

## Varujan Vosganian, *The Book of Whispers*

### Chapters seven and eight

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#### Seven

‘Do not harm their women,’ said Armen Garo. ‘And nor the children.’

One by one, all the members of the Special Mission gathered at the offices of the *Djagadamard* newspaper in Constantinople. They had been selected with care. The group had been whittled down to those who had taken part in such operations before, working either alone or in ambush parties. ‘I trust only a man who has killed before,’ Armen Garo had declared. They were given photographs of those they were to seek out, wherever they were hiding. Their hiding places might be anywhere, from Berlin or Rome to the steppes of Central Asia. Broad-shouldered, bull-necked Talaat Pasha, the Minister of the Interior, was a brawny man, whose head, with its square chin and jaws that could rip asunder, was more like an extension of his powerful chest. In the lower part of the photograph, his fists, twice the size of a normal man’s, betokened pugnacity. Beside him, fragile, her features delicate, his wife wore a white dress and a lace cap in the European style, so very different from the pasha’s fez. Then there was Enver, a short man made taller by his boot heels. He had haughty eyes and slender fingers that preened the points of his moustache. He was proud of his army commander’s braids, which, cascading luxuriantly from his shoulders and covering his narrow chest, sought to

disguise the humble beginnings of a son whose mother, in order to raise him, had plied one of the most despised trades in all the Empire: she had washed the bodies of the dead. In one of the photographs, his thin, possessive, but nonetheless timid arm encircles the delicate waist of his wife, Nadjeh, a princess of the imperial harem, and therefore a daughter of the sultan. And in another photograph, Enver, the son of the woman who washed the dead, the son-in-law of the sultan, strains to look lofty, his face set rigid, between portraits of his idols, Napoleon and Frederick the Great. Then there was Djemal Pasha, the Lepidus of that martial triumvirate. Ordinary in appearance, if he had not worn the epaulettes of a minister of the navy, he would have gone completely unnoticed, although he made painful efforts to match the brutality of Talaat and the haughtiness of Enver. Then there were Dr Nazîm and Behaeddin Shakir, the ideologues of the Union and Progress Party, who had come up with the idea of releasing criminals from the prisons. Enrolled in armed units, the criminals were to guard the caravans of Armenians and slaughter them at the crossroads. We do not know how beautiful their wives were: they were plump and had black hair, but their features are hard to make out, since the only photographs we have of them are from their youth and show them with veiled faces, weeping by the coffins of their husbands, after the avengers had completed their mission. And the others, Djemal Azmi, prefect of Trebizond, Bahbud Khan Djivanşir . . . Armen Garo picked up the photographs of Talaat and Enver, pictured with their wives. He looked at each of his men in turn: Solomon Tehlirian, Aram Yerkanian, Arshavir Shiragian, Hrach Papazian, Misak Torlakian.

‘Do not kill the women,’ he repeated. ‘And nor their children.’

The date when that meeting took place is of no importance to us. *The Book of Whispers* is not a history book, but one of states of conscience. This is why it becomes pellucid and its pages are transparent. It is true that in *The Book of Whispers* there are many precise dates, which specify the very day, hour and place. The pen moves swiftly, but sometimes it decides to linger, waiting for the reader and me to catch up, and then perhaps it goes into greater detail than necessary. Each additional word illumines, but precisely for that reason it diminishes.

And so even if we were to strike from it each list of years and each tally of days, *The Book of Whispers* would still preserve all its meanings. Such things have always happened to people everywhere. In fact, at its core *The Book of Whispers* remains the same for all time, like a chorale by Johann Sebastian Bach, like a narrow gate through which people pass, stooping or huddling close to each other.

‘Above all else, they killed our poet,’ said Shavarsh Misakian.

The newspaper offices had escaped the disaster as if by miracle. In any event, after the slaughter that began on 24 April 1915, when hundreds of intellectuals were arrested and the greater part of them slain, all the capital’s Armenians had taken it to be a miracle when the deportation order was rescinded. They had been about to share the fate of the other Armenian communities, driven from their homes and plundered of everything they owned, although their lot would have been harder, for unlike the Armenians of Van, Sivas and Adana, their caravans would have had to traverse the whole of the Anatolian plateau on their way to the deserts of Syria, where, unless they were massacred by the gangs of armed criminals or the bands of

nomads, they would have died of hunger and cold amid the expanses of makeshift tents, in the desert where the scorching heat of the days and the freezing cold of the nights claimed their equal share of victims.

Outlawed in 1915, the central press organ of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, named *Azadamard* at the time, re-appeared in 1918 under a new name, albeit one that evoked the first: *Djagadamard*. Shavarsh Misakian was the editor-in-chief at the time; he had returned to take up his old job. He sat in a corner. He was not a member of the Special Mission, but he had the authority that Armen Garo and Shahan Natali needed, an authority lent not by his stature, but rather, with his drooping left shoulder and crooked head, precisely by his lack of grandeur. It was his infirmity that made him imposing, because it reminded others of the stubbornness with which he had endured torture in the military prison where he had been taken in March 1916 and where, a few months later, he had torn himself from the hands of his tormenters and hurled himself from the third floor into the courtyard below. He had survived his serious injuries and was released on 27 November 1918, when the capital was occupied by troops. But his broken body had taken upon itself the crookedness of the world, a reminder to all that he had been delivered from the fear of death.

Their enemies knew that in order to annihilate them as a people, they would have to kill their poet without fail. To an oppressed and threatened people, the Poet becomes the leader. Daniel Varujan had been arrested along with the other intellectuals on 24 April 1915. He was tied to a tree and stoned to death, then left to the scavenging animals and the phantoms of the night. Legends tell that he is alive still. During the burning of Smyrna some told that

for an instant they had glimpsed his face in the burning mirrors. The only thing that we can prove from these legends of the resurrection of Daniel Varujan is that although we know the site of his passion, bound to the trunk of a tree, to a living cross, we do not know in what place his grave might lie. As we have proof of his death and even know the name of his executioner—Oguz Bey, captain of the Ceanguiri—but have no knowledge of his grave, we may be tempted by the thought of his resurrection.

Others of those arrested on 24 April, for example two members of parliament, Krikor Zohrab, the member for Constantinople, and Vartkes Seringulian, the member for Erzerum, ended up in the deserts of Syria, in Urfa and then Aleppo. Roessler, the German consul in Aleppo, tells us of them in a letter to Wangenheim, the German ambassador: 'Zohrab and Vartkes effendi are in Aleppo and are part of a convey headed for Diarbekir. It spells their certain death: Zohrab has a heart condition and Vartkes' wife has just given birth.' About the crimes that took place when my grandparents were children I have learned many things, not so much from the accounts of the survivors, as much as from the boasts of the killers. How great the difference between the shyness of those who are slain and the arrogance of those who slay . . . For example, we learn that they were stabbed with bayonets. Vartkes had his brains blown out. Zohrab's had his head smashed in by rocks. Their bodies were then cut to pieces and abandoned. Had anyone bothered to bury the countless dead of those days, he would not have been able to recognise them from the mangled remnants of their bodies.

But life goes on. The name of the place where Daniel Varujan was killed is Tuna. Before being led away, the poet told the others: 'Take care of my new-born son. Let him be baptised Varujan.'

'We will avenge them, both him and the others,' said Armen Garo, looking fixedly at Shavarsh Misakian. 'This is why you shall not harm their women or their children. We are not robbers of the dead or killers of women.'

They were in the first circle.

'Armen is right,' said Shavarsh Misakian. 'Follow the example of General Dro.'

At the time, Dro had not yet become a general. He was just twenty-one in February 1905, when the three-day massacre began in Baku. The Tartar bands killed thousands of Armenians. And Prince Nakashidze, the Tsar's governor, despite the warnings and then despite the Armenians' cries of desperation, not only did nothing to protect them, but even supplied the attackers with weapons. The Central Committee of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation sent word to governor Nakashidze that the party had sentenced him to death. The young Drastamat Kanayan, whom, under the name General Dro, we met earlier, was given the task of executing the sentence.

On the appointed day, Dro waited for the governor's procession on a narrow street, where the Cossack outriders would be unable to flank the prince's carriage. He had the bomb inside a bag, hidden beneath bunches of grapes. But when he saw that the prince was accompanied by his wife, Dro hesitated and finally abandoned the plan, merely watching them as they passed. He waited until nightfall. In the returning carriage the prince sat alone.

When the cavalcade reached a spot opposite where he was standing, Dro hurled the bag into the carriage and then ran as fast as he could. The explosion was terrible. Together with Nakashidze, a number of mounted guards in the governor's retinue were blown to pieces. Taking advantage of the panic, Dro managed to vanish. That night, his comrades smuggled him across the border into Turkey, and there he remained for nine years, until the beginning of the war.

'But at the time, Dro could not imagine what was going to happen,' said Arshavir Shiragian.

Nobody could have imagined. The Armenians' leaders had helped the Young Turks seize power, believing they would put a stop to the bloody atrocities of Sultan Abdul Hamid. Vartkes effendi, who went on to become the member of parliament for Erzerum, had concealed Halil Bey in his home during the counterrevolution. The same Halil Bey would later order him killed. And as a bitter irony of fate, whereas Dro had believed that a woman should not pay for the sins of her husband, thirty years later, in Omsk, Stalin ordered that Dro's wife, along with one of their sons, be killed in payment for her husband's deeds.

'In Trebizond,' said Misak Torlakian,' hundreds of women, along with their children and their old folk, who were unable to walk, were embarked on rafts and taken out to sea. The women rejoiced, in the midst of that tragedy, when they were told that they would travel part of the way by sea, as it would spare them further exhaustion. But the next day, the rafts returned to the shore empty. The women had been drowned in the sea. The same thing happened at Unieh, at Ordu, at Tripoli, at Kerasonda, and at Rize. From

Ghiushana, my village, not one woman reached Meskene, Rakka, Ras-ul-Ain or Deir-ez-Zor in the caravans, which means they all died on the way, of hunger or by a bullet or by the knife.'

'In Kharput vilayet,' said Solomon Tehlirian, 'in June, the notables were killed, and then the men were taken from the towns and the villages. The death marches were made up of women, old folk and children only. At Arabkir, the women were embarked on boats and then drowned. The Armenian children from the German orphanage were drowned in the nearby lake. The women from Mesne were killed on their way to Urfa and their bodies were thrown in the river. On the road between Sivas and Kharput, the mutilated bodies of the women massacred on the eastern bank of the Euphrates lay by the side of the road and in gullies for months on end. There were too many of them to bury. Their skeletons could still be seen in the middle of 1916. Of the almost two hundred thousand souls in the caravans, only a tenth reached Ras-ul-Ain and Deir-ez-Zor.

'The first women to reach Meskene, Rakka and Deir-ez-Zor,' said Aram Yerkanian, 'were the bodies that floated down the Euphrates. Throughout July of 1915, the Euphrates was covered with water-bloated bodies, with heads, arms and legs, pell-mell. The waters of the river were reddish; it looked as if it were then that death was born.'

The circle of those who bore witness grew wider.

'Corpses are constantly to be found on the Euphrates,' said Roessler, the German consul in Aleppo. 'The corpses are all tied together in the same way, two by two and back to back. This proves that it is not a matter of random killings, but a general plan of extermination, hatched by the



authorities. The corpses float downstream, in increasing numbers. Mainly women and children.'

'More than six hundred Armenians,' said Holstein, the German consul in Mosul, 'mainly women and children, driven out of Diarbekir, were killed while being transported down the river Tigris. The rafts arrived empty in Mosul yesterday. For a number of days corpses and human limbs have been floating down the river. Other caravans are on their way and the probably same fate awaits them.'

'Through Aleppo,' said Guys, the former French consul, 'since May, caravans of thousands of people have been passing. After a stay of two or three days in the places specially set aside for them, these unfortunates, for the most part women and children, receive the order to head to Idlib, Mâna, Rakka, Deir-ez-Zor, Ras-ul-Ain, to the deserts of Mesopotamia, places destined, as all believe, to be their graves.'

'Thousands of widows, Armenian women from the Van vilayet,' said Jackson, the American consul in Aleppo, 'accompanied by not a single adult man, are approaching Aleppo in a deplorable state and half naked. Like the other ten to twenty groups that have passed, these are caravans made up of from five hundred to three thousand people, leading behind them children in an indescribable state of wretchedness.'

Roessler once again:

'In connection with the Armenians of Kharput, it has been reported to me that in a village south of the town the men were separated from the women. The men were slaughtered and left like that on each side of the road along which the women were forced to pass.'

'It can be believed,' said Aram Andonian, the man who collected the accounts of the survivors, 'that the hundreds of children in the Deir-ez-Zor orphanage may as well never have existed.'

It was not until near the end, at the furthestmost point of the road, that the authorities believed they had found the solution to a problem that had hitherto seemed insurmountable: how to kill without leaving behind the bodies of the dead. Not because it made them feel guilty in any way, but because the hundreds of thousands of mangled bodies with blackened skin on their bones, floating down rivers or lying at the bottom of gullies, although they filled the caravans coming up behind with despair and readied them for death, nonetheless interfered with the circulation of road and rail traffic and thickened the air with the miasmas of death; they prompted protests from the Arabs, who were no longer able to use the rivers for drinking water, and they brought pestilence. To avoid such drawbacks, the killing of the children in Deir-ez-Zor would have to be the perfect crime.

