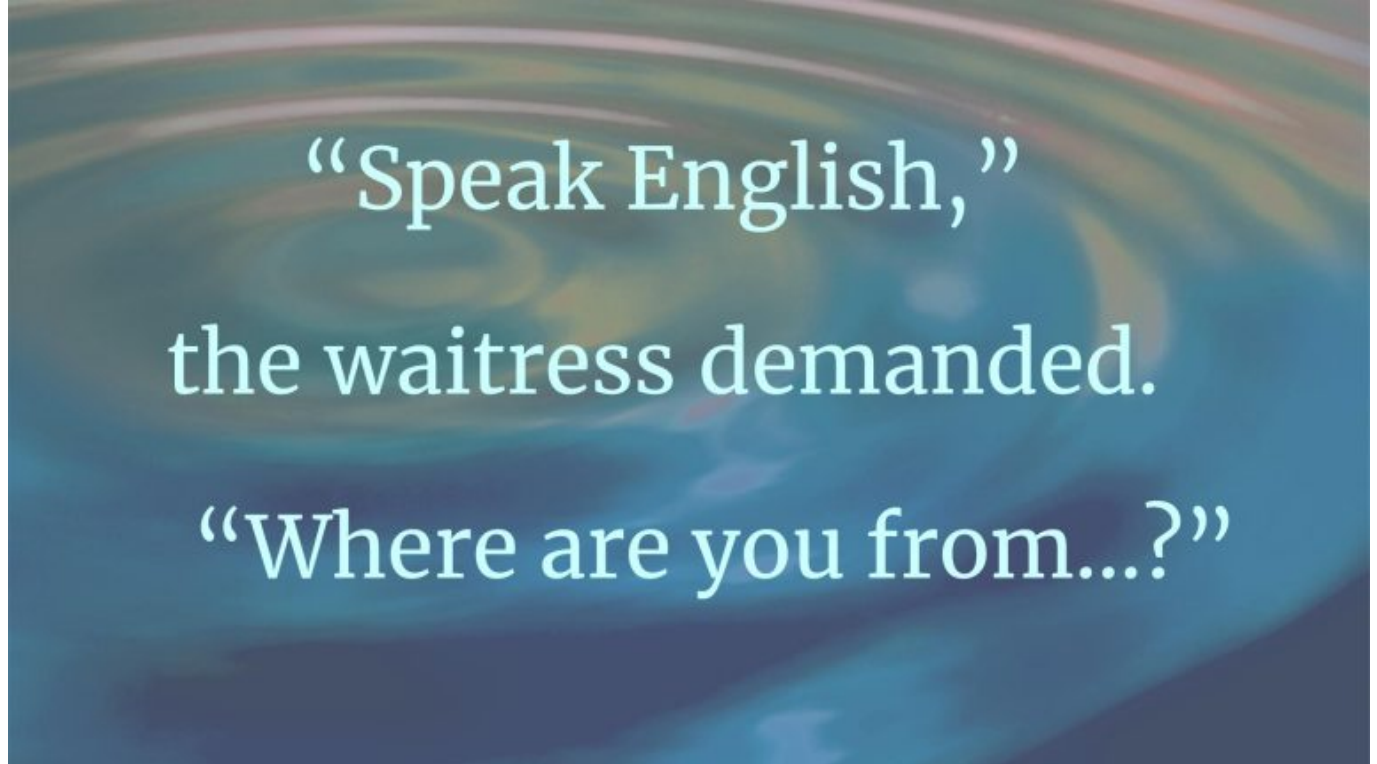


The Genesis of Forgetfulness: A Poet's Journey

Category: Stories

written by Shahé Mankerian | October 24, 2023



"The poet's job is to translate unspeakable things on to the page..." – Roger Robinson

In the beginning, the Lebanese civil war barely seeped through the ceiling of our living room. It didn't shatter windows or infiltrate through cracked walls. It became a slow fixture at our dinner table, nibbled on Mama's delicately wrapped grape leaves, inhaled Father's unfiltered cigarettes, listened to my older brother practice scale after scale on the upright piano and sat on the Persian carpet with my younger brother to rearrange his Matchbox cars. In our Armenian family of five, the war felt mute—a sixth character without words, an unobtrusive intruder who was given permanent residency.

