

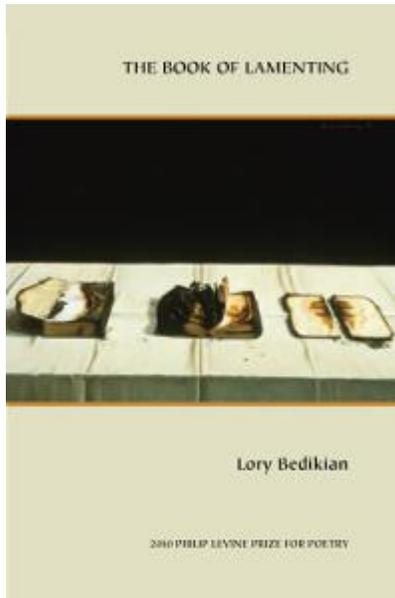
Critics' Forum

Literature

Voghb yev Garod, Lament and Longing: Lory Bedikian's *The Book of Lamenting*

By Tamar Boyadjian

"...nothing that runs can stay the same."



As I think about this closing line of Lory Bedikian's poem, "The Book of Lamenting," – bearing the same title as her first book of poems, winner of the 2010 Philip Levine Prize for Poetry, and due to be released on October 30, 2011 by Anhinga Press – I think about the many ways in which her collection of poetry is a *voghb*, or lament for life, family, and country.

For each of us, these terms may mean different things. As Armenians, they sometimes all seem to mean the same thing. Bedikian's poetry reminds us of the very complicated relationship of these categories and the ways in which as immigrants and human beings, we are constantly dealing with various forms of loss and change.

In poems such as "Levon," "Letter from Beirut," "Night in Lebanon," and "Prayer for my Immigrant Relatives," the narrator touches upon the harsh realities of living in a time of war: "For years we have known / the language of bombs," says the poem "Letter from Beirut," addressed to the title character, "Cousin" (6-7). Through various juxtapositions – calm and chaos, light and dark, stillness and movement – and multiple enjambments within the lines of verse, poems such as these become reminders of the unstable and unsettling moments of the past and the difficulty of calling a place a home: "When peoples' words resemble the buzz / of beehives, help them to hear the music / of home..." ("Prayer for my Immigrant Relatives," 6-8).

But what exactly is the place the narrator calls “home?” From Beirut to Armenia to the United States, many of these genuine and intimate stories allow us to share in moments of self-discovery, where we observe the narrator’s attempts to reconcile her place historically, geographically, and temporally: “The year 1997 rose like a spiral staircase / into a ceiling of darkness” (“Crossing Out the Date,” 1-2). The narrator’s journey becomes a shared voyage through space, time, and place, recounting deep-rooted memories, where family, history, and culture intersect. Each poem communicates instances in time when these very moments are experienced, questioned, and scrutinized.

In poems such as “The Fisherman,” “Father Picking Grapes, Armenia, 1997,” “Washing of the Feet, Lake Sevan, 1997,” and “On the way to Oshagan,” the narrator’s experience evokes themes of homeland lost, remembered, or imagined. Darkness and ambiguity dominate these poems’ descriptions of land and country, interspersed with an internal dialogue where nostalgia meets reality, such as in the poem, “On the way to Oshagan”:

...After all
having an ancestral name, firm family tree, the language
ironed to my tongue since the day I was born
how could I be just another Amerigatzi? I say
this to myself, though I’m the one with the walking
shoes, the camera, the plaid-patterned pants. (24-28)

Throughout the poems, the familiar moments confront unforeseen experiences. The narrator’s confident assertions of difficult circumstances are tinged with doubt and despair, such as the description in the poem, “At my Mother’s Dresser”:

As she swirls lipstick towards her mouth,
one hand smoothes the color on,
as the other dabs the crying
that’s begun. She does this without a change
of face. She does this as if it’s part
of dressing, of carrying on. (40-46)

These recollections of childhood experiences and relationships with family and friends hit close to home for many immigrants, displaced seldom by choice, often by circumstance. These stories also function metonymically – they stand as symbols of an Armenian heritage whose voice carries within it the glory as well as the despair of its own past: “On the back of every tongue in my family, / there is a dove that lives and dies...and it will chirp the ugliness or the pitted / truth, of how we choke on what we hide” (“Beyond the Mouth,” 1-2).

The personal and cultural tensions inherent in Bedikian’s poems are also paired with various types of progress – growth, maturation, awakening – inhibited by the shadows of family and cultural history, as expressed in the poem, “Levon”:

...I don't even think of poetry.
Instead I wonder where the ghosts are now,
if the scent is stronger at dawn or dusk,
if they know how far we've come,
if they can hear the rumbling of our wheels. (26-30)

In the "The Book of Lamenting," melancholy is a residue of the inherent tension between a mournful past and an uncertain future, carrying with it an implicit anxiety, suggested by its closing lines: "...nothing that runs can stay the same."

For the narrator, these difficult experiences devolve into moments of reconciliation and of reckoning powerfully recreated and interrogated within the short span of a few lines of verse. As the twenty-first line of the poem "The Book of Lamenting" puts it, "This is where I am when the world has closed its ears." For Bedikian, this moment encapsulates the act and the consolation of writing poetry, the silent recognition that the world can shut out her stories and yet hear them loud and clear.

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