The orphans, brought from Meskene and the other places where refugee camps had been pitched, were driven through the desert to Deir-ez-Zor. Imagine a caravan of hundreds of disfigured children, wearing nothing but rags and staggering barefoot through now the searing heat, now the chill of the desert, their shoulders covered in bleeding, maggot-infested wounds, driven onward by horsemen lashing them with whips and rods. The dead and those in their death throes were tossed into the carts that accompanied the caravan. The place they finally reached is called Abuhahar. By then only three hundred children were able to keep their legs under them; the rest, the majority, were transported in the carts. In the foothills of the mountains at the

edge of the desert, the soldiers brought the caravan to a halt and the carts were unloaded on the plain. The soldiers surrounded the area, waiting until nightfall. And at dusk the birds of the desert arrived. Drawn by the scent of blood, then by the wheeling of the other birds, and then by the croaking din and the snap of flesh ripped from the bone, the vultures and ravens of the desert swooped on bodies which, even if still alive, no longer had the strength to fend them off. Above all else the birds went for the eyes, the cheeks and the lips, which were all the more enticing given that the flesh on the bodies had grown so lean. For two days flock after flock of birds settled on that emaciated plain at the foot of the mountains, and the children were left prey to the beaks and the black, steely talons. It was the horrified Arab nomads who told the tale. And the man who commanded the soldiers, corporal Rahmeddin, was promoted with unusual swiftness to the rank of commandant of the Rakka gendarmes.

The other children, who lay sick and hungry in the Deir-ez-Zor orphanage, were loaded into carts one freezing December day. The moribund were thrown into the Euphrates; the river, swollen as it was at that time of year, quickly swallowed the emaciated bodies. After a journey of twelve hours through the desert, without food or water, the caravan's commandant, who we know was called Abdullah, but who liked to be called Abdullah pasha, found three different means of exterminating the children. But because he sensed hesitation in the eyes of the soldiers, he first grabbed a two-year-old boy and showed him to his men: 'Even this little boy,' he said, 'has to be killed, the same as all the others his age. Otherwise one day he will grow up and seek out those who killed his parents and he will take his revenge. This is the son

of a dog who one day will come to find us and kill us!' And whirling him around in the air he then furiously smashed him against the rocks, crushing him before he had time even to groan.

Some of the carts they lined up one next to the other, cramming into them as many children as they could. In the middle they placed a cart full of explosives, which, once detonated, turned the children into ash. Those no longer able to walk they laid out on the plain. They scattered petrol-soaked hay on top of them and set it alight. And the others, for whom there was no room in the carts, they pushed inside caves. They stopped the mouths of the caves with brushwood and dry grass, which they torched, suffocating the children. They left the carbonised bodies at the bottom of the caves.

But not even the perfect crime can be wholly perfect. A little girl by the name of Ana took shelter in a nook in one of the caves, where, thanks to a crack running through the mountain, she found a streak of air. And so she survived and when the fires had gone out, a day and a night later, she went outside. For weeks she wandered, as far as Urfa, where she was taken in by some Armenian refugees, and she told them the story of the slaughter of the innocents.

From the third circle comes the voice of Djemal Pasha, minister of the navy, alarmed by the large numbers of corpses floating down the Euphrates. And then he is indignant at the fact that the routes of the death marches might interfere with the running of the railways. It was then that the Turkish authorities understood that no matter how perfectly the system for exterminating the Armenians might have been designed, it nonetheless had a

defect: it left behind the bodies of the slain. Reshid Pasha, the prefect of Diarbekir, strove with all his might to rectify this flaw:

‘The Euphrates has little to do with our vilayet. The corpses floating down the river probably come from the vilayets of Erzerum and Kharput. Those who die here are thrown into the bottom of caves or, as is more often the case, they are sprinkled with petrol and burned. Rarely can sufficient space be found to bury them.’

Let us return to the first circle.

‘You did not see the places where the caravans met,’ said Hrach Papazian, ‘or to be more precise, what was left of them. At Deir-ez-Zor. Thousands of tents made of rags. Women and naked children, so weak with hunger that their stomachs could no longer hold down food. The gravediggers tossed them into carts pell-mell, the dead and the dying together, so as not to waste time. At night, the living blanketed themselves with the dead to keep warm. For a mother, the best thing that could happen was for a Bedouin to come and take her child, so that it would escape that mass grave. Dysentery made the air unbreathable. With their muzzles the dogs rummaged through the burst bellies of the dead. In October 1915 alone, more than forty thousand women passed through Ras-ul-Ain, guarded by soldiers. There was not one man among them. A crusade of martyred women. All along the railway line were scattered the mangled bodies of women who had been raped.’

‘Of the one million eight hundred and fifty thousand Armenians who lived in the Ottoman Empire,’ said pastor Johannes Lepsius, ‘around one million four hundred thousand were deported. Of the other four hundred and fifty thousand, around two hundred thousand were spared deportation,

especially the populace of Constantinople, Smyrna and Aleppo. The advance of Russian troops saved the lives of the other two hundred and fifty thousand who took refuge in Russian Armenia, a part of whom died there of typhus or hunger. The others kept their lives, but they were banished from their native places forever. Of the one and a half million Armenians deported, only ten per cent reached Deir-ez-Zor, the final destination of the caravans. In August 1916, they were sent on to Mosul, but they were to die in the desert, swallowed by the sands or crammed into caves, in which the dead and the dying alike were set on fire.'

They fell silent. The circles had closed around Armen Garo. He looked at Shahan Natali, at Shavarsh Misakian, and then at all the others. He took the photographs and handed them to the men who sat in the first circle, to each according to his mission.

'But even so,' he repeated wearily, 'do not kill the women and the children.'

To the old Armenians of my childhood the place where they lived seemed accidental. To some of them even the time in which they lived seemed accidental, except that time was harder to deceive. And for that reason, time, peeking out from the pages of the photograph albums, from old clothes, or from under their arms, ended up transforming them one by one into an event.

As place was therefore nothing but a convention, which you could ignore when the circumstances were not particularly threatening, my old folk were fascinated with wide-open spaces. They used to speak as if they could be in different places at once. This probably helped them to survive when it

seemed the hardest thing possible, but it also helped them die when there was not much else to do.

In this respect, my grandparents had different attitudes, however. Grandfather Setrak, my mother's father, seemed never to be bored. His elder brother, Harutiun, had been put to the sword in front of him and that had given him the chance to flee, to escape with his life. But because somebody else had died in his place, he reckoned that in some way the life he lived was not his own or that it was only half his own, a kind of borrowed life. Because another had died that he might live, he repaid that debt by living for others. He lived for his daughters, Elisabeta, my mother, and Maro, whom he named after his sister, buried in the soilless grave of the river Euphrates. He lived that he might give gifts to the poor children, to provide money for the weddings of the lads from his shop, to clothe the naked and feed the hungry. He gave food to the Soviet Armenian prisoners of war, made to do hard labour under the Antonescu regime. Under the Iron Guard regime he was slapped around, accused of being a Jew, and only the crucifix he wore at his throat saved him from much worse. He was slapped around after the communists came to power, accused of being a member of the Iron Guard, but this time the crucifix he wore at his chest was of no use to him, quite the contrary. But as Ecclesiastes says, the bread cast on the waters returned after many days, and one of the Armenian prisoners on whom he had taken pity now returned, this time as an officer in the Red Army, and so the stinging of his slapped cheeks and the confiscation of his shops were the only bad things to befall him. The communists let him keep one of his houses and were indulgent enough not to send him to prison for being the exploiter he was. That it was

not possible to prove whom he had exploited was another matter entirely, but the communists did not let such niceties hinder them. To them, it was enough that my grandmother had a fur coat, that they had a piano at home, that they went to the resort at Olănești in the summer, and, to make matters worse, that Grandfather used to organise get-togethers serenaded by folk musicians at the Chez Pasha restaurant on Sundays. Having become a night watchman at the Brothers Buzești Lycée in Craiova, my grandfather Setrak had plenty of time to ponder all these things during his sleepless nights. Things that also included the notification he received in 1942, to the effect that on the orders of the Marshal he and his entire family were to be interned at the prison camp in Tîrgu-Jiu, along with other stateless Nansenians. The order was revoked and Grandmother unpacked the thick coats and woollen stockings, hers and the two girls', but she left Grandfather Setrak's inside a wooden suitcase. Having almost ended up in a prison camp, now he was to be conscripted. He bid his family farewell and went to Bucharest in the spring of 1944, where his career as a soldier of the Romanian Army, together with the other recruits of the Nansenian company, lasted precisely three days. History does not record how shopkeeper manners adapted to army boots and tightly buttoned collars. The company did two days of training, and on the third day, they saw real-life action, when the railways station opposite their barracks was bombed. With the barracks thrown into chaos and the recruits milling around in confusion, recruits more apt to trade in military equipment than use it in a war, the Romanian company made up of stateless Armenians evaporated, Seeing that nobody gave them the order to fall in line, the Armenians scattered.



And so grandfather Setrak, who in the space of just a few years had experienced so many different states—having got rich and been reduced to penury, having been slapped around, called a Jew, interned in a prison camp, conscripted and demobbed, having been slapped around again, called a bourgeois and demoted from the bourgeoisie—had every right to believe the world made no sense. According to my grandfather, whoever believed the world was other than senseless did not understand anything. To demonstrate how absurd the world was, his clinching argument was the proof most readily available, namely the example of his own death. First, he let himself be hit by a motorcar in front of the Purcicarul Fountain, while he was returning from the Old Market. Then he fell on his head from the roof of his house on Strada Barați, number four, while he was trying to repair the eaves. He succeeded the third time, when he died of cold in the winter of 1985, because the communists were economising on gas, which is why, to make the biggest savings, they would cut the supplies for days on end just when the frost was at its bitterest.

Since to a man who had cheated death by a hair's breadth so many times nothing could seem more absurd than dying because the communist state was economising on gas, grandfather Setrak died with tranquillity stamped on his features. He was buried in Craiova's Catholic cemetery, not because he was a Catholic, but just so things would continue to be senseless.

On the other hand, grandfather Garabet believed that all the things in the world have a meaning. Unlike grandfather Setrak, who had spent his childhood in an orphanage and working as an apprentice during what ought to have been his school years, grandfather Garabet had attended the

agricultural lycée in Constantinople, which at the beginning of that century was no small achievement. He knew a lot of things. He was inventive and studious. To the exasperation of grandmother Arshaluis, not for anything in the world would he have exchanged knowledge for shopkeeping. As a result, whereas grandfather Setrak raked in money from coffee, olives, cacao and raisins, as a shopkeeper grandfather Garabet was always bankrupt. At least he would have been, if Sahag Sheitanian, his brother-in-law, had left him to his own devices. But being bankrupt all the time was not his only trade. Grandfather Garabet was a church cantor, a violinist, a motorcyclist, a calligrapher, a photographer, a painter, a teacher of music and Armenian, a portraitist, an embroiderer, and an impromptu musician. In other words, he plied all the trades that do not make you much money. All in all, when they made their reckoning with the world, my family came out even: grandfather Setrak prospered, grandfather Garabet squandered. Communism levelled all that: grandfather Setrak was no longer able to prosper, and grandfather Garabet was no longer able to squander.

But since for grandfather Garabet the worldly side of things, the side that could be measured in coin, was unimportant, his life did not change very much with the arrival of the communists. In fact, when it came to what they had done previously, the lives of the Armenians of Focşani did not change very much. He who was a watchmaker remained a watchmaker. He who was a cobbler remained a cobbler. He who was a grocer continued to sell groceries. The bell ringer remained a bell ringer, the doctor a doctor. And, of course, nor did the priest discard his cassock. But whereas the trades remained the same, the tradesmen suffered. For, the mechanisms the

watchmakers repaired were no longer Swiss, but Russian. Patent-leather gents' footwear and ladies' high-heeled shoes gave way to clunking boots that were cobbled again and again until the sole ended up thicker than the uppers. There were still sweet shops, but from the shelves the delicacies now vanished: Turkish delight, halva made from *tahin*, *leblebi*, tins of Van Houten cacao, sacks of coffee, candied tropical fruits, and chocolate-coated almonds. In their stead appeared dough coated in fat, cardboard-like wafers, and very dry biscuits, whose crumbly crême filling used to flake off. Only the sugar candies, when they caught the light, preserved a tiny, stubborn gleam of their former glory. Assisted by Arshag the bell ringer, Der Dagead Aslanian, rolling up the sleeves of his cassock, hid the church books and treasures in the old crypts. It was not until a number of years later that he cautiously took them out, one by one, and finally he retrieved the most precious treasure of all: the silver bird whose beak sprinkled chrism on the holy water at Epiphany. The chrism was that sanctified by Saint Gregory the Enlightener himself in the year 301 and refreshed every seven years ever since. The church bell was now silent and pensive. Arshag would ascend to the belfry not so much to pull the rope as much as to talk to the bell, which answered him in silences of varying profundity, like an organ from whose pipes you inhale rather than blowing air. He also ascended to gaze through the south-facing window, which was narrow enough to use as a gun hole, but tall enough to allow you to see as far as the edge of town and whether the Americans were coming. Through that south-facing window he espied no Americans, but through the north-facing window he did espy the Russians coming down the road from Tecuci. And more than ten years thereafter, during which time the south-

facing window kept its silence, it was also through the north-facing window that Arshag watched the Russians depart, heading down the same road to Tecuci. This time, the other members of the parish council were there with him, and he let each look out of the window in turn. But by then it was too late: the red flags had sunk roots and the hammers and sickles had become part of the plasterwork, so that to remove them from the frontons you would have had to rip away the wall. Lingering longer than the others, his face pressed against the small windowpane, Sahag Sheitanian put it well when he said: 'If we are to be free, then rather than them leaving and us remaining, we should leave and they should remain.' It was a misty morning following upon a rainy night. The Russian soldiers soon vanished. The earth caked their boots in mud, and so they left no dust in the air behind them.

