

A Poet's Voice

Keith Garebian

Kieth Garebian is a widely published, award-winning freelance literary and theatre critic, biographer, and poet. Born in Bombay to an Armenian father and Anglo-Indian mother, he holds a doctorate in Canadian and Commonwealth Literature (Queen's University, 1973) and posts theatre, dance, and book reviews on his website www.stageandpage.com. Among his many awards are the Canadian Authors Association (Niagara Branch) Poetry Award (2009), the Mississauga Arts Award (2000 and 2008), a Dan Sullivan Memorial Poetry Award (2006), the Lakeshore Arts and Scarborough Arts Council Poetry Award (2003), and the Naji Naaman Literary Honour Prize (2009). He lives in Mississauga.

Author's Statement Poetry humanizes as it provokes and comforts. Much of my earlier poetry has been concerned with giving voice to victims or personae, either by projection (the monologues of my Frida Kahlo poems in *Frida: Paint Me As A Volcano*) or by a manipulation of points of view (as in my Derek Jarman poems in *Blue*). My Armenian poems from *Children of Ararat* (Frontenac House, 2010) are a further means of giving voice, but in this case, it is the voice of a survivor's son who tries to create "a terrible beauty" from the Armenian genocide and its continuing trauma, so that I may bury the dead with due homage and challenge the denial of deliberate amnesiacs.

My Father

I. To Speak His Own Love

Named Adam, he wasn't the first-born,
yet he felt a wound in his side,
something wrenched from him
in Eden, and he was cast out
among weeds and bare stones
never to be free of wariness,
even when held by desire,
making it hard to speak his own love
from a fixed place in the world.

II. Silence and Stammer

Ash on his orphaned tongue
weight of the void

he stammered into stone, into silence
the nothingness of night

words speaking stones
stones speaking silence

dry tongue feeling around
the seams of syllables

stammer in the dryness of exile
spells the distance unforgiving

his murdered kin, the shadows looming
dark birds hammering the sky

Indoctrination of a Turkish Boy

Tell him how history has losers and victors.
Tell him they are bitter in defeat.
Don't tell him about fabrication.

Tell him it's important to be quiet.
Tell him skeletons in the photographs are Jews.
Don't tell him they are Armenians.

Tell him they were people who hated Turks.
Tell him the same thing repeatedly.
Don't tell him about their convulsive misery.

Tell him they were a disgrace.
Tell him they were a curse.
Don't tell him how they became fossils.

Tell him everything was done for their own good.
Tell him the screams were of angry birds.
Don't tell him about the clubs, axes, knives.

Tell him they were moved from inhospitable lands.
Tell him they were sent to where they could prosper.
Don't tell him about the canyons, caves, or desert.

Tell him the statistics are skewed.
Tell him it's their strategy of resourceful recollection.
Don't tell him the unpleasant truths.

Tell him you'll say more when the time comes.
Tell him this is not the time to re-visit history.

Don't tell him you select what you want to remember.

Don't tell him anything more.

Tattooed Girls, Part Two

I

Breathing odours foreign to them,
they are seized with intent
to blow old idioms shut.
A catalogue of harms in the insistent
abduction, playing the slave
with irresistible wounds.

New enchantment means harsh entry
that rends old families, taking a path
after the loss of graves, walking to the salt
and bread of a different closure—
time bringing the future
into an enclosed presence.
In heart song's harsh music,
ecstasy is absent from gestures
in submission's bond.

II

Woman has become a doubt
despite the prospect of fecundity
and inheritance. Their tattoos have meaning
only as functions of the body: to labour,
cook, clean, bear children, submit
to what is outside their skin, keeping within
a clamp on private configuration,
the blue wounds altering the visage,
linking arm, chest, neck, and face.
Even with food, their roots find soil bitter,
the historical rupture forbidding rapture.

Tattoos are drawn on them
like scars or yearnings.
Skin is hazard's shroud.
Its markings hone a homily
of enactment, the body's capacity
to turn frailty to fortuitous torsion,
endowment, dissimulation.
Without panic, they survive
the twist of surfaces, gathering
solitude and pain under the ribs,
straining to remember small realities
and cherished faces.

Memorizing water in their mouths
where rain had entered, the wind
a caress in their hair, and home
a place where feelings erupted
no matter what they willed.

Skin trammelled from the outside
can rise with the mind's fabulation,
the will's inexact fervour, the spine's
shudder, leaning with the secret self
to a stillness beyond amazement—

a course of sustenance in a wounded domain,
the heart's small crater.

The Need for Precision

One apple plus one apple make two
without dissent. The mathematics
of apples can make for certitude.
Some particles of matter
count more than bodies
where the losses are not exact, where
the lost are a loss in meaning,
indeterminate spectres flitting
across maps.

In an inventory of claim, how easy
to account for clay bowls,
for gall-nut, sugar and rice,
hemp cords and silk clothes.
The tally of torts worth gold.
But where is the precision
of headless bodies, of unmarked graves,
shreds of scarves hanging in walnut trees,
of apple-cheeked children
whose golden hair was carried
by winds to the mountains?

Squalid

Everything is begging to be given voice:
empty work-sheds, rusted keyholes, deserted cafes,
the vines of orchards, blue shadows,
shrivelled shoes, abandoned flutes—

If only just to say:
To have died here
had some meaning
in the squalid mess of history—

So we may forgive the insult
of this, the cheering of mobs
as axes thudded, as bright blood
filled the gutters—

And fires left their scars
down to the last ungrieving stone.