# CUSTODIAN: A REVIEW OF KEITH GAREBIAN'S CD "POETRY IS BLOOD"

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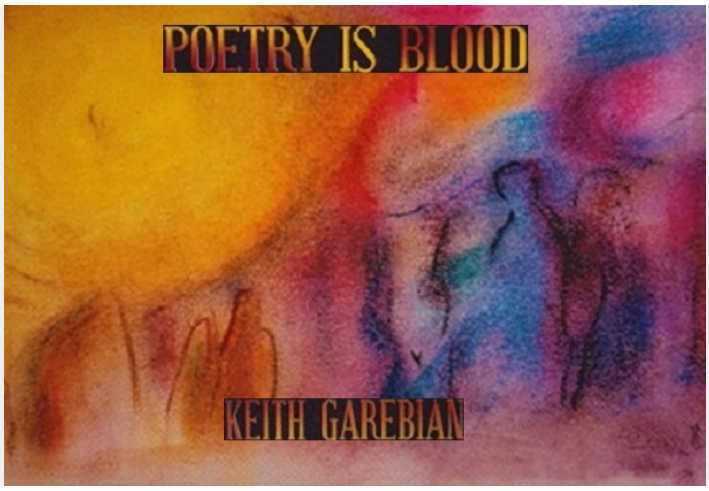


**Category:** Opinions

**By Lorne Shirinian,** Toronto, August 13, 2023.

Keith Garebian has just released an audio cd (funded by a grant from the Mississauga Arts Council) of his reading 18 poems from his 2018 collection *Poetry Is Blood* (Guernica Editions). A feature of this recording is the addition of short pieces of Armenian music composed and played by Ernie Tollar on the flute and percussion. They are wonderful, evocative pieces that weave throughout the readings, wrapping them in suggestion and mystery, highlighting the origin of many of the poems. I would have liked more of these very effective pieces.

The poems on the cd are divided into four sections, as they are in the book: Old Griefs, Disappearances, Heartbeats and Footprints, and Meditations. However, Garebian has selected only eighteen poems for this cd, whereas there are forty poems in the original book. (Perhaps because poems require a special concentration, unlike popular songs.) The cd begins with Garebian quoting the twentieth-century American poet laureate Charles Wright: "a line of poetry's a line of blood." This certainly sets the tone for many of the poems that follow. The first poem, "April," a month that is forever seared into the memory of Armenians, begins, "A month bequeathing poppies/compact red explosions," signalling death, commemoration, and memory. These ideas and motifs are central to many of the themes throughout the collection. The poem that follows, "The Boy Watched," develops these themes: "Parents moved in stealth/as killers came like wolves/to tear fresh flesh." April was the month in which the Ottoman Turks unleashed the genocide against its Armenian citizens, changing the world for them forever. "For that: much grief/and anger against a sky/of venomous sun, hawks/with razor-clam claws." The Armenian victims had become the prey in a world that had seemed to have turned against them.

In "Old Griefs," Garebian moves from a broad overview to the personal, as he expresses some of his Armenian father's trauma after surviving the immense tragedy as a very young orphan. Referring to his twin heritages, Anglo-Indian and Armenian, Garebian represents himself as a "Divided River," referring to his bi-cultural heritage, "the first…suckling at the teat of Mother India;/the second, an ever-returning nightmare--/cauchemar, Armenia." In writing about his father, (who "died alone and lonely"), Garebian turns his father (now with the distance of time) into a character in an Armenian tale, and uses a familiar formula of paradox, often found in such tales:

> He was a father, and he was not,
> in a time that was
> and a time that wasn't.

His father and the Genocide have seemingly been reduced to a fictional tale; however, tales contain a great deal of psychological truth which Garebian explores in this poem that manifests wrenching poignancy.

As one listens to Garebian reading his poems, certain motifs become apparent. Taken together they develop the major themes of the collection. In "Deir Ez Zor," the ultimate end for the deportation of

Armenian columns pushed east away from their homes, Garebian summarizes the immense suffering of starving, unhoused victims, brutally exposed to the blazing heat of the desert sun: "Their broken bodies belong to silence,/…begging mutely/in abandonment."