And the doctors were still doctors, but the same as in any other war, having buried pell-mell the starving, those with bleeding wounds, those shivering with typhus and those that wept for all the rest, now they were inundated with births, children who, in that topsy-turvy world, where the sun set in the east, were born already old.

And so, my grandfather Garabet Vosganian situated himself at an equal distance from all the different things that were happening. He wanted to understand the world and so he regarded it as repeatable, and he let his models live in his stead. His model of suffering was Komitas the monk, whom he began to resemble as he grew older; he ended up resembling him so well that when I first saw the death mask of Komitas, which is preserved by the Mekhitarist monks on the Venetian island of San Lazzaro, I started at the

uncanny likeness. For my grandfather, Father Komitas was perhaps not only a model of suffering, but also a model of madness.

He would often sit motionless, murmuring to himself. We did not know what he said; Grandfather did not let us come near. Those pages remain blank in *The Book of Whispers*. Sometimes he would lock himself away in his room and sing. He had a baritone voice, which nimbly rose to a high tenor, exactly like the voice of Komitas, which astounded Vincent d'Indy, Camille Saint-Saëns and Claude Debussy. He would sing, accompanying himself on the violin, straining the bow against all the strings at once, so that it sounded like a quartet.

Komitas was arrested on 24 April 1915, on the same day as his friends, the poets Daniel Varujan, Ruben Sevag and Siamanto. He was wearing his archimandrite's robes, but without the hood, whose pointed tip symbolises Mount Ararat and which is worn by every representative of the Armenian Church, from monk to katholikos. His hood and his cape he gave to some of the needy in the caravan. Vehicles took them almost as far as Ceanguiri. Komitas mingled with the crowd, trying to soothe their suffering as best he could and urging them to keep faith in God. At night, he kept apart and began to murmur. At first, his fellow travellers thought he was praying. However, he was not praying, but talking to somebody, and if God was that somebody, then the words, unwonted for a monk, were reproachful, like an inverted psalm. And one day, he saw a woman about to give birth, but before he could reach her, a soldier ripped open her distended, throbbing belly with his bayonet. From that moment hence, Komitas fell silent, like Andrey Rublyov faced with the cruelties of the Tartars five centuries before. He spoke but once

after that. At first the others thought he was joking, but then they realised that the reins of Father Komitas' mind had slackened. He stopped in the road and told the others in the caravan: 'Do not hurry! Let the soldiers overtake us . . .'

Then, as Daniel Varujan was being led away to his death, Komitas gave voice for the last time, not talking, but singing. First he sang the psalms, 'Lord, forgive me!' but in a harsh voice, as if expecting God to beg forgiveness of us, and then *Grunk (The Crane)*. And when he finished, he burst into laughter. His peals of laughter were heard the whole night through, rasping and angry, like a rotten scrap of cloth that you keep tearing into shreds, folding it and tearing it anew. Many of them, including Daniel Varujan and Siamanto, were killed then. Not knowing what to do with him, Oguz Bey sent Archimandrite Komitas to Constantinople in the end. He knew how to kill people who fell to the ground or who tried to flee, he killed people who prayed, who begged for mercy, who wept or cursed, but he did not know how to kill a man who laughed.

And Komitas laughed continuously. It was a laugh the likes of which had never been known before, which took upon itself the tears of the suffering, but defied the killers: that laughter showed that there was nothing left of Komitas to kill.

He never recovered. His friends sent him to a sanatorium in Paris. He died twenty years later, and his laughter and his tears were reconciled on his death mask. His face is tranquil, the same as my grandfather's was, as if death were just a way station, as if you were leaning against the rim of a cool well and gazing within.

Grandfather Garabet used to sing *The Crane*, a song that told of the native lands, after which he did not burst into laughter, but fell silent. He knew what he was doing, since the traces were left on the canvas. My grandfather's laughter was made of pigments. He would brush the pigments onto the canvas, at random, as I used to think, or else he would dab them with his finger straight from the palette. And when the roars of laughter were irrepressible, he would squeeze them onto the canvas straight from the tube. Black and orange were the dominant colours. Grandfather would study them carefully. It was his way of understanding himself. In his effort to understand, Grandfather had his own methodological standards for each separate thing. He decoded himself through colours, for example. Above all else, energy means light. Light is a combination of colours and by the spectrum you can understand what distance it has travelled, what body emanates it, what time of day it is. It is the same when it comes to a man: you place a prism of glass in front of him, you look at him, and there is your spectrum. 'Here I am,' Grandfather would say, looking up close at the jagged furrows of pigment, even touching them, so as to see not only the colours and the flow of the lines, but also the smoothness or roughness of the paint.

They were among his few moments of participation. Other than that, he would look at things patiently, painstakingly. Even when he was eating, in order to understand the nature of the food, he used to chew each morsel up to thirty-three times. He said that that was the required number of chews if you are to make anything of the taste and meaning of each foodstuff, on the one hand, and if you are to break down the food sufficiently to protect your stomach, on the other. To tell the truth, that point at which he made himself

equally distant from all things was also equally distant from himself. To view yourself with the same curiosity and detachment as you might examine the trees in the garden or the chronology of a war, from the vantage point from which all things can be viewed from outside themselves, is another kind of madness. As is plain to see, Grandfather took Father Komitas as his model of suffering, not to imitate him, but to mirror him. Whereas the madness of Father Komitas was internal, the madness of grandfather Garabet was external to things.

For that reason, my grandfather, who believed the world existed only that it might be understood, used to say that when you learn yourself by rote, when you become so predictable that you can recite yourself by heart, like a poem, with a beginning and an end, with even a rhyme scheme, then the time has come for you to die.

If during their passage through this world grandfather Garabet Vosgian understood and grandfather Setrak Melikian failed to understand, then my godfather Sahag Sheitanian suffered. And if for grandfather Garabet the foremost understanding, which is to say, self-understanding, came from his encounter with combined pigments, and for grandfather Setrak non-self-understanding came from his encounter with the slaps he was dealt with a vengeance, for Sahag Sheitanian self-suffering came from his encounter with Yusuf.



## Eight

THE STORY OF YUSUF. In *The Book of Whispers* there are no imaginary characters, since all of them have existed in this world, in their own place and time and under their own name. There is one character alone who might seem imaginary, given that his existence gradually transforms *The Book of Whispers* into a self-replicating reality, like two parallel mirrors. I often write about the storyteller of *The Book of Whispers*. In my tale, the storyteller tells of *The Book of Whispers*. And in the telling of this new book, there appears once more the storyteller who tells the tale. He tells of the storyteller and his story. If the order were reversed and we came to the final storyteller, the one who does not have the defect of describing himself, and if we were to move away from him and towards me, then we would have the dream, then the dream within the dream, and so on. But in this way, writing about the one who writes, while he in turn writes, stooped over the manuscript in which there is also a character named the author, it is as if we were gradually going deeper, like those toys made of hollowed wood, the matryoshka dolls that old man Musayan brought back from Siberia, losing count of the years and forgetting that in the meantime his son, Arakel, was already old enough to be drafted into the army.

Of all these real-life characters, some of their names you will find in the history books, others you will find only in *The Book of Whispers*. Although more often than not it tells of the past, it is not a history book, for the history books tell of the victors. Rather, it is a collection of psalms; it tells of the vanquished. And among the characters of the book there is also one who did

not exist, but in spite of this fact or precisely because of it, he too bears a name: his name is Yusuf. This Yusuf was nothing more than a borrowed name, and he exists in *The Book of Whispers* only because of the fact that, despite not being part of the *Book's* fabric, he is nonetheless the key that opens the door to the room of the most grievous chamber of the liminal era, a chamber with bare walls scored by fingernails, with buckling floorboards and earth heaped haphazardly in mounds, like the earth of graves dug in haste. And the graves dug with the greatest haste are mass graves.

The living and the dead belong to the Heavens and the Earth. Only the dying belong wholly to Death. Death walks among them; she is tender and takes care not to snap off the state of dying too soon. They are her fresh shoots of rice. The state of dying is an initiation into Death. From Mamura to Deir-ez-Zor, for a distance of more than one hundred and eighty miles, an entire nation traversed the seven circles, which is to say the road of initiation into Death. And it was at the end of this road that Sahag Sheitanian met Yusuf.

MAMURA. THE FIRST CIRCLE. The road runs straight, for the length of the railway line. The entry into the first circle was made on foot, the circle of the death marches that gathered the Armenians from the most various of places, from European Anatolia, Smyrna, Izmid and Adrianopolis, or from the *vilayets* of Eastern Anatolia, from Trebizond, Erzerum or Kharput. Seen from afar, as they walked huddled together, their heads bowed, they looked like pilgrims. Except that pilgrims are driven by their faith, not by soldiers thrusting them from behind, butting them with their horses' muzzles, herding the

stragglers back into line with blows of the whip. Sahag Sheitanian's family had five members: his grandmother, his parents, himself, and his younger sister. The two older children, Simon and Haigui, had been smuggled to Constantinople. His mother Hermine was a fiery woman. She was still steady on her feet. She held her arms around the children and walked in a straight line, keeping to the middle of the column to shield them from the horses' hooves, but also to shield them from the sight of the crows pecking the corpses by the side of the road. They had some money. Rupen, the father, kept it hidden under his shirt. With a part of the money, they had been able to pay for a kind of ticket, or rather they had bought the goodwill of the stationmaster in Izmid, and they had boarded the train that travelled the Eşçişer-Konya-Bizanti-Adana route. Half way to Mamura, the Army halted the train, having placed a barrier across the railway track. But even if the journey on foot, across rocky wastes and a scorching plain, was to be exhausting, their lives were saved when the train stopped, as there was no room in the cattle trucks in which they had been crammed, their food had run out, and no one had given them water. The dead still remaining in the cattle trucks were those who had only just breathed their last, since all those who died on the way had been pushed out of the moving train onto the embankments.

Thus they were fortunate twice over: firstly, because they had not had to travel for hundreds of miles on foot, and secondly, because they had been released from the cattle trucks when they were all on the verge of death by suffocation. But most of the caravans, particularly those from the eastern *vilayets*, did not have any such luck. They made the whole journey on foot.

Some of them, the wealthier folk, managed to get hold of carts and mules. Because of the exhaustion, the cold, the hunger, the raiding parties and the massacres, of the almost one and a half million people deported, half a million died before they even reached the edge of the first circle. And then we may add those who did arrive, not on their own legs, but borne on the waters of the Tigris and the Euphrates.

In September, the nights begin to grow cold, but the fierce heat of the day is unrelenting. They herded them onto open ground by the railway station in Mamura. As far as the eyes could see, folk erected makeshift tents from whatever they could: blankets, clothes, sheets. Most of the tents hung from just four sticks, spreading over an area of about ten square feet. The faded tent fabric was proof against the sun and the rain, but useless against the cold. Sahag counted with his eyes the ramshackle tents; they were so many that their farthest limit could not be glimpsed. They were pitched at the edge of the town, on the other side of the railway track. There was a reason for this: it was easier to guard the railway track and it meant that none would dare to go into the town for bread. They still had meagre provisions. They ate in haste and watchfully, in the shadow of their tents, so as not to be seen by the others.

Now and then, scattered groups tried to approach the railway station, but were driven back into the camp. But in the end, the soldiers stopped threatening them and allowed them to go about their business. Some went from tent to tent, helping those within to carry away their dead. And so that the dead would not be left all alone, they laid them one next to the other. Later, when the dead had multiplied exceedingly, they laid them one on top of

another. And so it was that Death built mounds, which surrounded the camp like watchtowers. The animals snorted from hunger and at the smell of death. They were mainly mules, tethered to carts or carrying bundles on their packsaddles. The mules proved to be the most resilient. The horses had died either of thirst or having broken their legs on the mountain paths. The dogs kept apart. They sensed in the eyes of the people the same hunger, the same state of being harried. Together with the flocks of crows, the dogs waited patiently for evening to fall.

The family slept huddled together to keep warm. In the daytime, they undressed and hung out their knotted clothes overhead. They had agreed to share their cart with a betrothed couple from Konya, and the men took turns pushing it from behind to help the mule. The woman offered to darn their sheets, strengthening them against the gusts of wind. She was travelling with her fiancé. They were to have wed, but the wedding guests had died on the road.

Sahag's mother had two pots in which she collected rainwater. When the water had almost run out, they wiped their lips with the rags they hung out at night that the hoarfrost might moisten them.

When the host of tents extended too far, threatening to spill over the railway track, and when the number of corpses was so great that the air was thick with the stench of death, the soldiers descended on horseback among the tents and forced a few thousand folk to take to the road once more. The tents caved in under the horses' hooves; the people were herded to the edge of the field with blows of the whips. When they did not manage to cram their

things into their bundles or to fold up their tents, the horsemen made haste to set light to the roofs of dry fabric.

Their turn came at the end of October. For a hale man it would have been a five-hour walk to the next stopping place, but it took them almost five days.

