

"RENDERING THE TIMELINE"

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By **Keith Garebian**, Book review, Ontario, 13 June 2023

Rendering the Timeline

Lorne Shirinian

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Writing as the son of a father who survived the Armenian genocide of 1915, veteran poet, playwright, filmmaker, and Professor Emeritus, Lorne Shirinian sees himself as having inherited a predetermined disorder. His fifth poetry collection (originally published in 2021) is framed by a digital film-editing metaphor for ordering scenes, replete with colour, special effects, and transitions. Shirinian explains that such a rendering allows him to see what his life is like, "whether it's intelligible or not, whether there are flaws and gaps, mistakes, regrets. In contrast to a film, however, the final cut of your life cannot be altered. It is fixed for all to see and for the writer to bear." He acknowledges that his presentation is fragmented, but it is made "occasionally coherent by poetry scribbled by an aging poet searching for meaning to the fifth act of a tenuous life."

Shirinian uses jump cuts, moving from romantically intoxicated lyrics for wife Noemi, and tender lyrics for sons Emmanuel and Benjamin, to poignant poems about his own aging and heart-wrenching commemorations of his father's odyssey from his birthplace in Turkish Armenia to a new life in Georgetown, Ontario. The poems of his father (what I would call the Armenian poems) form an



essential core in the collection. Some are marred by either flat denotation ("the presence of temptation and corruption/the burden of suffering and misery" in "Approaching 68") or an ambiguity that is far too vague to be truly meaningful ("I want something more than wanting something more" also in "Approaching 68). But they have no pompous grandeur; nor do they overflow with devotional empathy. Their innate power derives from their honesty, succinct expression, and weight of a terrible history as they rehearse what should already be familiar themes for diasporic Armenians: "love, family, genocide, loss, survival, aging/and the desperate necessity of putting it all down."

There is a real gem in this collection that owes a special debt to Constantine P. Cavafy's "Ithaka," but one that creates its own significance. Originally published in an earlier book (*History of Armenia and Other Fictions*), "I have no memories of Ithaka" takes its cues partly from Ulysses's perilous odyssey, as well as principally from Cavafy's great poem, without following either Homer or Cavafy scrupulously. Ithaka symbolizes the end of a journey home, while also suggesting that sometimes we have to fight for things that we value most. In Homer, Ulysses survives numerous dangers in the course of his long journey home to wife, son, and kingdom. In Cavafy's poem, the journey is what offers wisdom:

Keep Ithaka in your mind.
Arriving there is what you are destined for.
But do not hurry the journey at all.
Better if it lasts for years.

.....

Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey.

Without her, you would not have set out.
She has nothing left to give you now.

In Shirinian's poem, his orphaned father does not return to his homeland, but is "moored offshore, quarantined for life," trying to hide his scar or pain. The poet has only his father's tales of forced wandering as a child from a fabled land, but the poet has inherited (umbilically) his father's painful memories. Shirinian (like his father) eschews facile sentimentality: "I find no solace in your past/rigid like a corpse awaiting resurrection." Nevertheless, the poet recognizes that his own journey begins with the father's history and memory; and his own emotional healing is achieved by joining his father's journey through poetry:

in you the ancient voices of Ithaka
may stir what lies dormant in me
speak to me
so that the scar from Ithaka
to Canada
can join past and future time.

His father had said once "that a life of only memory/is a wasted life," and had fought the impulse "to freeze time." "If we are to worship, you said, let it be a living thing/no walls no museum halls." Ultimately, then, (as with Cavafy) Ithaka is not a single place or journey. There are several forms of Ithaka. All diasporic generations have inherited some historical trauma, and each survivor will need to understand what Ithaka could mean in personal life.

I can pay Shirinian no higher compliment than wishing I, myself, had written such a marvellously wise and touching poem as his.

There are no comments yet.