In "Memorial," Garebian remembers his soul-shaking visit to the "Swallow's Nest," the memorial outside of Yerevan. It is a deeply moving experience for anyone who has been there. Twelve large stone slabs representing the historical twelve provinces of Armenia, surround the sacred flame.

> The wall speaks names
> of bodies unrisen
> from faraway
> despoiled graves
> . . .
> This requiem
> ill with carnage of a people

Atom Yarchanian , known by his pen name Siamanto (August 15, 1878 – August 1915), was an important Armenian writer, poet, and national figure He was killed by the Ottoman authorities during the Genocide. In "Siamanto's Dismay," Garebian sums up the situation many Armenians find themselves in even today.

> We cannot see beyond seeing,
> Burning fields, cauldron caves,
> Corpse-engorged rivers.
> Nothing to make it otherwise.

The sad truth we have learned is that genocide does not cease when the hostilities end. The pain burns its way through generations. There is a reference to Siamanto's famous poem, "The Dance," in which Armenian women are tied together and forced to dance in a grotesque circle as a Turk pours kerosine on them, burning them to death.

As one listens to Garebian's poems, the images and references accumulate, leading us to understand the world bequeathed to the post-Genocide generations. It is a world Garebian understands, as he demonstrates in his poem "Komitas," about the fate of the much-loved, Armenian priest and ethno-musicologist, who travelled through villages, writing down and collecting some three thousand pieces of Armenian folk music. Although Komitas was released from imprisonment, he suffered from acute and chronic post-traumatic stress, a result of what he had witnessed of the destruction wrought on his people. He spent years in psychiatric hospitals in Paris until his death in 1935. Garebian creates a memorable metaphor of doom. He says,

> a dangerous song of black wings
> rustling in the tree of twisted self.

Garebian asks in another poem, "Tell Me Why": "Tell me why history gives small hope." Written in the second person point of view, the poem could well be about his own father, and Garebian's vocal tone becomes sharply dramatic, without losing lyricism.

Several poems weave around issues of national importance and return to focus on the extremely personal, as in "A Pilgrimage," in which Garebian writes,

> I walk in my orphaned
> father's shoes, the footfall
> imprinting his voicelessness.

However, here the personal relating to his father is intimately linked to his father's history as an Armenian Genocide survivor. In the title poem "Poetry Is Blood," the poet writes, "the poem's lines a crimson pool/in memory of memory." He accepts his father's history as his own when in "Elegy" he writes, "My father's ancient tribe writhes/on my written page."

The poem, "Custodian," is meaningful to me and to every other poet who considers himself/herself an Armenian poet. Many years ago, when I. began writing, I decided that I would do so as a son of survivors of the Armenian Genocide, both father and mother. This has affected my creative output. In Garebian's poem, I hear the same conviction and dedication to Armenian history and heritage, "I am their custodian/in poetry…." In "Cranes," the final poem of the collection, the poet reaffirms this.

> I cannot refuse
> their deaths, tattooed on the mind.
> . . .
> The earth moves on
> and light dances
> as I shelter the dead
> give them refuge in my words.

Every reading is an interpretation, and Garebian, who knows how his poems work and what they mean, has given us wonderful readings that are clear and powerful and need to be heard.

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*recent collection of fiction is **Arising**, both available from Blue Heron Press. His new work, **Remembering, Keeping a Record**, will be released in September.*

# Comments



**P** – 2023-09-05 12:00:08
Beautiful effort by Shirinian and Garebian. May this production serve as a reminder that the Armenian Genocide is ongoing.



**Mesrob** – 2023-09-04 15:23:08
I would like to commend Lorne Shirinian for his sensitive, probing, and illuminating review of Keith Garebian's "Poetry is Blood" CD. I hope the review impels readers to rush and buy the remarkable CD by the amazingly prolific and indomitable Garebian.