ISLAHIYE. THE SECOND CIRCLE. The road led through the Amanus Mountains, over the crests, then down into Islahiye, on the banks of a river. When they reached the second circle, the first snows began to fall. Many were clothed in thin rags and they had only the sweat-soaked dust that thickened their clothes to keep them warm. They threw the blanket over the mule and for the whole way they wrapped themselves in sheets. They abandoned the cart, which no longer had room to move along the narrow paths, and the men carried on their backs as much of the chattels as they could. When it grew a little warmer, they tore a sheet into strips and tied it to one another, so that they would not lose their footing and slip among the steep precipices. The mountain path was clean, and clean it remained even after the caravan had passed, for those who fell, having reached the end of their strength, were thrust with prods of the walking stick into the ravines. The old woman rode on the mule, which helped her to survive the journey, unlike many others, who died of exhaustion or collapsed dying and tumbled down the rocks. When they came down into the plain, the caravan was met by a band of a few dozen armed Kurds. At a signal, the soldiers guarding them blocked the way ahead, leaving the caravan powerless to advance. The folk came to a stop, gazing in fear as the horsemen fell upon them, brandishing their muskets and sabres.

The plateau was narrow, with mountains behind, precipices to each side and the horsemen before. It is a scene we know from hundreds of accounts.

Caravans of mostly women and children, abandoned defenceless, scattering over the plain, each person seeking to escape, not knowing that when you break away from the throng you become the easiest prey of all for horsemen bent on plunder and slaughter, be they murderers the Turks had armed and released from prison for that very purpose, be they Kurds, Chechens or Bedouins. They rarely attacked at random. More often than not they were informed of the caravan's time and route, and the soldiers had orders to move aside, leaving the horsemen to do their work. Sometimes they merely plundered and seized the young women, but more often than not they slaughtered them to the last man. There was no general rule. You might be killed for having money or jewels or because you had nothing to give them. The best thing to do was to curl up into a ball or lie down and pretend to be dead. If you were lucky enough not to be trampled under the horses' hooves, you might survive until the horsemen tired of chasing moving targets, until night fell and they went away, whooping and grasping the struggling women slung over their saddles. Behind them they left a plain dotted with corpses, from which those still alive would slowly be climbing to their feet in a daze.

The fiancé of the woman they had befriended was also killed. Around his neck he wore a worthless but shiny necklace, which a horseman coveted and did not take the trouble to steal from him other than by chopping off his head. They were forced to leave him there, prey to the wild animals.

Dragging the wounded behind them, it was not until daylight that they reached the plain at Islahiye. On either side of the entrance to the camp there

were two mounds of corpses, mainly children. They unpacked their tents. The food was almost gone. In the morning, mounted soldiers streaked across the plain, tossing loaves of bread at random over the tents. The people swarmed, grabbing at pieces of bread, fighting for their share. Toward noon, the camp grew quiet. The people crawled inside the tents, keeping watch over those whose death was near.

The soldiers kept their distance, for the oppressive smells of death were not sweet, but sharp, presaging the spread of dysentery. The commandant of the camp called the men that still had strength and ordered them to collect the dead. In those autumn months, at the Islahiye camp starvation and dysentery caused more than sixty thousand deaths. The commandant ordered the corpses to be left at the edge of the camp for two or three days before burial. Exposed to the wind, the dead dried up and shrivelled, taking up less space, and in this way there was more room in the mass graves.

Then, they moved their tents closer together, so that the raiders, especially the Bedouins from the surrounding villages, would not have room to move between them. They did not fear one another, for none of the deportees stole money or gold, not having any use for them. The things they might have coveted, flour, sugar or cured meat, had long since run out. At the foot of the walls or along the embankments, their animals searched for tufts of grass. Those wracked within by dysentery lay curled up, awaiting death. The others chewed long on the pieces of crumbly bread tossed from the galloping horses.

A miraculous and at the same time terrible thing happened: the snow came. They rushed outside the tents with outstretched palms. They still had



enough life in them for the snowflakes to melt in their cupped palms, so that they could lick the drops from between their fingers. Then, when they saw that the snowfall was thickening, they waited for it to settle and licked it from the ground, together with the dogs and mules. More than the others, Sahag drank his fill, for he had noticed that the snow thickened the most and lasted the longest on the brows of the dead, which were colder even than the ground.

But with the snow came a bitter frost that froze the earth, turning the sheets from which the tents were patched together into jagged folds. It cleansed the air. The putrefaction of creatures of every kind abated and the miasmas settled on the ground as hoarfrost. The people huddled together, gathering inside the most capacious of the many tents. And there they managed to scrape together a fire, softening a few chips of wood. They crowded together, even if they managed only to see the feeble flame from afar.

And those at the point of death were so emaciated from hunger and scorched by the cold that when they dragged them between the tents by the arms or legs, their ankle and wrist bones broke, snapping like dry twigs.

When the snows melted, the caravans began to form once more. The heavens grew damp and the rain began to fall. The roads were mired in mud. They tied strips of sheets around their feet, otherwise their bare soles would have stuck in the ground, and the people no longer had the strength to tear them from the mud. Beneath the drizzle that blurred every outline, the new journey lasted almost a week. They were unable to count the dead, for on this misty road no one could see anything but the bluish mist of his own breath. The flesh of those who fell, soaked by the rain, was as soft and sticky as clay.

They were trodden underfoot by those that came behind. Their flesh was churned into black dough and swallowed by the mud of the road. And nor did the rain cease when they arrived.

BAB. THE THIRD CIRCLE. The plain of black tents stretched along a strip of land a few kilometres from the town. This was deliberate, as it prevented the deportees from going into the town. Because of the clayey soil, pools of slushy water had begun to form and all was transformed into mire.

They did not manage to make a tally of the dead left behind on the road, because they were overwhelmed with those that were now dying within the deportee camp. The men, as many as remained, organised themselves into two groups. Some of them handled the lugging of the dead bodies outside the camp and the digging of the mass graves. The dead were harder to lug in the third circle: because they were as dry as the crumbly soil and the cold had lightened their bones, they absorbed water and bloated, and moistened by the water, their veins burst, reddening them like raw meat. Swollen and hard to bend, they took up much space, and so besides the fact that the earth was sticky, the graves also had to be made larger.

The second group of men roamed the plains, approaching the town only as far as the rubbish pits and the edge of the paupers' quarters, searching for food, which more often than not consisted of carrion flesh. Some, those still nimble, threw rocks at the crows or hunted the dogs that hung around the camp and which after nightfall scabbled at the hastily covered graves in search of flesh that had not yet rotted.

And thus the epidemic of typhus broke out. It struck the children first. It covered their cheeks in red blotches, which, because of the squalor, swiftly turned into open wounds welling with blood and the sweat of fever. Then it passed to their mothers, who were unable to refrain from clasping their feverishly shivering babies in their arms. Only the winter frost prevented the plague from spreading to all. But the cold also meant that there was no hope for those that fell ill. From fear of the sickness, the soldiers kept their distance and only rarely did they venture among the tents through the sleet to toss them a loaf of bread without dismounting. They no longer thought of wiping the mud off the loaf. The lucky ones who got a piece of bread ran to share it with the people in their tent or else they crouched with their heads hanging low, grasping their crust and gobbling it without chewing, lest another rush at them and wrest it away from them.

From time to time, the women in particular, who would lose their minds out of pity for the dying children, would venture to the edge of the settlement to beg for food or to seek a safer shelter and clean bedding. When they were not shot at, they were driven away with rocks and clubs.

The woman with whom they had set out on the journey fell ill. She lay huddled and they could do nothing for her but heap on her shoulders all the bedding they had. One day, the man of the Sheitanian family came back with a dead crow, which he had hunted as the bird lurked with its flock by the mass graves. The man had a wild glint in his eyes, his hollow cheeks were covered with tufts of crinkled hair, his clothes were nothing but tatters and to stop them fluttering in the wind he had tied them with a piece of string, wrapped round and round his body, from his chest to his waist. In place of boots he wore two

strips of knotted rag, with two pieces of wood for soles. This caused him to walk disjointedly, shuffling, now and again lifting his soles to step over a ridge. In order to hunt, he did not need to run, and nor would he have had the strength to do so. The dead things needed only to be carried away. It was enough to cast a rock at the dogs and crows: they were cumbersome, as the camp had stuffed them with food aplenty. And then he had but to crush the head with the same rock, or swiftly to wring the neck. Which is what Rupen Sheitanian had done; the bird's neck was unnaturally crooked. On seeing him like that, Hermine clasped her children to her breast and, harrowed, she whispered: *Ur es, Asdvadz? Where art Thou, Lord?* 'God is dying, woman,' said the man. 'Look, even His angels have died.' And he tossed the black bird into the middle of the tent.

Using damp twigs, they struggled to kindle a smoky fire and then singed the flesh of the plucked bird. But it did not help the sick woman, whose shrunken stomach could no longer hold down the food. She vomited the only morsel she managed to swallow and unable to quell her spasms she died shortly thereafter, having suffocated. 'It is the sign of the black angel,' murmured Hermine. 'It is a different and more cursed sign,' said Rupen, 'if God kills even the black angels.' And he looked up at the grey sky, he looked down at the miry earth, he looked at the drizzle and the mist of the camp that blurred sky and earth together in one greedy, murderous haze. They slung the woman over the mule, so that she dangled on either side like a pair of saddlebags, and Rupen took her to the edge, where the bodies swelled and distended gelatinously. But firstly he unclothed her and shared her garments

with Sahag's younger sister, to protect her from the cold, and with the young woman from Konya, lest the Bedouins lust after her if they saw her naked.

No matter how hard the local people tried to avoid the deportees, driving them away like dogs, with what ever they could lay their hands on, shouting 'Ermeni! Ermeni!' so that others would come out and throw rocks at the creatures that hesitantly approached, their arms outstretched, no matter how hard they tried to avoid them, the typhus still spread through the town. Then, the Arabs mustered their warriors and fell on the camp, furrowing it with their horses' hooves, slaying them with sword or bullet, driving them away with the flat of their swords or with blows of their cudgels, setting fire to their tents. The same as always, the soldiers looked on, impassive, willingly accepting the assistance that the bands of warriors lent famine, dysentery and typhus. The slaughter lasted the whole day, and the warriors swore to return if the next day the deportees did not move on their way, no matter where, as long as it was far away from the houses of the town.

Although the instructions said that the camp at Bab had to be kept in isolation until the coming of spring, because of local discontent, the caravans once more set underway. It was 5 January, although this was not known for a fact: nobody had kept a tally of the days and because no day could be distinguished from the next by any sign, such as Sunday mass for example, they perceived only the passing of the seasons, and then only with approximation. The only precise tally that was kept was that of the dead. The Turkish soldiers cut notches with their bayonets in the pole nearest to each place where the corpses were dumped. But even this tally ceased to be kept

when the typhus raged and the dead began to be brought by the cartload and emptied straight into the mass graves.

They tried to reckon the arrival of Christmas by the length of the nights, but because the sky was always grey and overcast, the nights seemed longer than they really were. And the dead multiplied, because it was in the night that the dying mainly gave up the ghost. But because the next day the first caravans set off and they were unable to know how many would reach the end of the journey, the few priests among them, who could be told apart from the others only by their longer beards, decided that that night would be Christmas Eve.

Those who still had candle stumps lit them. Hermine said: 'Let the light be visible.' They burned the whole candle, scraping up the warm wax with their fingers and smearing it on their palms. They would also have to preserve a taper for the night of the Resurrection. 'By then,' said Rupen, swaddling the soles of his feet, 'we will all be dead.'

MESKENE. THE FOURTH CIRCLE. So that it would not stray near Aleppo, where there was once more a risk of contamination, faced with the growing hostility of the local populace and at the express order of Djemal Pasha that the deportees should be kept far away from the railway, the caravan avoided the most accessible road, via Aleppo and Sebil, and cut across tracts of wilderness, via Tefridge and Lale. A man in good health might have made the journey from Bab to Meskene in two days, if we take into account that he would have been able to enjoy a restful night in the caravanserais of Lale, that he would have been able to eat his fill and would

have had mules to carry his water skins. It took the death marches that departed from Bab more than ten days to make the same journey; sometimes it took more than two weeks.

After they left Bab it began to snow again. As they did not keep to the main road that led to Aleppo, and as snow covered the whole expanse, the caravans often lost their way. The soldiers would take a bearing and then turn them back in the right direction, pushing them forward with their horses' muzzles. And nor was it hard for them to lose their way, because those that made up the caravans, even the hardest, those that walked at the front, breasting the wind, went with their eyes downcast, looking up only seldom, not at the road, which they reckoned endless, but at the sky, to seek some glimmer of light, a sign that the snow would stop or merely a sign, any sign. They wrapped themselves in all the fabrics and bedding they still had, tying it around their bodies with string to keep the wind out. The thickest blankets they reserved for their feet, fashioning booties for themselves, which they soaked in oil, if they still had any, or in puddles of oil, the better to keep the snow out. The caravan had set out in a compact huddle, but now, as it began to tire, it stretched for almost a kilometre. The soldiers were content merely to shove them, no longer attempting to hurry them; those that were beaten with whips or canes fell to their knees rather than quickening their steps. When they fell, it was taken as a sign of rebellion. These the soldiers killed with blows of the cane to the back of the neck, thereby saving bullets. They would fall senseless in the snow, which was the same thing as death. Then the soldiers gave up, letting them advance according to their strength. The exhausted ones moved slower and slower, falling to the back of the caravan.