Soon after, we heard about the sudden abduction of the blind newspaper boy. Militiamen placed sandbags underneath the railroad bridge between Mar Mikhaël and Bourj Hammoud. My brothers and I stopped playing Risk on our sagging balcony and watched the bloody baker being dragged by his feet on Rue Arménie. Not long after, we saw them tying his severed head to the chrome bumper of a black Mercedes, using his tattered *keffiyeh*. We spent six days trapped underground in a makeshift shelter full of tractors. And then the schools closed, and my father finally decided to relocate his family to America.

In her essay *Infinite Departure and Uncertain Return*, Rewa Zeinati writes:

"You spent your whole life leaving Lebanon." We didn't leave Lebanon; an airplane simply spewed shell-shocked refugees onto a tarmac at LAX. Like Lot's wife, most of us turned into saline pillars because we masochistically turned our heads back and yearned for the yesteryears.

"Pepsi or Coke?" interrogated the suspicious waitress.

"Water!" Mama answered in Armenian.

"Speak English," the waitress demanded. "Where are you from?"

She waited.

Mama kicked me under the table as I mumbled, "Lebanon."

Wrong answer.

"Your people," sneered the server, "blasted those poor Marines into smithereens."

Before we came to America, we had tossed the hasty fragments of a civil war into one of the suitcases. Father didn't pay baggage fees at the airport because of the additional weight. At checkpoints, no one rummaged through our baggage; no one questioned the dangers of carrying this hidden weight. And long after we reached our destination, we took turns carrying the load. We never talked about it at the dinner table or after the volatile verbal battles between my parents. No one questioned the lack of laughter in our new home. No one had time to reflect.

At some point, I retreated. The school library became a place of refuge. I bumped into books and slipped into incoherent words. The librarian suggested that I take smaller bites and gave me poems by white men like Whitman and Wordsworth.

Later, in English class, the teacher snarled, "Read us the poem you wrote about the fighting in Albania."

I was too young to grieve or give geography lessons to Mrs. Blackburn, who was white. I wanted to say, "Armenians are diasporic people, displaced by a genocide, who took refuge in Lebanon until a civil war banished them once more."

During my high-school years, counselors failed to recognize the hunchbacked kids carrying warfare remnants over their shoulders in crowded hallways. I shoved mine into a backpack and traveled incognito from classroom to classroom. Draped in a frayed sweater, I took trauma on dates and later to the prom. In college, she hid in convoluted poems I wrote. When I became a teacher, I gutlessly stapled trauma on a bulletin board behind the picture of Vonnegut. When I got married, I pinned her to my lapel like a camera concealed in the corsage. Later, she sounded colicky as my daughter slept in a crib.

Gregory Orr writes, "I believe in poetry as a way of surviving the emotional

chaos, spiritual confusions and traumatic events that come with being alive." Like Orr, I, too, tried to save myself with nuggets of poetry and liberated my confined chaos onto the pages of my journals. That's how *History of Forgetfulness* chiseled itself to life. For forty years, I kept rewriting the same poem, taking to heart James Baldwin's mantra: "Every writer has only one story to tell, and he has to find a way of telling it until the meaning becomes clearer and clearer."

As a child of war, my parents clearly raised me to distance myself from the wayward streets of Beirut. In obedience to the Coca-Cola waitress's unforgiving demand, I tried to *speak English* and shredded the remnants of Armenian and Arabic letters in a wastebasket. However, I was a hoarder at heart. I dragged the wastebasket with me everywhere.

"In America, we start fresh," my father said, and raised me to love literature, because having a poet in the house seemed better than having a parasite. Ludwig Börne said, "The suppressed word is dangerous," so I wrote poems to remove layers of damaged skin and waited for a sense of rehabilitation.

To recover, America equipped me to reboot, refresh and fast-forward. Yet I fed my fixation by revisiting my tumultuous past. I made an art form of reloading old memory reels and pausing at scenes recorded forty years back: the missing balconies—*pause*—bomb craters full of corrugated pipes—*pause*—the dead with bloated bellies strewn on the sidewalk—*pause*. In my journey of retelling the immigrant story, my parents disintegrated slowly and disappeared into the American abyss. Regrettably, I couldn't pause their deaths. I lost them both quietly and buried them on a hill overlooking Los Angeles. *Pause*.

History of Forgetfulness became a collection of recollections. It sought to disband the hyphen in the man-child and then tried to repair it. The man needed to exist outside the child; therefore, the far-flung voice of the adult poet needed to liberate the child trapped in the horrors of war. Every poem became a morsel for solace.

Like Mama's pressure cooker, I, too, learned to release steam with every hissing verse, until it became safe to reopen the lid.