not create for a “rational” reason, and similarly, the poet wants to escape life’s “rational” constructed perceptions that the world gives to him/her. To write poetry only for its creation is to look through the soul. To want to write a poem because the soul has a need for it, is to be like God.

Գեղեցկութիւն | Beauty (p. 94–95)

For years, man has had difficulty agreeing about beauty. First, is beauty objective? No one can deny the beauty of a rose or of the Taj Mahal. But, for example, what about a carrion? Many people would think that its rotting scent and mangled limbs were ugly and disgusting. It is not beautiful, they would say. But not Baudelaire. Baudelaire would write a poem about it and about his lover. Therefore, he made that carrion beautiful through poetry. Then is beauty subjective?

And what is the reason for beauty? Is it pleasure for the body, or pleasure for the soul? Beauty exists for the human soul. The soul yearns to reach a higher world, and beauty helps us. When we are surrounded by beauty we forget about ourselves on this earth. Then our souls are free to live in a higher world.

Whatever one thinks about beauty, everyone searches for beauty in life.

Not “what is the soul,” but “where is the soul,” humans often believe that this is a very difficult and complex question. First, does the soul exist? If someone can say “yes” to this, then the following question is “where is the soul”?

The soul is everywhere. Each beautiful thing lasts and each beautiful thing wants to reach another world. There is a child with a book beside an old man. They are in a hospital, and the little child reads to him; the soul is there. The girl who finds an injured butterfly, and cries and cries; the soul is there. The tired wanderer who falls to the ground and kisses the mud because this mud is his only home; the soul is there. Our actions search for meaning in a higher and absolute realm.

The interconnected nature of life reaches to a higher world. There’s a tremble in everything from the world’s magnitude. The trees, the flowers, the grasses, the mountains grow upward. The soul is here also, when they try to reach the heavens. From every word of poetry, from each genuine action, from each leaf, the soul exists.

Բաներով | With words (p. 98)

How can I say with words those things that I feel? My dog feels hungry and barks. My cat feels angry and hisses. Yet they do not speak; it is man who speaks with words.

Man speaks with words always to tell a story. With words man speaks about his sadness. He speaks about loneliness with words. And with words he speaks about love.

What does he feel when he sees the perfect landscape?

He puts it into words— beautiful, pretty, magnificent.

Of course, animals do not speak with words.

We have many words because we feel many things. If I think, therefore I am, then I feel, and therefore I speak with words.

Այնթապ | Antap (p. 99–101)

When my Dad was little, his Armenian grandfather would tell
him stories about their family.

Years later, when I was little, my father would tell me these same
stories about our family.

I don't know a lot about my family and from where we came, but I
know a little.

Mostly, I know about my family like a dream, very elusive and
ambiguous.

My father's father was born in Aleppo before the genocide.

My father's grandmother was born in Harput, and her husband,
Vartan by name, was born in Antap. I know that Antap
had a large citadel.

And in truth that is all that I know about my family.

But I can imagine many things about Antap.

The air always smelled like coriander and sumac.

There, the water was the best; it always resembled roses.

But like a dream, these abstract ideas are neither real nor true and
in truth I don't know a thing.

Why didn't you tell us more stories, Vartan?

Maybe because you knew that if we are too busy with the delicate
past, we won't look to the future. Maybe he wanted it like
this.

Lnjup | The Light (p. 102–103)

The Great God didn't like darkness because he was the Great
Light. Therefore, the sun.

Under the sun flowers grow, we become warm, we see many
things.

There are also stars and the moon.

They give light to the sky.

But little man, little man wanted little suns in his room.

He loved *this* light.

Therefore he wanted little suns on the roads and in schools and in
churches.

And now little man watches the light of his computer and speaks
to his phone.

Now man no longer watches the moon, or talks to the stars.

And Great God is darkness again.

Ինչո՞ւ | Why? (p. 104)

When one is little, the whole world is like a question.
The child's imagination is always growing, becoming.
The internal-thinking spirit, the mind is very beautiful, because it
is filled with *whys*.
At lunch and dinner, they ask *why?* in the classroom they ask *why?*
before bed they ask *why?* They are always wondering.
But when one becomes an adult, *why?* becomes *I know*.
They never wonder, because they think they know all things.
If they asked more questions, maybe we would not have war and
peace would reign more.

Յեւ գրութիւն այս գիրքին մասին | Afterword about this book

(p. 107–118)

“Tenny and Soghovme”

Outside of Armenia, the largest mass of Armenian speakers is found in the United States, as well as the largest concentration of individuals in the world who know literary Western Armenian. Not only that, the American-Armenian community is perhaps the oldest of the foundational communities of the modern diaspora, which was already sizable even before the genocide. Yet despite the above assertions, over the course of approximately 120 years this book is the first volume of creative literature written and published in Armenian that has been produced by an American-born individual.