It was harder and harder for them to lift their feet out of the snow. Finally they would remain motionless, planted in the snow, their legs too frozen to allow their knees to bend. They died standing up, their arms akimbo, having been blown into that position by the wind; they died like black, withered trees. The governor of Aleppo, alarmed at the large number of bodies which, if left by the roadside, would have brought the plague to the city, sent carts after them. Sometimes, the carts would find them a few days later, still standing, their frozen arms creaking in the wind. At first, the gravediggers took fright. But later they quite simply plucked them from the snow, like trunks whose roots had withered away, and they said to each other that the earth must be sated with the dead if it had left these people to die standing up.

They slept in abandoned caravanserais, sometimes remaining there for two days at a time so that they might gather a little strength. With the carts for the dead sent from Aleppo there also came a few sacks of *bulghur*, a kind of husked wheat, which was shared out among them, each receiving enough to fill his two cupped hands. At Tefridge and then at Lale they saw from afar a host of large shelters, with sheet-metal roofs resting on poles, some of them even having brick walls, and they rejoiced that they would be able to find protection from the cold. But they were not allowed to go within a few dozen metres of the shelters. Lest the road to Meskene remain strewn with the dead, the authorities had decided to set up such shelters in the Aleppo *vilayet* and gather the dying in them. They did not receive any care, but were laid on the ground to die, fifteen to twenty in each shelter. The state in which they arrived was so pitiful that they were too feeble even to turn over on one side or the other or to brush the swarms of bugs from their faces. They died in the



posture in which they were laid, often with their eyes open, since their eyelids were too shrunken and withered to cover the whites of their eyes. For this reason, the camps had only a few guards, without pistols, but armed with clubs and rocks to keep away the dogs, the hyenas and the crows, although they displayed little alacrity in the performance of this duty.

The joy of approaching such places, which they thought had been prepared for them against the onslaught of wind, rain and snow, turned to bewilderment then horror when the caravan was brought to a halt on the outskirts of the shelters without being allowed to go any farther. At each of those way stations, the caravan was met by a band of soldiers, headed by a petty official and a man dressed in black, whom the others addressed as *doktor effendi*. He made all the people in the caravan stand in a row, at a distance of one pace from each other, so that they could not prop each other up. Some collapsed straightaway, making the task of the *doktor effendi* the easier. For, he had come to tend not to the living but to the dead. To eliminate the risk of so many corpses strewn along the road, especially given that Aleppo was full of foreign consulates ready to send dispatches to the imperial courts of Europe, the *doktor effendi* indicated the moribund, who were there and then bundled away to the shelters and beaten if the life in them attempted any resistance. The *doktor effendi* gauged each of them, pointing his finger at those that showed the rash of a fever, those that were already shivering from every limb, those whose cheeks were deathly pale and whose eyes were sunken in their sockets or whose mouths were flecked with greenish-red froth from their punctured, wheezing lungs. At each of the two camps for the dying the caravan thinned by around a tenth. Of those that had set out from Bab,

around a third did not make it to Meskene. Many gave up the ghost at the two way stations for the moribund, while the bodies of others lay scattered along the roads, their flesh melting with the snow and seeping into the streams, their bones crumbling to gravel.

In Meskene, at the boundary of the fourth circle, the caravans met the Euphrates once more, which was a flowing tomb for thousands of deportees. At the bend in the river, beyond Meskene, the corpses from the north accumulated, those that the waters had not dragged down or which the fish had not yet torn to shreds. The bodies were hauled to the bank with boat hooks. Because the earth was frozen and the corpses were too many to bury, they were sprinkled with petrol and set alight. The black smoke was visible from the camp at Meskene. Although deportees knew why the smoke was so thick, knew why the pyre was so wet that it could only smoulder, knew what floated down the river, they still went to the riverbank, knelt down and greedily drank water that tasted like lye.

Some pitched their tents yet again; others took shelter in abandoned tents. The same as always after the appearance of a new caravan, the number of dead grew before falling back to the usual figure of five or six hundred a day. The cold had softened somewhat, particularly in the daytime, but the nights were just as bitter. The rains and the snows had abated and were to become ever more infrequent the nearer the caravans came to the desert. The air too became drier, making the breath of the dying rasp the noisier.

The camp was harshly guarded. The few that managed to elude the guards were captured on the plain by the town, and then they were ducked up

to their necks in the cold river and left on the bank in the wind. If they survived, they were sent back to the tents, where, shivering and delirious, they perished soon thereafter.

All of a sudden, the mule knelt down and refused to drink. It had been a good animal. Rupen stroked its forehead tenderly for a long time and then with a rock he struck it repeatedly in the same place. The children wept, but they wiped away their tears when they tasted the sweetness of the meat, which was not stringy, like that of the crows, or bitter, like that of the carrion. It lasted them a few days and lent them strength. They also received a fistful of *bulghur*. When they raised their eyes wondering at that gesture of kindness, they learned the reason from Kior Hussein, the same man who punished those that tried to escape by plunging them into the icy water: 'I don't want you to die here. We have problems enough as it is. The earth is sticky, hard to dig. You will die anyway. But leave this place on your own legs and go into the desert. There, nobody will have to tire himself out because of you. The wind and the sands will bury you.'

Then they understood that those who received a portion of grain in their cupped palms were to continue their journey. They let them go down to the river and drink the brackish water, which, like the Jordan, was to acquire the taste of human flesh. The *bulghur* was a fleeting remedy for innards parched by dysentery. And in their bellies the water swelled the grains that had been swallowed un-chewed, making them feel achingly ravenous but sated at the same time. For, the body craved strength, but shrunken from starvation, the stomach swelled, ready to burst walls thinned by so much grinding away at nothing.

Sahag had grown thin. His ankles were only a little thicker than his wrists. His mother meted out what was left of the sacks of flour and sugar bought in the station at Konya from traders who, knowing where they were going and adding their desperation to the price, had asked three times what they were worth.

They ate in the evening so that they could sleep, since Hermine had observed that hunger is harder to endure in the night, when the body is more focussed on itself. At first she gave an equal portion to all, and then more to the children and less to themselves. And at Meskene, she gave nothing to the old woman, who, one evening, made a sweeping sign of the cross, turned her face to the wall and died huddled. The next morning they loaded her on the cart for the dead and rolled her into the mass grave. As there was nobody to wash the dead, to watch over them and fold their arms across their chests, there was no reason for them to press rags soaked in hot water on their joints in order to straighten their bent legs and arms. And even if they had bothered to soften the shrunken, frozen gristle of the joints, it would have been in vain, since the bodies were not laid neatly in the mass graves side by side, but tumbled on top of one another pell-mell. 'We should have kept her until the afternoon,' said Hermine. 'By then the graves would have filled up and they would have laid her on top . . .' Rupen made no answer, but merely shrugged. He no longer spoke, he would lift his shoulders and the women did not know whether that was his manner of speech or whether he was stretching his increasingly stooped back.

The old woman had chosen the right moment to die. The next day, soldiers surrounded their corner of the camp and drove them on their way

once more. With the mule dead, the old woman would in any case not have been able to travel and would have been dragged to the carts transporting the dying back towards Lale. There, the only things that were plentiful were the swarms of gnats and the patience with which the dying were laid in a row and left to die.

DIPSI. THE FIFTH CIRCLE. Ordinarily, it was a good five hours' walk from Meskene to Dipsi. But it took the caravans more than two days. For the first time their footsteps met the sandy lands that heralded the closeness of the desert.

The carts that collected the dead and dying no longer accompanied them. From time to time, the gravediggers that collected the dead would wait for the winds to whip up the sands and cover the mounds of naked, blackened bodies. But the two days the journey lasted were calm. The sky had cleared and the winds had died. The corpses lay at the edge of the road, a large part of them lacerated by animals. Among the dead bodies were the dying, women and men exhausted by the journey, by hunger and thirst, children who could not understand what was happening to them, and they waited to die, leaning against rocks or withered trees. This effort to remain seated was their final effort in the fight against death, because otherwise, lying at the edge of the road, the sand would have covered them, smothering them.

The camp, made up of thousands of tents, was situated in a valley on the right bank of the Euphrates. Those who chose that place surrounded by hills had calculated that the relentless stench of death and the sharp reek of dysentery and typhus would have less chance of spreading. The distance

between Meskene and Dipsi was shorter than between Bab and Meskene, and for that reason, the governor of Aleppo had not set up the midway shelters for the dying that he euphemistically named *Hasthane*, which is to say, hospitals. But given the exhaustion of those in the caravans, arriving after a two-day journey of sand and then mountain passes, the whole camp at Dipsi was called a *Hasthane*. And it deserved its name, since in the few months in which it served as a concentration camp, more than thirty thousand people died there.

The so-called hospital was completely lacking in medicines and the only staff were the Armenian doctors among the surviving deportees, who were helpless to do anything except put a name to an illness, when it was not otherwise obvious, and estimate the number of days until death. The concentration camp at Dipsi was one of the deepest levels of the initiation into death, not so much because of the large numbers who gave up the ghost there, as much as the even larger number of those who, having been infected there, were to give up the ghost farther along the road to Deir-ez-Zor, the place where the seventh veil of death fell.

It was now March. The rains had ceased. From time to time, at evening or dawn, a blanket of cloud would gather. Spring will have arrived unnoticed for the deportees, who looked around them more and more seldom and even then with fear, alerted by the clatter of horses' hooves or the whoops and the muskets of the Bedouins. This was why they looked mainly at the ground. And that was how they discovered it was spring. Near Abuhahar, Hamam, Sebka and Deir-ez-Zor, where the trees became more and more sparse, spring arrived unawares, when the tufts of grass began to sprout. At first, they did

not know how to eat them; the sharp edges of the long fine blades made their gums bleed and they choked on the stringy strands. Then, the wisest and most patient among them showed the others the art of eating grass. You had to crumple the strands into a ball in your palm, on which you then sprinkled a little salt, to moisten the clump of grass. You did not chew it all at once, but let it soften in as much saliva as you could gather in your dry mouth. You kept it like that in your ravenous mouth for a few minutes, until it turned into a kind of paste, like pottage. When there was no more grass to be found, Rupen ripped up the roots and washed them in the waters of the Euphrates. He cut them into little pieces and once they had been soaked in water for a few hours they could be eaten.

It did not rain, but the sky was not serene. The nearness of the desert lifted a kind of haze, which the dust stirred up by the wind held in suspension. The dogs and the wolves had dwindled and in their place appeared hyenas. They were harder to catch, swifter and more accustomed to the dryness of the desert. And their corpses could never be found, for when a hyena felt its end was nigh, it vanished into the desert whence it came. The crows remained. They were hard to hit, for in the nacreous haze they could not be told apart from thin air, in which white angels could not be told apart from black.

Since the grass became meagre because of the miasmas, as well as the Turkish soldiers' horses, which grazed at the edges of the camp, Hermine and Rupen, after agonised thought, decided to send Sahag to act as one of the couriers.

My grandfathers, Garabet Vosganian and Setrak Melikian, did not sing songs of the deportation in their moments of solitude. And nor did the other

old Armenians of my childhood. The poems we read as children, the songs we heard, told mainly of the *fedayi* who had fought in the mountains, nor of the massacres and the deportations. In silence did the caravans descend each level of the initiation into death. Perhaps it was because the inner suffering was too strong to allow anything to pierce through to the outside. Perhaps it was because they did not believe that anything would come afterward.

But since nothing pierced through to the outside, the deportees wrote for themselves. The manuscripts that have remained from the seven circles of death were written during the journeys of deportation, wherever a piece of wood was to be found, a milestone, a tree trunk with yielding bark, a wall. For a long time, until the rains washed them away and the winds erased them, the Armenian letters and words written or carved on wood and stone remained. Those who went before left tidings for those that came behind. And if there was room, those that came behind left their own words. In the camps pieces of paper circulated from hand to hand. They were unsigned, from fear of reprisals, and nor were they dated. There was no need. The reality, with the exception of the snow that turned to mire and the mud that turned to swirling dust, was unchanging.

The tidings described the realities of each circle of death. Those who bore these tidings were the couriers. They were picked from among the young boys, who were more agile and could creep unseen. And to give them the strength to make their journeys quickly, they were given provisions. Some never returned: either they were incorporated into the advance caravans, which meant the distance until their death was shortened, or else they were



killed on the way. For this reason, the couriers were always volunteers and chosen from among the orphans, because few parents chose to part with their children that way. The man who decided at that end of the death marches was named Krikor Ankut. The man at the other end, at Deir-ez-Zor, was Levon Shashian, a responsibility he held until he was killed after enduring unimaginable torture.

