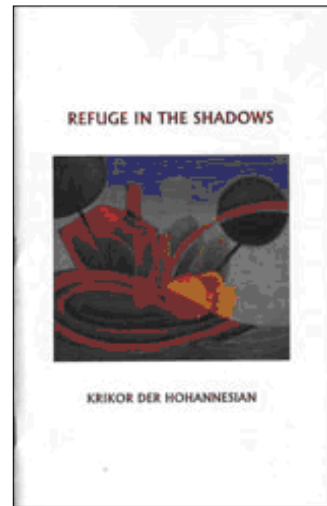


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Refuge in the Shadows
By Krikor Der Hohannesian
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Review by Dennis Daly

Those of us who hear disembodied voices have been given a bad rap in today's technology-based world. How unfortunate! A good case could be made that human beings are sentinels deployed by our planet, or perhaps universe, to listen and record. But even sentinels have a responsibility to their own species and must respond by acting accordingly.

Some of the most adept of these sentinels society calls poets. They provide conduits for the competing voices (or muses as other generations have labeled them) buzzing around the ether.

Krikor Der Hohannesian takes his responsibility as a poet-sentinel seriously and responds to his voices with a righteous fervor and a singular decency. His first poem, *Elegy*, sets the tone and stakes out his territory. The poet speaks from the Granary, a Boston graveyard. He says,

*...But listen...
in the shadows of ancient elm and maple
and you may hear it...
the wispy, low keening
of founding ghosts
mourning the sins of us,
their promise. Take heed,
take heed they whisper—refuge
from their judgment elusive as grace
for the inattentive...*

After these ghostly, somewhat pissed-off, whispers, the poet opens up the context to all creation, or at least all creation as we know it. The Poem *In the Beginning* ties the existence of nature's many voices to man's ability to hear and understand. Der Hohannesian explains,

*The puffs of cumulus born of
sea mist and updrafts, wind-blown urns
for thirsty primeval forests. The desultory
sowing of pod and seed, the destruction
by wildfires, hurricanes, tornados,
ice, snow, flood and drought. Rebirth
rode the fickle winds of change. Until
erectus, habilis, neanderthalis, sound*

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*fell on no human ear. But once heard
there was no denying a force to be heeded:
a herald of tidings, bearer of gifts, the messenger
that warned of danger...*

In the same poem the author fearlessly engages his voices with indignation and passion. Consider these lines,

*... human sounds, too, that rise
on the wind but are easily lost:
the wail of a Darfuri child, starved,
black flies feasting on black skin,
a Shia wife keening—
her lost husband lost to a vest
of detonated shrapnel,
the shouts for justice
from the disenfranchised,
from those who have lost heart
a thunderous silence, whispers
from the souls of the dead...*

Sometimes the voice of silence both comforts and confounds, whereas the alternative introduces another reality, nullification. The poem entitled *A Way of Life* sounds out clattering, splintering, a screech, and a thud. These are sounds of demolition, the end of a way of life. The poet describes the terrible suddenness of change and life's non-transitions here,

*Henry and his wife both near 100 years,
eight decades together in this his house of birth,
defying entropy—suddenly vanished
like wraiths in the night...*

Voices come in many forms. Sometimes even the motion of hands delivers a jaw-dropping eloquence. Der Hohannesian begins his poem *These Hands* this way,

*How strange to look at them
with a young child's awe
these hands I take for granted.
These hands that point
and beckon, clap and slap,
accent speech with dips and swoops,
and held my children new-born,
tiny fists clenched, grasping at air...*

In the poem *A Man is Down* the poet's persona lies awake listening the musical voices of nature. He uncodes the dirge of wind and rain and discovers death by violence. The sounds of suffering fill the air. The poet expresses it this way,

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*a wife is keening...
a child is squalling...
I must grieve with them, I must
mourn him and all like him who
choose to rise against the oppressor
a man is down...
and others will rise in his stead,
the rain, and wind, they tell me so...*

I found the poem entitled *Lest We Forget* irritating, grating, and probably the most interesting piece in this collection. The narrative focus on an adolescent Iraqi child named Ali who has lost both arms, his parents and his siblings in an American missile strike. He whispers a wish for new prosthetic arms. Apparently the news media has taken an interest in Ali for the moment and his voiced wish has possibility. But the fickle media jumps onto the infamous rescue of Private Lynch and Ali is abandoned to his horrendous fate. I accept the story line and the ensuing pathos. Only a hard-hearted son-of-a-bitch realist would suggest apologies, reparations, and leaving these devastated people alone. The emphasis placed on the word leaving. A feel-good trip to the US for Ali seems beside the point. Hundreds of limbless, perhaps less photogenic, children would never be considered for such staged missions of mercy. Such a mission strikes me as just as dishonest and as political as the Lynch rescue farce. But Der Hohannesian sees it differently. Whether he's right or wrong, the world needs more people who think as Der Hohannesian does. He's clearly a better person than I am. He believes one act of kindness, staged or not, cynical or not, should carry the day. His poetic passion rages defiantly from the page. Here is a lovely meditation hidden in the heart of the poem's narrative that says a lot about the sensitivities of this poet,

*...His pain pulsates
Behind dilated eyes, brown
Iraqi eyes, soft as those of a desert
camel. Bewilderment flickers like passing
shadows through the merciless yellow-white
of klieg lights. I wonder where
his adolescent soul wanders...*

The poem *Requiem*, a hymn of remembrance to the poet's dead mother, conjures up the genocide against the Armenian people perpetrated by the Ottoman Turks around the time of the First World War. Ghosts are everywhere, haunting the wind with atrocity after atrocity. Memories like this do not die. Der Hohannesian laments,

*Almost a century has passed, fresh rumors float on the wind.
Osman's descendants intend to plow under
All vestiges, once and for all to silence the screams,
The pleading, the cursing against a forsaking God,
The raging against their butchers by ghostly spirits...
But, the poet continues,
...Anatolian breezes*

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*Will forever betray them, bearing bone dust
And blood motes into every fissure and crevice
Where Armenians once lived...*

Many of today's Turks, it is worth noting, including the great writer Orhan Pamuk, are breaking with the past and admitting these long denied historical truths. Here's hoping that this trend continues.

If you like a writer who puts his conscience first before other considerations and you appreciate the delicate and intricate language of weather and wind chimes you will love Der Hohannesian. Another terrific book from Cervena Barva Press.