Between Arlen and Arakelian

The author, Tenny Arlen, is the daughter of Tim Arlen and Tammy Showalter and the younger sister of Jesse Arlen, already known for his Armenian writings. It was her grandfather who changed the last name Arakelian to Arlen. She was born and raised in California, far removed from Armenian circles, from Riverside to San Luis Obispo, a city on the Central Coast of California. Having absolutely no prior Armenian knowledge, it was only at age twenty that she moved to Los Angeles and began to take Western Armenian language and literature courses at UCLA, following in the footsteps of her two older brothers, although with a fundamentally individual drive. Already being the master of an exceptional poetic talent, she soon also began to

write in Armenian and conceived the “return” to the language as a creative process, a means and a way to achieve self-actualization through creation. (The author of these lines had the good fortune to lead that journey from the beginning and to accompany it until the end—until Tenny’s death. That is why, perhaps, that the culmination of this publication as an event spurs dual feelings, of duty and gratification, without being certain where one ends and the other begins. There is also another facet: that unique, singular, perhaps even altering, bewildering significance of inheriting what you yourself have passed down.)

Nearly all of the poems published here were written about 15 to 20 months after Tenny began learning Armenian, which of course suggests a significant investment of time and a serious concentration on the acquisition of the language and the subtleties of vocabulary. The leading ideologies of diaspora would explain that effort with the word “commitment,” subjecting it to a political, but, deep down a moral, drive, which essentially may be translated as duty or obligation. But it was not that. The chief impetus of that exceptional effort was a falling in love with the language and literature, just as has happened and happens to nearly all writers. Not yet having mastered the language, “bonds of love” toward it begin to form, the roots of which one should look for in Tenny Arlen’s early and laborious readings—in her amazement inspired by the works chiefly of Narekatsi, Medzarents, Varuzhan, Beledian, Sarafian, and Vahe Oshagan.

The writings included in this volume are not translations from English. Quite the opposite. They were created in Armenian and later translated to English by the author in order to check the accuracy of what she intended to say (the final three poems are an exception: they were translated to Armenian by the present

writer later on). Her writings were subject to only minor editing at the time. They were written day by day, from 2012 to 2013, mainly inspired by university course readings and discussions (“The Narration” after Krikor Beledian’s “Deviation;” “Night” after the Armenian translation of Salvator Quasimodo’s homonymous poem “Night” and a series of poems by Nigoghos Sarafian; “The Problem of the Armenian Language” as a contemporary answer to Daniel Varuzhan’s 1911 article with that same title in *Azatomart*; “Ebb and Flow” after reading Sarafian’s book of the same name.) In the poems, there is mature thinking and a subtle play of ideas. An example is the poem that opens the volume, “Night,” where we observe a depiction of the writer’s relentless effort to become herself and, at the same time, to become the master of that self and her language, to truly create, which happens only after reaching the creative ‘night,’ i.e. after shedding all the external ‘lights’ and givens, which blur and confound the shaky boundaries between imitation and creation.

It is by beginning from the language that Tenny Arlen performed her journey towards Armenian identity, in the way that she would understand and define it. First, leaving her Near Eastern and North African Studies major, she switched to Comparative Literature, in which she earned her B.A., graduating from UCLA in 2013. Yet she did not stop searching for her own unique place. After participating in different programs in the south of France and the American state of Indiana, in 2015 she was accepted into the doctoral program at the University of Michigan (Ann Arbor), in the Comparative Literature department, with the goal of focusing on French Symbolist literature and its connections with the Armenian expression of that movement.

Immediately before that, after following as an auditor theological courses at the University of Notre Dame and after long consideration, she decided also to bend her religious belonging toward the Armenian Church, where, being baptized in June 2015, she chose another name for herself and so sealed her Armenian identity: Soghovme.

Soghovme, Salomé, Sulamitha, or Shulamith. In the poetic era that Tenny loved, this figure had become renowned in the works of different artists, chiefly through the efforts of the Symbolists in the second half of the nineteenth century, where that biblical character was transformed into a symbol of beauty for its own sake, or more precisely, into a figure incarnating art.

The adoption of Soghovme by she who was born Tenny in 1991 is illustrative, especially in the context of the general process of her adoption of belonging to Armenianness and the Armenian language. Neither the biblical nor 19th-century characters of Soghovme have anything to do with oughts or obligation, with social pressure, necessity, or duty. They desire to attract, to entice only through beauty. They are an invitation to surrender oneself to the reign of beauty. A question of pleasure and enjoyment, i.e., of a choice coming from the subject, which it was for Tenny Arlen, in the linguistic, creative, and other realms.

Tenny Arlen, 1991–2015, ceased from creating a month after adopting Soghovme, on the way moving between one city and the next, as she was heading toward the University of Michigan to begin her doctorate.

It is difficult to mention the unprecedented nature of a volume of literature by an American-born author, which was noted above, without commenting on its significance, especially when it has taken more than a century for it to happen. Beyond assertions, amazement, or an approving smile, it compels us to question why. However, the question “Why so late?” would direct our attention toward the past, and surely one must look for the answer elsewhere. It seems more essential to think about the likelihood of such a thing happening. In other words, is poetry or creative literature more generally *possible* in diaspora?