Krikor Ankut measured up the young boy, with the flat of his hand he shoved his chest, but Sahag found the strength to keep his balance, not to fall. The man therefore decided the lad was suitable. The journey to Deir-ez-Zor would have taken around six days on foot, but as the couriers travelled mainly by night, taking shelter in hollows in the riverbank by day, the round trip lasted more than two weeks. Sahag learned the name of the man at the camp in Rakka who was to provide him with further provisions to reach Deir-ez-Zor. Rupen and Hermine stood to one side and watched, not knowing whether what they had decided would be to their son's advantage or whether it would spell his death. Somebody stood guard outside the tent; another had brought a jug of water. Hermine carefully washed Sahag's back, and then the boy lay face down with his arms spread. Krikor Ankut dipped his quill in the inkwell and slowly wrote on the boy's skin, filling his back down to his rump with large letters, which were as plain as possible, both to make the task quicker and to spare the boy, who bore the scratches of the quill without flinching. The fact that his skin was stretched tautly over his bones made the task easier. For a short while, the boy lay motionless, to allow the ink to dry. Then, they mixed earth in the basin of water and made a thin mud, with which they smeared his back. Anointed with mud, he was only a little dirtier than he

had been before. They asked him whether he knew how to swim. The boy answered that he had grown up on the bank of the Bosphorus. Then, Krikor traced the road to Deir-ez-Zor for him in the earth. 'Travel by night. Keep to the bank of the Euphrates and do not stray from it. If you have no other escape, then throw yourself in the water and endure as long as you can, until the water dissolves the ink and washes it away. They must not see what is written there. Likewise when you return. Above all when you return.'

On behalf of the boy, Hermine received the provisions for the journey. She set aside a handful of grain and rice for his younger sister, and then she embraced him and he vanished into the night. They did not bid each other farewell. Having seen so much death around them and accepting it as an unavoidable reality, they had long since bidden each other farewell.

Sahag did exactly as he had been asked. He meted out his meagre food, he endured three days, but he did not stop at Rakka, fearful he might never be able to leave. When he arrived at Deir-ez-Zor, he sought out Levon Shashian, who wiped away the mud and read Krikor Ankut's message. He cleaned the boy, inscribed fresh letters, and then smeared his back with a layer of mud mingled with ash. On his return, Krikor Ankut first gave him a cup of water and a fistful of *bulghur*. He told the women to wash him and after he had read he asked to be left alone. With his own hand he wiped away the text on the boy's back, embraced him and said: 'Do not tell anybody what you saw at Deir-ez-Zor. Most will not believe you and then it will do you no good. Go back to your parents.' When they saw him, Hermine took him in her arms and wept, not so much in joy at having him back as much as in pity.

In mid-April, the camp at Dipsi was broken up and the final caravans set out along the course of the Euphrates. Mounted soldiers and gendarmes surrounded the camp, rushing between the tents, striking with canes and whips, driving the people from the shelters towards the edges, where the caravans were forming. When all those still able to stand had run from the tents, driven before the horses, leaving the dying behind them, the signal to depart was given. They had been walking for almost an hour towards the hills, turning their heads back toward the hospital camp at Dipsi, when they saw thick smoke rising. The shelters had been sprinkled with petrol and set alight. From the colour and shape of the billowing smoke, they realised that along with the tent fabric there also burned human bodies, withered or yet moist, moribund, pell-mell.

RAKKA. THE SIXTH CIRCLE. The harsh journey lasted more than a week. By day the heat was scorching, but the nights were exceptionally cold. They walked ever more slowly, tottering. For those dazed files of people, impassive to the shouts and the lashes of the guards, at least there was no longer any danger of their being attacked by armed bands, for they no longer had anything to pillage. But at the way stations, the Arabs would approach, buying girls with little bags of grain. The caravan kept to the right bank of the river and finally reached Sebka, the camp on the bank opposite Rakka, from where the town was visible like a miraculous and forbidden realm. The waters of the Euphrates slaked the thirst of the deportees, but there were fewer and fewer chances of their finding anything to eat. From time to time, the gendarmes would gallop past and toss them bags of food sent by the foreign

consulates or Christian charities. Tossed at random, most of the food was wasted. The people tugged at the bags of flour and sugar and the powder scattered away between their fingers. Other food aid, such as chickpeas and rice, was inedible because the people no longer had teeth. They swallowed them without chewing, but their stomachs did not have time to digest them, either because of long disuse or because of dysentery. Rupen no longer went hunting; dogs were scarce and the wolves went in packs. On no few occasions the packs attacked people as they scavenged in the rubbish, devouring them. Rupen went with the others to collect the dead bodies. He helped to dig the mass graves, a task made easier now that the earth was neither hard nor sticky. It was enough to move the sand aside with your spade. But the task was harder given that the graves had to be much deeper. Otherwise, the wind would have scattered the tops of the graves, lifting them like lids and exposing the dead.

There was nobody to pray by the mass graves. All the methods used to kill the Armenians, on the roads of Anatolia, from Constantinople to Deir-ez-Zor and Mosul, were later used by the Nazis against the Jews, methods that ranged from caravans taken to isolated and easily encircled places to be slaughtered, to the concentration camps where the dying were shot, starved, plunged in icy water or burnt alive. The only difference was that in the Nazi camps the prisoners wore numbers, and that macabre numbering augmented the horror of the crimes against the Jewish people. The dead resulting from the endeavour to annihilate the Armenian people were not as numerous, if comparisons can be made between crimes on such a scale, but they were numberless. The names of which we know are mainly those of the murderers,

the governors, the camp commanders, the pashas, those with the ranks of *bey*, *aga*, *çavuş*. The victims rarely have names. Shedding its vestments circle after circle, never was death closer to its core; never was death so nameless.

Traditions have yet to be invented when it comes to the digging of mass graves: how they should be dug; how the dead should be laid therein; whether the men should rest at the bottom, the women in the middle and the children above; how they should be washed; how they should be clothed; what kind of prayers the priest should say and of what eternal rest he should speak; what kind of cross should be planted; how many arms that cross should have and what should be inscribed thereon. There is no tradition as to all these things. Each mass grave has its own laws, and the only thing that makes them alike is the haste with which they are dug. And this precludes the idea of lasting customs, since where there is haste there can be no tradition.

Graves are given names and they are adorned in order that the buried should not be wholly forgotten. The mass graves were made so that the dead tossed into them would be forgotten as quickly as possible. Mass graves are history's guiltiest part.

From this nameless core of death I have traced seven circles, whose centre is Deir-ez-Zor. Within their area, whose outer circumference passes through Mamura, Diarbekir and Mosul, more than a million people died, around two thirds of all those who died in the Armenian genocide. We know that they were there and that of those who entered the circles of death, of those who were not forcibly converted to Islam, sold as slaves or taken for the harems, almost none escaped. Anybody could die anywhere. There is not one

family of Armenians in this world that does not have a member who vanished in the circles of death, as if dragged down into a whirlpool. Therefore, you can pray at the edge of every mass grave in the sure knowledge that somebody who belonged to your family is laid there.

Rupen knew how to do a thing well. Death was a refuge for the humiliating plight of the living, and the mass graves were a refuge for the embarrassing situation of the dead. But there was also another reason why Krikor Ankut along with the other leading men decided to hasten the removal of the dead from the tents and the digging of the mass graves. A few days earlier, they had removed a faceless corpse from inside a tent in which lived a large family. They gazed for a long time at that corpse, whose face looked as if it had been eaten away by rats. But in the camp there were no rat holes, and therefore there were no rats. They all understood, but they said not a word. They did not need to swear an oath of silence, sensing that nobody would be able to speak of something so gruesome. When similar cases began to abound, the men decided to make an inspection every morning and evening, so that no corpse would remain inside the tents for long.

New garrisons were sent to Rakka and Sebka from Aleppo. The soldiers and gendarmes kept their distance from the camp. The camp was not hard to guard. At its northern edge was the riverbank, and the Euphrates was hard to cross even for a man in good health. To the left and the right stretched the plains, on whose open expanse there was no place to hide, and to the south was the desert. And indeed, with the exception of the boy couriers, few managed to flee, losing themselves among the motley crowds of the markets

in Rakka and thence travelling in a direction opposite to that of the caravans, to Bab and Mamura, or north to Urfa.

But the soldiers were not only guarding the people. They also guarded the wild animals and even the birds. The inhabitants of Rakka and the tribes of Bedouins were fearful of the plagues that stalked the caravans of deportees. For this reason, the governor of Aleppo had forbidden gravediggers from outside the caravans to approach, and the carts that were sent to the camp were abandoned to the deportees. And finally, when the deportees themselves did not kill them for food, the horses were shot to prevent them from bringing back any of the diseases which, having raged unopposed, had now become incurable.

As they stood and gazed towards the tents, polishing their boots, currying their horses, cleaning their guns, the soldiers, in their fresh uniforms, looked ready for the parade ground. Their faces were invisible to the deportees, because they were too far away, and when they did come closer, to toss them aid, they did so galloping past on their horses. But anyway, their faces were of no importance.

The feeling was mutual. To the deportees, the soldiers had one and the same face, and to the soldiers, the deportees were devoid of any face and even any human quality, given that they had been given the order to shoot, without mercy, any man, bird or beast that tried to leave the sixth circle.

The deportees were more and more exhausted after months of hunger and ordeal. The soldiers, on the other hand, were more and more rested, since the deportees were easier and easier to guard and the way stations were more and more frequent. And what made the incongruity even starker

was the fact that as the deportees became more and more ragged, the soldiers' uniforms became fresher and fresher, shinier and shinier, and their horses more and more bedizened.

The men had managed to organise themselves in such a way that they were able to collect the dead as quickly as possible. The arrival of a new caravan from Abuhahar and Hamam was immediately followed by the extension of the network to collect the dead. They had begun to work at the same pace as death. But this was ill omened, since death, finding itself trumped, quickened its pace. And then it gave the soldiers to think. They realised that in the camp at Sebka the people had begun to obey a rule other than death's, and the man who was courageous enough to defy death might defy anybody in the world. So they hastened the departure of the caravans to Deir-ez-Zor, in order to throw them into disarray. But the corpse collectors from the camp at Sebka reassembled their teams; they re-organised themselves, most of all from fear, not the fear of death, but fear of themselves.

This ability to organise, so unwonted for a camp of ragged, almost moribund people, could be tolerated at Sebka, where there were thousands of tents, but it would have become dangerous at Deir-ez-Zor, at the centre of the seventh circle, where the deportees were in the tens of thousands.

This is why one morning the commandant sent word that all the men between the ages of fifteen and sixty were to assemble at the edge of the camp. They were to be sent to dig earthworks. And of course, they would be given food and drinking water. They emerged from their tents and some believed that since they were going to be sent to work it meant they were



needed and that consequently they would be spared. Others were hesitant and they went only after the soldiers threatened to come for them on horseback. Others still, such as Rupen, went impassively. Ever since he became a hunter of angels, without caring overly much about whether they were black or white, but only about the stringy flesh beneath their feathers, Rupen had become empty inside; he lived only to protect his children. And this is why, when Sahag came after him, thinking that boys of fourteen might be accepted into the ranks of the men, Rupen stopped him and slapped him twice, which bewildered the boy, but was sufficient to quell his impulse.

But others still stubbornly tried to hide, such as the husband of the woman in the adjacent tent, whom they had befriended. Together the couple formed a single whole, which is why each of them, man and woman, could pass for the other. Tall, with narrow hips and small breasts, dressed in man's clothes, she did not attract the soldiers' attention when the caravans formed and she managed to conceal herself from those who seized the women. And the man, who was thin and whose cheeks were without down, whose hair had grown long and wild, dressed himself as a woman, waiting anxiously lest they searched the tents. But that did not happen. When the men were lined up and counted, it was decided that five hundred was a satisfactory figure, and so the order was given for them to set off.

In any event, the proportion of men in the caravans had dwindled. During the march to Deir-ez-Zor, the men were the main targets of attacks by war parties. In some places, so that no mistakes would be made, the death marches were segregated from the outset, with the men being slain during the journey in ambushes by bands of warriors or even by the soldiers meant to

guard them. And so, the greater part of the caravans was made up of women, children and old folk. Almost all the old folk perished, unable to keep up with the others on the way to Sebka. Some of the caravans, above all those that came from the west, had travelled almost a thousand kilometres to that place.

The two slaps, dealt not in anger, but in desperation, were Sahag's last memory of his father, Ruben Sheitanian. The men were taken south into the Syrian desert and shot. After which death returned triumphant, spreading like a puddle of green silk above the camp.

It was late spring when the caravan set out again, taking Hermine and her two children and the two lovers with it. The waters of the Euphrates had subsided and grown clearer. As the *vilayets* along the two tributaries of the Euphrates had by then been emptied of Armenians, the bodies floating down the river had also dwindled, and no fresh corpses took the place of those devoured by the fishes or swallowed by whirlpools or snagged on the banks. Like any other grave, the Euphrates had closed and once more made room for life.

If the journey from Meskene to Deir-ez-Zor had taken a different route, then the deportees would probably have long since died of thirst, especially now that the torrid heat had arrived. But the river that had for so long mingled the water of life with the water of death now provided limpid water. And so it remained all the way to Deir-ez-Zor, where the Euphrates abandoned the caravans to their fate, descending to meet the Tigris.

DEIR-EZ-ZOR. THE FINAL CIRCLE. The caravan was made up of indistinct little shapes. In the wind, they seemed flimsy, a flock of fluttering

birds rather than a column of people. The photographs taken by the foreign travellers who managed to get near the caravans or who came across those left behind to await their death helpless at the side of the road, show mainly children on the way to Deir-ez-Zor. The death march to the seventh circle was a kind of children's crusade. They shared the same fate as every other unarmed crusader. The children in those photographs are skeletal, their torsos withered, their bellies hollowed, their bones jerking like steel springs above their concave abdomens, their arms and legs having tapered to the thickness of twigs, their heads disproportionately large, like the sockets of their eyes, in which the eyeballs bulge from their orbits or sink into the back of the skull. The children gaze without any expression on their face other than vacancy, they gaze as if from another world, they do not stretch out their hands, they do not ask for anything. In their eyes there is no hatred, they have lived too little to understand or to condemn. There is no imploration, because they have forgotten what hunger is, there is no sadness, because they have forgotten the joys of childhood, there is no oblivion, because they have no memories. In their eyes there is nothing. Nothingness: a small, half-open window to the other world.

