

Critics' Forum

Literature

The Lost Generation: The Poetry of David Kherdian

By Hovig Tchalian

The Armenian-American poet, novelist and essayist David Kherdian, has been writing for decades. His new book of poems, entitled *Letters to My Father* (2005), represents his latest effort.

Kherdian is unusual in this regard, both for having been so long in a profession not known for supporting its own, as well as for producing any new English-language poetry in the Armenian Diaspora in recent years at all.

At his best, Kherdian writes a melancholy and sometimes nostalgic poetry that expresses simple ideas with a straightforward style and tone. The very first poem in this newest collection exhibits this kind of understated elegance. Kherdian (who, for the sake of simplicity, we will assume *is* the speaker throughout) recounts a wartime story his father has told him:

They are in the river
he and his buddy

swimming with two
loaves of bread

in upraised hands
trying to keep them dry.

The poet's compact, terse style lends itself well to the sense that is being portrayed—of a symbolic moment both sad and strange, in which two soldiers carry the source of their livelihood precariously over their heads while wading in the river. (How similar—and yet how different—the scene would have been if the two men were poor African villagers carrying a basket of wheat across the river, one they had crossed a thousand times in familiar surroundings, instead of in a strange and unfamiliar place.)

The poem (and the collection as a whole) conveys well that sense of distance and longing so much a part of the experience of the soldier and the immigrant both. The simplicity of the language thus carries most of the emotional and experiential weight. And when the language slips, it tips the balance back all the more toward the banal and sentimental, as with the words that immediately precede the ones quoted above:

He is telling the tale
to me, his son

who wonders too
where he belongs.

What lifts the poem, almost despite itself, above the level of banality is the central image of those earlier lines, the water carried by the force of the river the men are crossing, once again mediated by the father:

He does not
explain

he does not finish
the story

but looks at me
in wonder

and I no longer see
what he sees

moving water grown still
under moonlight

The poem ends fittingly, with the river's rushing waters now stilled and the poet's father refusing to explain or continue to tell the story, with the lines themselves trailing off the page into the present moment. (The poet has intentionally left out the final period.)

The strange simplicity of these final lines conveys the sense of unfamiliarity and distance expressed far less adroitly in the speaker's earlier lines, as he wondered "too where he belongs..." The moment speaks for itself, with both father and son estranged from themselves and each other, lost in generational and personal stories neither can fully convey.

The image of water makes several more appearances in the collection, in almost every case adding depth and dimension to what would otherwise have been a perhaps too ordinary collection of poems, ironically a too personal account of a relationship between father and son. In a later poem (Nine), the speaker watches his father swimming in the ocean:

I stood on the beach with
mother—or alone—
and watched you, strangely suited,
making even the water you stood in
seem foreign, forlorn.

The generational distance between father and son is amplified by the image, once again, of standing water, now the ocean that separates the continent the father inhabits from the one he left years earlier.

In another poem still (Forty-Three), the son wonders whether his father has walked across

a bridge the son always crosses, with the emptiness between it and the water suggesting a past now lost:

. . . Your past
life, my life ungained as yet.
My life, your nightmare,
and the shadows that moved
in the mesh between.

While as a whole, *Letters to My Father* too often crosses the fine line between style and sentiment, it is in moments like these that it finds its voice and speaks it honestly and without pretense. The collection is not Kherdian's best work. But it represents the latest episode in a long and successful career whose story other writers and poets would do well to continue.

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