FROM MASQUERADE TO THE QUESTION OF IDENTITY

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By Arusyak Karapetyan, Ontario, 10 August 2021

Interview with Keith Garebian

Keith Garebian (KG) is a widely published, award-winning writer. He is the author of more than 25 books, theatre and dance critic, biographer, and poet. Born in Bombay, Garebian lives near Toronto and holds a doctorate in Canadian and Commonwealth Literature from Queen's University. He has been a judge at various prestigious Canadian poetry competitions and participated as a delegate in various literary events. At The Fifth Conference of Writers of Armenian Origin Composing in Other Languages (2013) he received the William Saroyan Medal from the Armenian Ministry of Diaspora. Garebian has been a lecturer/instructor/assistant professor at various Canadian universities and colleges.

Some of his works, theatre books and poetry collections include: *Pain: Journeys Around My Parents (2000)*, *The Making of 'Guys and Dolls' (2002)*, *Reservoir of Ancestors (2003)*, *Samson's Hair and other Satiric Fantasies (2004)*, *Frida: Paint Me as A Volcano/Frida: Un Volcan de Souffrance* (2004), *Blue: The Derek Jarman Poems* (2008), *Children of Ararat* (2010), *The Making of 'Cabaret'* (2011), *Moon on Wild Grasses—haiku* (2013), *Georgia and Alfred* (2015), *William Hutt: Soldier Actor* (2017), *Poetry is Blood* (2018), *Colours to the Chameleon: Canadian Actors on Shakespeare* (2019), *Against Forgetting* (2019) *Mini-Musings: Miniature Essays on Theatre and Poetry* (2020), and *Scan: Cancer Poems* (2021).

Upcoming Publications include *In the Bowl of My Eye* (Spring 2022) and *Finger to Finger* (2022). *Pieces of My Self* and *Three-Way Renegade* are works in progress.

Keghart: When did you begin your professional writing career and who are some of the authors that have inspired you?

KG: I was a good writer in school. However, a colonial education for the Cambridge G.C.E. in India meant that our chief literary models were British, with Shakespeare leading the way—for which I was grateful because even from that early age, I never felt "colonized" by the greatest poet-dramatist in English. As I put it in my book about Canadian Shakespearean actors, Shakespeare "is an expert shape shifter who can have more colors than a chameleon. His immense curiosity about life generates enormous plays with significant questions that cut across all generations and cultures." As a Commonwealth writer, I was turned into a wider nation (to steal Derek Walcott's idea), though there can be the fear of feeling like an adjunct to English headquarters.

I became a professional freelance book and theatre reviewer in Montreal in July 1975, publishing reviews, interviews, and articles in diverse newspapers, journals, magazines, and anthologies. When I moved to Ontario, I had wider freelance opportunities, but never enough to make a living. My first book came out in 1983; my first poetry collection in 2003. And as I moved deeper into poetry, my models ranged from Walcott, Paul Celan, Donald Hall, Irving Layton, Peter Balakian, Louise Gluck, Adrienne Rich, Jack Gilbert, and Mark Doty to Ocean Vuong, Billy-Ray Belcourt, Billy Collins, Douglas

Burnet Smith, Stephen Heighton, Lorna Crozier, Kevin Irie, etc.

Keghart: What role has theatre and drama taken in your life?

KG: Being the only son of a father orphaned during the Armenian Genocide, drama was something in my blood and genetic makeup, as it were. What could be more dramatic than learning to live with obscene history? Life also taught me the value and dangers of masquerade in love, marriage, and gender issues. Masks play a radical role in my non-fiction and poetry. My forthcoming poetry collection, *Finger to Finger*, goes into this subject, but I had already engaged with masks in earlier collections such as *Frida*, *Blue*, *Georgia and Alfred*, and some of my theatre books, where I use personae or empathize with those who do.

Keghart: In 'My Passage to Ararat' published by Keghart.org in 2013, where you describe perfectly what the Armenian identity means for you, a recollection of your father's memory from the Genocide materializes: "Atrocity is often magnified by the scale of statistics, but what need of a million and a half bodies when a single anonymous child can cry out for rescue under a nameless tree in an unnamed geography of terror? That barely remembered sister of my unfortunate father reminded me why I am my father's son, a stranger to his language and some of his countrymen's customs but an Armenian with eyes that have a deep-sea sadness and a soul across which the snows of Ararat blow." Eight years later, would you say anything has changed in your views or feelings in regards to your Armenian roots?