When a woman collapsed, it was also a death sentence for her child. More often than not, the child would stay by its mother's side, and they awaited death together. With horror, Hermine noticed the rash of typhus on her little girl's cheeks. In a short while, because of the scorching heat, the red blotches would spread. Hermine walked onward, clasping her little girl by the shoulders and weeping. Sahag wanted to help her, but his mother would not let him come near, to protect him from the disease. She did not even touch

him, but would examine him with her eyes as he slept, seeking for signs of the illness, her heart in her throat. In terror, she thought to discover the signs. But then she breathed easy; they had been merely blotches left by the dust, which, soaked in sweat, had taken on the colour of dried blood. She refrained from embracing him in his sleep. She caressed only the little girl, without caring whether she too would fall sick, quite the contrary: the thought of allowing her to go to the other world unaccompanied terrified Hermine, who, not knowing how she might cure her daughter, prayed that they would die together.

The journey from Sebka to Deir-ez-Zor was the longest and most frightening of all: a march of almost a hundred kilometres. Since the desert heat had begun to bother the mounted soldiers, who dozed in their saddles next to the caravans that dragged their feet across the scorching sands, they decided to travel by night, and in the daytime they waited by the riverbank, where there was still an occasional cool breeze. The few men remaining pitched makeshift tents to fend off the murderous heat. Some would be gripped by madness as they slept: they trembled and writhed, and the others would hit them to waken them, preventing them from suffocating in their sleep. Others lost their minds while awake and wandered off, but they did not get far, since having lost the reflex of self-preservation, they were felled by bullets.

The caravans had no shadow. By day, lying on the ground, they left no shadow, or else where they found a patch of shade, they would wrap themselves in it like a blanket. By night, as they groped their way, stumbling over rocks or falling into potholes, they became their own shadows. The caravans were so weak that they no longer had the strength to leave a

shadow, to pull their shadows behind them like a fisherman's net. It took the shadowless caravans almost two weeks to travel from Sebka to Deir-ez-Zor.

The camp was on the right bank of the Euphrates. Here, the tents were in the tens of thousands. Deir-ez-Zor was the final centre where such a camp was established. From Deir-ez-Zor there was no transit to any place in this world.

For this reason, the deportees were given nothing to eat. As vegetation was sparse, and the men that might have killed animals of the desert lured by the corpses had also dwindled, the hunger became unbearable. Their bodies were so weak that even the diseases spread with the greatest slowness: the organism did not have enough vigour even to nurture a disease. Those sick with typhus no longer ran a fever, because they had stopped producing antibodies. The other diseases retreated, leaving starvation to gnaw away at their bellies, to stretch their skin over their bones and dry out their innards.

Incidents were fewer and fewer. The camp commandant had discovered Levon Shashian's group, which had organised not only the living messages that the orphans carried on their skin from one camp to another, but also a system for supplying food and medicine, as much as they could come by, and the same system as in the camp at Sebka, whereby teams of men managed to bury the corpses, keeping pace with death. Levon Shashian had been taken from the camp and murdered with bestial cruelty by none other than the commandant himself, Zeki pasha. Any organisation on the part of the deportees within the camp was suppressed and in this way, in the opinion of the soldiers, any danger of revolt vanished. The camp succumbed to lethargy. The army's fear of revolt perhaps seemed unjustified, since the

soldiers were well equipped, rested to the point of boredom, and armed to the teeth, while the deportees were more and more skeletal, ragged and irresolute, drunk with death. But the soldiers were genuinely afraid and the authorities in Aleppo and Deir-ez-Zor were too. The soldiers had learned to fight other soldiers, and their weapons were designed to dispatch enemies afraid of death. Weapons had yet to be invented that could strike fear in those who no were no longer afraid of anything. Exhausted, eaten away by hunger, the deportees were unaware that their reconciliation with the thought of death constituted their formidable strength. Although this power of fearlessness in the face of death increased with every new circle, the journey through the seven circles of death was not one of revolt. The journey of the caravans was sooner one in expectation of death. Death, wandering through the camp, had become one of them; death itself was one of the victims of the circles of Deir-ez-Zor.

Only a muted murmur seeped to the outside. A German traveller, who managed to see the deportees at Deir-ez-Zor from close by, was left deeply troubled not so much by the obvious things, which the photographs reveal in all their horror, as much as by a single detail: in that dreadful place he did not see any people weeping. Or rather, he did not see what we normally understand by a person weeping, that is, he saw no tears.

But it is not true that the people did not weep. Rather, they wept differently. Those who still had the strength to sit upright, rocked back and forth; the others wept with their wide-open eyes staring up into the sky. But the weeping was a kind of uninterrupted groan, in a low voice, which, repeated by thousands of chests, made a droning sound. The weeping was

not the streak of tears running down the cheeks, but a sound. That drone, flowing endlessly and tuning itself to the surroundings, came to sound like the hum of the wind among the dunes or the swirl of the waters of the Euphrates. The weeping did not ebb for an instant, until the caravans were taken from Deir-ez-Zor to the plateaus where the last deportees were killed. That dry weeping took the place of prayers, and of curses, and of silence, and of confession, and for some it even took the place of sleep. Many fell asleep weeping in that way. Others died weeping, with their weeping still thrumming in their stilled chests, like a note in an organ pipe. I heard that weeping when grandfather Setrak used to rock back and forth on the chaise longue in the garden or when grandfather Garabet used to lock himself up in his room and his violin fell silent.

At first, the weeping groan irritated the soldiers, especially given that combining with the waters and the wind it seemed to come from everywhere at once. But then they got used to it. The drone proved more reliable than any sentinel: as long as it flowed evenly, it meant that nothing untoward was happening. It would have stopped if the people had found some other occupation than dying or lamenting their dead. It would stop, said the soldiers, if the deportees revolted or if they all died. But apart from the cases of madness, which most often ended with a bullet to the chest in the expanses around the camp, they did not revolt. When it came to dying, however, they did not die as quickly as before. It seemed that death itself, having lived among the deportees for so long, had come to love them. Although the camps were dismantled a few months later and the deportees were mostly killed in the meantime, the drone did not cease at Deir-ez-Zor.

But by then, their ears alert to that noise which carved a riverbed for itself wider than the Euphrates, the Turkish soldiers were not very worried when it came to guarding the camp at Deir-ez-Zor. To the south and east there was no need for guards, since there was only desert. Anyone who tried to flee in that direction would have no chance of survival. And nor was there any hope of escaping over the Euphrates, which bordered the camp.

For a time, Deir-ez-Zor was the destination of all the caravans, without the authorities having made any decision as to what was to be done next. Probably they expected that the caravans would gradually disappear on the way, so that Deir-ez-Zor would be just a kind of lazaretto, where those who did manage to arrive would quickly give up the ghost, a kind of Hastahane, like at Tefridje and Lale. Despite the plentiful opportunities to die, a few hundred thousand deportees stubbornly clung to life. Or rather, they had quite simply forgotten to die. The camp became increasingly crowded and hard to control, not because of the people, but because of what rained down on them and what they stirred up, namely diseases and miasmas. As the authorities in the imperial capital wanted a hasty and definitive solution to the Armenian question, Deir-ez-Zor became a transit point rather than a destination. However, the transit was not between two camps, but between this world and the next.

Of all the manifold forms of suffering, hunger proved stronger than disease or pain. Lacking any source of food, providing only chance sustenance, such as grass, berries that set the teeth on edge, wild honey and the carrion of wild animals, the camp at Deir-ez-Zor succumbed to a state of hallucination. The skeletal bodies went down to the Euphrates to drink water,



walking unsteadily, and then they sat back down in the scorching heat, rocking back and forth, groaning, as if feeding on the light, like plants. Some, losing all discernment and all sense of anything but hunger, put in their mouths whatever came to hand: the bark of trees, rags saturated with the salty taste of sweat or faeces, faeces which, because of starvation, were hard, sparse pellets, like a goat's. After the killing of Levon Shashian and those who laboured at the mass graves trying to provide shelter for the dead, the corpses once more began to linger inside the tents. Once more, faceless corpses began to appear, bodies without arms or legs. Those who did the rounds of the tents every few days to remove the mutilated or decomposing bodies were no longer shocked. Some even did so deliberately: having been hunters of crows and hyenas, they were now hunters of the dead. This is why those inside the tents eyed them carefully and did not entrust their dead to just anybody.

Even so, the task did not prove easy. It was increasingly difficult to distinguish the dead from the living. The living lay motionless for hours at a time and often they fell asleep with their eyes open, going blind in the blazing sunlight that burned away their eyeballs. And the dead would sometimes give a start, because of the large differences in temperature between night and day: their limbs would soften in the sunlight and then contract in the frost at night. And so they began to collect the dead at random, and some would return from the edge of the mass grave, awoken by the jolt of having been thrown on top of the others.

When the signal was given, the caravans began to form once more. Some were driven east, towards Marat and Suvar. Others marched west, in

the direction of Damascus. But whichever the direction, the outcome was the same. Once they arrived on a plateau that the advance guard reckoned suitable, the soldiers moved away, encircled the caravan and fired their muskets from every side. When none was left standing, they inserted their bayonets into the muzzles of their guns, drew their sabres and did butchery, making sure that the blade finished off what the bullet had missed.

Hermine was waiting for death, holding her daughter in her arms. The little girl was increasingly convulsed by chills; at night Hermine covered her with her body, trying to warm her. Sahag managed to obtain a handful of green dates and even a pomegranate that had fallen from a soldier's saddle. They ate the sour-sweet seeds of the pomegranate one by one, holding each under their tongues for a long moment. In the other tent, the two lovers were suffering from starvation without being able to search for food, since the woman refused to let her man go outside lest the soldiers see him and kill him. They seemed to feed on each other and clinging together they endured, until one evening when they released each other from their embrace and stood up. They took off their clothes and the woman handed them to Hermine. 'Clothe the child with them,' she said. 'She is trembling with cold.' They were completely naked. Hermine gazed at them in wonder, not because of their nakedness, which, like anything else that might happen to the body, was nothing unusual in the camp, but because they were ineffably beautiful. They had a strange light in their eyes, their hair lay smooth around their foreheads and shone, their flesh was of a ravishing whiteness, her thighs and chest had ripened and become rounded, and his muscles had knitted together and tautened around his bones. The light was beaded on their shoulders and they

cast no shadow around them. 'We have come to say farewell,' he said, but it was as if his lips did not move. Then, he took his woman by the hand and they moved into the distance. For a long time, they were able to see their receding outlines, perhaps also because of the luminous contours their bodies had acquired. They were so radiant and so impassive as they seemingly floated over the sands. Hermine and Sahag waited, straining their ears for the noise of the shots. But nothing happened, not even after darkness fell, enveloping the clay and the wax of their bodies. All that remained was an indistinct scent, like the smoke of smouldering myrrh or amber. 'They have escaped,' whispered Hermine. 'I will go to call them back,' said Sahag. 'They will die in the desert out there. Nobody has returned alive from the sands.' Hermine made a sign for him to sit and she went over to him. 'Leave them . . . They are beautiful and without sin. I keep thinking that Rupen is right.' She spoke of her husband in the present tense, as if he had gone far away, but would return, although by then Rupen had been killed along with the caravan of men from Sebka. 'Rupen is right. God is dead. Let them go on their way. Here, where you saw them for the last time, at the edge of the Deir-ez-Zor camp, is the boundary of the Garden of Eden. The gateway to paradise is but two paces away. We have returned to whence we set out at the beginning of the beginning. But in the meantime the world has turned bad. Perhaps they will start the world over again and they will create a different God.'

Sahag peered into the darkness where the conjoined bodies of the man and the woman flickered one last time and were extinguished. And all of a sudden a breath of wind bathed the boy's brow, fresh and rustling. It was as if the sands had parted before the two and from the earth fruit trees pleasing

to the eye had sprung up. The two arms of a far greater river joined before them: the Tigris and the Euphrates. And the man, walking in the garden watered by those rivers, left behind him his kin, his father and his mother, and he clove to his woman and they were made one flesh.

But here, among people, as the caravans of hundreds of people were led to the execution sites on the plateaus, on the way to Suvar or Damascus, new caravans arrived from the west, descending to the last circle of death. In that July of the year 1916, throng separated from throng, throng joined throng, and despite the continual coming and going, the size of the camp at Deir-ez-Zor remained the same, as if it were motionless. The surrounding lands had filled with bones. The final frontier had been crossed. The living served the dead, whose burial was their only remaining occupation. The dead served the living, keeping them warm, like garments, in the frosty nights and providing communion bread to those who had gone out of their minds with hunger.

With wild eyes, Hermine gazed at her daughter. The blazing heat of summer began to kill people, drying them up, sweating away their bodies' salts. The living and the dead, who were alike in their motionlessness and in the spasms that convulsed them from time to time, now also began to resemble each other in the dark, dry colour of their faces.