It is first necessary to offer a few clarifications in connection with the terms employed in that question. Diaspora is not capitalized, because the the question wants to think about diasporas in general, and not about the proper noun, that potential land, where many of us live. It indicates a place where a writer would be born, and for now we must temporarily leave aside the middle-eastern, Armenian ghettos, i.e. those communities which ignored their surrounding society and succeeded in closing themselves off behind a fence linguistically, culturally, and in the realm of creativity.

“To create in diaspora” is confined, at least for present purposes, to those who are born or at least raised in liminal, in-between places, in the threshold between one place and another, where the fluctuation between their mother tongue and other languages in their surroundings—whether in the street, school, university, workplace, or, of course, in their readings—is not just hypothetical, but an everyday and inevitable experience. They are truly liminal diasporans. On the other hand, one of the premises would also be that that diaspora had come about as the result of a

catastrophe, an explosion, a dispersion of loss (and thus perhaps it would be necessary to bring back the capitalized Diaspora).

Adoption (of a child) and Adoption (of a parent)

Those for whom Armenian has not been chronologically first—i.e., their mother tongue during their first few years of life—have generally remained outside of the general understanding of a liminal diasporan Armenian writer, i.e., that which the academic literature likes to call a “heritage language,” and which includes all levels of familiarity with the language that it is possible to imagine, beginning with the most elementary acquaintance. But left outside of this definition are those who adopted Armenian at a mature age, who, according to their own definition, “returned” to Armenian, although objectively speaking Armenian never had a beginning in their biography to where it would be possible to “return.”

Their adoption occurs generally during university, after age twenty, and with the exception of those who in recent times have acquired the language for utilitarian—whether academic or other—reasons (who comprise one sub-grouping of the so-called “new speakers”), those who do this, according to their own understanding, are performing a return to their parents, ancestors, or even just to that one single branch of their many-peopled family tree that belongs to the Armenian culture. In this cycle, the adoption in question, rather than being the adoption of offspring (a child), is really the adoption of progenitors (a mother or a father).

There is yet another level, where the adoption of a parent in essence involves a projection, an aiming at the future expressed in creative intent. Such a person acquires the language with the purpose—whether hidden or explicit—of writing and creating in that language, which veers toward the concept not so much of adoption (of a child), but rather of *birth* of a child, the production of offspring, procreation. The subject not only pursues the past, but by appropriating the past, she desires to nurture her present and delineate a path, an outline toward the future.

In other words, this adoption of the mother or father masks an intention to *become* a mother or father. Progenitors are adopted with the aim of projecting, transmitting, continuing them, and thus it involves on the part of the subject both the purpose of discovering herself and of extending, prolonging herself.

The above situation must surely seem illusory, or perhaps even delusional, except in the case of “miracle children,” an appellation which in and of itself fundamentally betrays a lack of faith in regard to the possibility of creative activity. There is a lot of talk in recent years about the “foreign” born Armenian, about “half,” “quarter,” or even “one-eighth” Armenians (the scare quotes are necessary in order to problematize the very idea of fragmentary identity). Could such a person then not just become familiar with Armenian, but go on to create in Armenian?

Illusory? Delusional? Perhaps so. But if that possibility be rejected as a mere illusion, then the logical conclusion would be that it is fundamentally illusory to think about a Diaspora two or three generations from now, in that place where nearly all diasporas tend to pass (if not pass away): the West. All the homilies, schools, lectures, and articles, the masses and

resounding sermons, the tired rituals, all of them would be illusory. Simply a monument, a memorial, which is the ultimate limit of the face looking towards the monumental past. This, because without a creative language, there will no longer be that which there now is. It will exist, but only as memory, memorial, an object of study or excavation for archaeology. A dead object. In the most extreme instance, that which in one way or another was proposed by one famous pan-diasporan institution: a “Legacy Center” in Yerevan, and probably in English, at that. A beautiful museum, a playground for philologists.

The fundamental way of turning illusion into the possibility of reality, it seems, consists in choosing to offer Armenian, i.e., linguistic production presented in Armenian; the thought of taking the reader seriously; analysis, creativity, poetry. Taking seriously means captivating seriously, focusing on the inherent value of a choice object, of *creating* that *today*. Yet before the reader, it is the creator herself who is to be taken seriously, in her sleepless labor, in her effort to adopt progenitor and offspring, in the newly recognized evaluation of what’s “inside” through the richness brought from outside, but especially, in the reverence shown when approaching all of that, a reverence which signals not fear, but falling in love, and, later on, peaceful love.

It is in just such a way that those who inspired Tenny Arlen to turn her poetic calling towards Armenian have written and created. It is that same inspiration which has pushed dozens of university students in their turn to perform their own creative attempts after reading Tenny’s writings, so that the language itself, by coming out of the ritualistic, may nourish a bold ambition to live a more or less real life in the contemporary world.