KG: I do not speak, write, or read Armenian. Accordingly, my Armenian identity is only partial or fragmented. While I have extended it by my readings of Armenian history and culture, I am still mainly Armenian by instinct and what I have inherited from my father's history. While I was writing *Children of Ararat* and *Poetry is Blood*, I felt as if I were an accidental descendant of Komitas, Siamanto, and even in a strange way of Nagash the Ghareeb. "There is no end to things in the heart," Ezra Pound declared.

Keghart: Please tell us what unifies your books *William Hutt: Soldier Actor*, *Pain: Journeys Around My Parents*, *Frida: Paint Me as a Volcano*, *Children of Ararat*, *Poetry is Blood*, and *Against Forgetting*. Are these the books that should be read to "best know who you are as a person and writer"?

KG: All those books you mention above have a large overarching unity because they have all come from some of the deepest places in my psyche. They all express my engagement with different histories, and my poetry confronts questions of cross-cultural, cross-generational trauma, witness poetry, exile, the complicated epistemology of memory, and the problems of defining and preserving identity. Identity can be mutable, as I have shown in some of my theatre books. I have undergone many changes in my life, and one of my deepest convictions is something that Virginia Woolf asserted: "a self that goes on changing is a self that goes on living."

Keghart: You have stated: "I'm very empathetic to the marginalized, the oppressed, the exploited and the outcast" in your interview with Elana Wolff at Open Book Ontario. How and where does your

perception of injustice in the world appear in your writing? What is the role of an artist in social and political issues?

KG: Virtually every book of mine reflects various injustices in art as in life, circumscribed by place, time, motive, and opportunity. An artist is a witness to certain realities. It is my responsibility to myself to express what I see, feel, and understand, and to explore possibilities of change. A true artist usually expresses personal vulnerability while exploring the vulnerabilities of others. The marginalized, oppressed, exploited, and outcast are all vulnerable in different ways. They share a pathology because they are in conflict with the state, religion, political philosophies, and economic greed. Human society is generally disappointing to me; most of my best friends are books, paintings, music, and movies.

Keghart: You have quoted Yeats in above mentioned interview with Elana Wolff: "We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry." How important is it to have a discourse on matters that concern the Armenian diaspora, the current conditions that surround Armenia and the Armenian nation as a whole?

KG: All life is essentially a quarrel with oneself and with others, as demonstrated by global wars, social and political unrest, religious and political strife, and economic or sexual exploitation. Such wars or battles lead to, among other things, uprooting and exile. I am probably most Armenian for always feeling a sense of *garod*—something I doubtlessly inherited from my father, but also from having a post-colonial life. Where is the true home? Is it in the land of birth, the adopted land, or is it somewhere abstract? The Armenian diaspora is a microcosm of something macrocosmic, and its current conditions are more than depressing. These conditions should concern the western world deeply because they repeat cycles of destruction we have seen in many eras, but mostly in the 20th and 21st centuries.

Keghart: Your latest chapbook, *Scan: Cancer Poems*, is available in a limited edition of 100 copies. Please tell us how the chapbook came about.

KG: I was treated for cancer in 2019, and while undergoing radiation therapy, I felt an irrepressible urge to write poetry—primarily about illness but on other subjects as well. I wrote upwards of 100 poems that I shared with poet and editor Allan Briesmaster who is familiar with virtually every poem I have written. In 2020, I was able to carve out some of the best poems to make a chapbook which I entered in a competition, adjudicated by physician-poet Shane Neilson. I did not win, but Neilson selected my manuscript for Frog Hollow Press's Disability Series, while the publisher used a watercolor and a pastel drawing of mine for the cover and interior.

Keghart: Another recent book of yours is *Mini Musings: Miniature Thoughts on Theatre and Poetry*, released in the fall of 2020. How can our readers obtain copies of your work?

KG: E-mail me at kgarebian@rogers.com for specific information about the books I have for sale.

Comments



Jeffrey Round – 2021-08-29 12:19:23
This is simply one of the richest writer/poet interviews I can recall. Mr. Garebian's "obscene history" serves him well, and he it. The search for identity, one of the most compelling issues of our times, is brilliantly expounded in these few paragraphs.

Lucine Kasbarian – 2021-08-21 22:51:06
The world is enriched by Mr Keith Garebian's unique literary, artistic and intellectual contributions. We Armenians are fortunate that this versatile man of many identities has seen fit to expound upon his genetic and spiritual affinity with the Armenians. Thank you, Keith and Arusyak, for a refreshing interview.