Given the pace at which the executions followed upon one another, the concentration camp would be cleared by the autumn of that year. Even without the executions, nobody would have survived to winter given the conditions at Deir-ez-Zor. That summer, it was the children who died above all. Many remained unburied among the tents, huddled, blackened, naked carcasses. Hermine impatiently waited to be included in one of the death

marches, she did not hope for anything, but she longed with all her soul to leave that place. Her open eyes motionless, the child would whisper from time to time: 'I'm hungry!' When the child's groaning became continuous, mournful when she exhaled, rasping when she drew air into her chest, Hermine set out among the tents. An hour later she came back empty-handed. 'They didn't give you anything, did they?' the little girl asked in a dull voice. She shook her head, her eyes vacant. 'Afterward, don't give them anything of me,' the child went on, smiling sadly. Hermine lifted her hand to her mouth, so harrowed that she forgot to drive away the boy when he approached his sister to caress her. She looked at him in a manner wholly unaccustomed and then grasped him by the wrist: 'Come!' she said in a new voice. She dragged him outside the tent, towards the edge of the camp, upstream, where the Arabs brought their animals to drink. On the riverbank, she stood with her son, praying that it happen as quickly as possible.

The Arab that approached them looked at them without kindness. But at the boy he looked with curiosity. As Hermine and the boy spoke Turkish, they could have made themselves understood in those words common to all the expanses of the Mohammedan faith. But there was no need. It was well understood was afoot. The circumstance had been repeated thousands of times during the death marches and at the edge of the camps. And to make things clear, Hermine let go of Sahag's hand and pushed him one step forward, keeping her hand on his shoulder, lest the boy bolt back the way he had come. Despite his weakness, Sahag did not seem to be afflicted by any disease and the Arab, by way of agreement, took out a little pouch of flour and handed it to the woman. She received it, cupping it in both hands. Then,

feeling himself released from her grip, Sahag tried to flee. But the Arab caught him by his waist and his neck and threw him over his horse like a pair of saddlebags. He leapt up behind him and giving a whoop, he galloped away. Hermine stood rooted to the spot for a long time. She thrust her hand in the pouch and stuffed a fistful of flour in her mouth to stifle her scream.

For a time, the boy languished inside a different kind of tent, one much larger, furnished with carpets and unintelligible inscriptions on the walls, in which lived people who spoke a hoarse, guttural language, who looked on him with indifference, but brought him food, wiped the sweat from his brow and changed his sheets. When he became strong enough to travel, they lifted him onto a horse and then they made their way deep into the parched lands where their only occupation, when they were not pillaging caravans, was tending the fires in which the camel fat sizzled by night and searching for water by day. Sahag's only clear memory of those days was of the men's doleful prayers and the white garment he received, a garment streaked with blood from the painful mutilation of his member, although he failed to understand why this new pain provoked smiles and satisfaction on the faces of the others. With his white, blood-stained garment he also received a new name: Yusuf, although nobody asked what his old name had been. But that was to his advantage later, when they sought him, travelling as far as Urfa and Diarbekir. Not knowing whom to ask after, they did not find him.

Yusuf became a capable young man. He learned to lead the camels to water, holding their bridles. He learned to ride, he became inured to dry victuals, and faced with the sandy expanses he learned patience. He received man's clothes, he had his own horse, the only creature to which he could

He spoke Armenian, and he knelt with the others, at sunrise and sunset, at midday, as they murmured words that sounded like a prayer. He might have remained a skilful horseman of the deserts, with his body already steeled by the circles of death, with his long eyelashes that protected his eyes from the sands, with his swarthy face, honed against the harsh wind, and with his black, curly hair, a good shield against the scorching sun. The fact that he did not speak Arabic was to his advantage. Nobody pestered him with questions and he did not have to tell the story of his life. He did not have to pray to a prophet who had revealed himself to him by bloodying him, preserving for himself the other who had revealed Himself having been bloodied.

He could have been a good horseman of those expanses and one day he might have become the chief of his own tribe. In winter he would have gone down to the shores of the Red Sea, almost as far as Medina, and, at least once in his life, as far as Mecca, and then, via Jerusalem and Damascus, he would have gone back up to the places he knew so well, and farther still, to the mountains, to Ras-ul-Ain and Mosul. But Yusuf remained aloof and the others, content that he was capable, left him in peace and did not interrupt the unintelligible conversations he held with his horse.

Yusuf lived that life in bewilderment. But enlightenment came to him all of a sudden, as happens when the questions are not precise. They had reached Mosul. It had been a good day. They had sold goat's cheese and camel hide. In the tent it was warm and peaceful, there was a scent of toasted meat, but before sitting on the pillows around the fire, they counted the gold pieces they kept in purses with drawstrings. Then, the women admired their gifts: amber, fabrics and jewels. The master of the tent grasped the most

beautiful of the jewels in his fist and then, opening his fingers like a magician, gave it to the youngest of his women. She tied it around her throat and twisting this way and that she joyously danced around the fire, to the sharp sound of the pipes and the rhythm of the tambourines. The droplets of fat made the fire spark and sizzle, faces shone and lengthened in the light of the flames, the rhythm of the tambourines joined with the handclaps, and the woman danced in a circle, carried away by her youth and the joy of the jewel. The boy saw her when she drew level with him, swaying her hips and shaking her breasts from the base of her shoulders. The talisman on its gold chain, worn in full view and proudly, was his mother's, and the boy remembered the modest gesture with which she used to conceal it under her clothes. Nobody noticed when he slipped outside the tent. His mind whirling, the only thing he could do was run wildly. Not even he knew what he was running from. He ran until he was out of breath and fell to his knees. And feeling the need to be released from his body, he began to scream. He sat on the sand and rocking back and forth he screamed at the top of his lungs. By the time the scream faded, giving way to the Deir-ez-Zor moan, to dry tears, Yusuf had died. He had been an unhappy, alien, silent creature wandering in places unknown to him and among gods in which he did not believe. Yusuf had been born from blood and was slain by a scream. But he was not slain as happens when a body kills another body, piercing it from the outside inward. Rather, Yusuf had died pierced from the inside outward, by the very body to which he had been added, like a white, bloodied garment.

Stripped of the new garment, with Yusuf lying at his feet like a cast-off rag, Sahag returned to the tents. But this time, no longer a son of the tribe, he



came surreptitiously, hiding in the deep shadows, avoiding the fires and the tent openings. He went to the animal pen and slowly untethered his horse. They trod silently over the sand. The horse followed him without sensing any change, obeying him, sniffing him, since Yusuf had never existed for the horse. Later, galloping hooves could be heard, but by then horse and rider were far away.

He headed west, in the opposite direction to the death marches, but alas, the return journey, back through the circles of death, from the death to the resurrection, was not a journey back in time. On the contrary, climbing the levels one by one, from the depths into which he had fallen, as if down a well, he found only the traces of the caravans, survivors begging at the side of the road, new and terrifying names given to the ravines whose scree consumed the bones, children of his nation wearing shalwars and with Yusuf's growing within them, as if in nests. Many times he wanted to go back to the tent, to kill the Arab, beneath the eyes of his women and children, and to take back his mother's talisman. Then, he told himself that the Arab bore no guilt. The man who had ripped the pendant from his mother's throat was elsewhere and he would have to wage too great a war to find and kill all those like him if he were to be certain that his mother's killer had been punished. The Arab had ultimately proven to be his benefactor and it was not his fault that the times had cheapened human life so much that the Bedouin had set the boy's life at a pouch of flour.

At Ras-ul-Ain, Sahag re-intersected with the railway line that he had left two years before, on the way to Mamura, climbing out of a cattle truck, his face swollen and scarlet from the lack of air. He sold his horse and travelled

for a day and a night, huddled in the corner of a carriage, as far as Izmid. On the way back he found no pointer to show him the way. For a time, his journey was by train and by boat, which took him west, to Bazargic and then to Silistra.

As long as he was fleeing, the memories left him in peace. When he finally settled, in Silistra, he became a grocer's apprentice, and later he opened his own shop. Later still, he began to look for a wife, but until he found her he tarried with the girls that waited for the sailors in the port. The Bedouin robe he once cast to his feet came to life, hissed like a snake and set out on Sahag's trail. And so it was that one evening he saw the face of Yusuf looking back at him in the gaslight, mirrored in the window. Sahag gazed in horror as Yusuf danced to the sound of drums and flutes, as his white desert dweller's garment swished, as he held his member in his hands and rubbed it, cavorting savage-eyed, as he ejaculated not seed but blood. Sahag could find no other way to dispel the apparition than by grabbing a tool and striking the window. Yusuf chortled, his face shattered, it multiplied in a thousand other faces and seeped into the room. When Sahag came to his senses, he took a good look at himself, at his savagely distorted face, at his clothes in disarray, at the not yet softened, the still mutilated member in his hand. He understood that Yusuf had entered him and that not by breaking windows and covering the mirrors could he fight against that transparent face.

Sahag and Yusuf hated each other, but they knew that they were forced to live together. Yusuf bore tenfold the torments to which Sahag had been subjected, as he had to endure the worship of another saviour and the gentle ordinances of that saviour's faith. But he avenged himself on that

foreign tribe in the only way he could, which is to say, through the member that bore his birthmark, poisoning his seed. Bound to that seed, forever to remain barren and dwindling with the passing of the years, Yusuf also dwindled. In my childhood, Sahag Sheitanian was an old man. That is why I never knew Yusuf.

Each of his halves was accustomed to waylaying and hating the other. Each waited for the other to fall asleep before it struck. But as fate would have it, they always fell asleep together and only in dream did they truly become separate, for the two halves were unable to dream at the same time. As his other half dwindled, so increased the resignation of Sahag and his wife, Armenuhi, at not being able to have children. Split in two, inured to hating and unable to store away his hate in the nooks and crannies of his soul, Sahag began to hate others. First of all he hated those like Yusuf. But as very few around him were like Yusuf and as his unconsummated hate gnashed like the fangs of wild beasts, which have to rend, otherwise they grow until they end up piercing their own skulls, Sahag poured out his hate on the Bolsheviks. The un hoped-for opportunity arose after the war. Previously, the only communist in Focşani had been a bibulous greengrocer, whose sole political activity was to hurl raucous, slurred curses at the King and his dynasty on 10 May, until the authorities became wise to it and arrested him at the crack of dawn, before he could awake from the previous night's drinking bout. But after the war the town filled with communists. Sahag used to call them communist highwaymen. The communists repaid his affection with their usual generosity, which is to say, they looted his shop and then, when there was nothing left to loot, they confiscated the entire premises. Sahag only rejoiced. 'Take it all!' he

shouted, waving his arms and jumping up and down on one foot. 'Loot these!' he cried, throwing tins of Van Houten cacao at them, 'You forgot to take these!' he yelled throwing bags of coffee beans, which scattered over the pavement like cockroaches.

He came up with the idea of putting the Telefunken radio in Seferian's crypt and in the night he used to go there by himself to listen to Radio Free Europe in the cemetery. In the summer of 1958 he watched avidly as the departing Red Army battalions vanished down the highway to Tecuci. He sat unbudging for hours in front of the saucer-sized screen of Mrs Maria's television set, over the road from our house, watching the live broadcast of Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej's funeral, hanging on every detail, cracking sunflower seeds, drinking beer, cheering like at a football match. 'The Russians poisoned him with radiation,' he said, albeit this time without any hint of reproach for the Russians. 'They did his gallbladder in!'

And it was also Sahag Sheitanian who was the first to succumb to the fascination of maps. Uprooted from the places of their childhood, the old Armenians fled, they emigrated, they crossed deserts, continents, seas and oceans, but they never really travelled. Their journey through the world formed part of their sadness, not curiosity or joy. That is why they were travellers over the expanses of maps, like book mites.

The cartographic plates were like a fissure in the real world; they opened into a different dimension. On those maps, the wars always had a different ending than in reality, the *fedayi* came down from the mountains and crushed the armies, the prisoners managed to escape from the concentration camps, and the warriors broke out of the encirclements. The Americans

landed in the Balkans, English paratroopers dotted the skies, the Russians retreated into the depths of Siberia. And of course, Armenia stretched from the Caucasus to Tyre and Sidon, from Anatolia to Lake Urmia, as in the time of Tigran the Great, in the last century Before Christ. The world was made of interlayered maps, studded with arrows indicating troop landings, liberations, routs, retrocessions, glory and triumph. Of all those maps, the least remarkable and therefore the least noticed was the one laid directly over the grass, in other words reality itself.

For that reason, on his maps different treaties were operative and the wars turned out in different ways. The Treaty of Sèvres held. The Yalta summit never took place and Stalin's purposely-sharpened pencil did not carve up Europe. Sahag Sheitanian and the other Armenians of my childhood were men of maps rather than men of this world. Sometimes they were so impassive, their eyes gazed so far away, that it was as if they had been rolled up like maps and vanished from the earthly plane.

In the *Book of Whispers* every aroma, every colour, every flicker of madness has its own magic. The guide to the various realms, the magician of the maps, was Mikael Noradungian. The others would stand around him, watching wide-eyed, as he smoothed the continents beneath his palms. Wise and silent, my grandfather would sit there too. Like nothing else, the maps proved that there was in fact a meaning behind the chaos of the times. Anton Merzian would forget to ask questions and in front of the maps, where there was room for all, he would no longer argue with Krikor Minasian. Ștefănuca Ibrăileanu, Măgîrdici Ceslov, Agop Aslanian, Vrej Papazian, Ovanes Krikorian and all the others would piously approach, allowing themselves to be guided

to that new Bethlehem, where salvation took the form of a map. Sahag Sheitanian would gaze, overwhelmed by the wonder of it. These were the only moments when his twisted innards unclenched and he was reconciled with Yussuf.