

TOROS TORANIAN

**DARKNESS
UNDER THE SUN**

Reflective Essay

**Translated from the Armenian by
Aris G. Sevag**

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No, the title of this book is not a borrowing that perhaps recalls the name of a book titled *Darkness at Noon* by the German author Arthur Koestler. Koestler committed suicide in 1981. Far be it from me the very notion of suicide. Koestler committed suicide, despite being armed with the world's most progressive ideas. Why did it happen, I wonder? He was one of the leaders of the German working class, and suddenly he cut short his very own life.

Why? Why? This question torments my soul. I'm experiencing an affliction that has no name. I wish to forget the event yet it is present within me; it hurls me from one wall to the next and puts me in a nightmarish state.

Now, what am I thinking about? Where's my mind? Where am I? A short while ago, I was sitting in front of the window in my room, in one of the world's most ancient cities—Aleppo—and thinking of writing a short story, when the heartbreaking news came of the earthquake that had jolted the region of Leninakan and Spitak.

The sun had struck my back and was warming me, spreading a feeling of bliss in waves among the millions of cells that make up my body. It felt as if my body was a boundless ocean and the sun's rays were waves set free from a zephyr. The sound of those waves was coming to me like a melody. I was listening to myself, minute by minute, and was thinking of writing a story about that. I was thinking of naming that story, "I with Myself," or "The Sun and I."

The world was so wonderful like that. A seemingly imponderable state, in which one gives thanks to the Inscrutable One that he, one whose beginning and end has to do with the Mysterious, experiences such a moment of bliss. Is that moment incorporeal? But how can it be incorporeal when I can feel and experience that moment? I, a material being, a human of flesh and bones, am thinking or I am experiencing; that's how I feel. In other words, my thought has materialized on the vibrating fibers of my feelings.

I am ecstatic that I exist.

I live in Aleppo, one of the world's oldest cities. Yes, I'm a human being,

like one from Angola, Chile, or Ireland. However, can anyone say that I am not Armenian? I haven't created the Armenian people. The Armenian people came into being centuries ago and I, centuries later, am clinging firmly to the handful of our soil that is left to us. I am the continuation of the Armenian people; I'm the perpetuator of this people destined to carry on its existence, a people which has developed its culture over the centuries, cell by cell.

Now back to the earthquake . . . Spitak, Leninakan. I don't know who named the latter such. I don't know who had previously called it Alexandropol and, even earlier, Giumri and Gumairi.

Now I already said that I'm Armenian, but Leninakan doesn't have an Armenian name. This vexes me too. Why shouldn't an Armenian city be called by an Armenian name? Why shouldn't an Armenian person be baptized with an Armenian name?

Have you seen or heard of a centuries-old city in any country in any part of the world having been christened with an Armenian name? Is it perhaps because our Armenian names aren't pleasing to the ear? Why doesn't anybody adopt our names yet we adopt those of others? Thus, we don't value our own names either.

Who is preventing us from doing so? My father named me after his father, which doesn't displease me. It's good that he didn't name me after an American movie star. In that case, as a child, I would have aspired to be like that actor. I mean to say that I would not have lived my own life, with my own thoughts; rather, I would have imitated someone else's manners, I would have aspired to resemble somebody else.

But I'm alive, I exist. I believe that I'm a world unto myself. Why should I repeat the life of others? Why shouldn't I have my own life?

I am not an egoist.

I'm simply who I am. In other words, I'm Armenian. A type of human being, who has decided never to commit suicide, never to become despondent, even if the Himalayan mountains should come tumbling down on him; that is, on me, on the Armenian people.

No, I shall not become despondent, like the Italian writer Ignazio Silone, the great novelist of the 1930's, the author of the novel *Bread and Wine*, one of the founders of the Italian Communist Party.

Or, again, like the Italian writer Primo Levi who committed suicide. He too was a left winger, the author of a few novels, who ended his life after experiencing the horrors of fascist oppression.

I wonder, is the world truly one huge stage where mankind, after giving birth to the greatest of geniuses, like Tolstoy, Dante, and Narekatsi, continues to perform *The Comedy of Errors*?

Isn't this cause for anguish too? Is it not a greater woe that mankind shall continue to perform this play called *The Comedy of Errors*?

Why did Primo Levi commit suicide?

Why did this man commit suicide, particularly since he believed in international brotherhood? The heroes of his novels are good characters. Primo extracted them from real life and presented them to us as good examples but he didn't follow, or was not able to follow, the example of the very heroes created by him. Why? Was his life so unbearable? Primo Levi had read Dante's *Inferno*. He had read Franz Werfel's novel, *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*. He had seen plenty of misery, stood alongside men in suffering, so how and why did he detach himself from this army?

So there I was, sitting in my sunny room in Aleppo and thinking of writing a story.

The sun was dissipating my gloomy thoughts, just as it dispels the dark clouds and presents its shining face to the world.

I was feeling proud of the sun. Through my existence, I was happy to confirm the sun's universal power—the sole power which is an indiscriminating and universal benefit to all, which brings all beautiful things to life and the creature capable of appreciating all those beauties, known as man.

If man didn't exist, if he hadn't been summoned to existence, who would confirm the existence of the sun, the existence of beautiful things, the existence of evil?

"Satan, get lost, just for today let me not think about evil."

It's a sunny winter day. Calm prevails. Therefore I shouldn't become absorbed in gloomy thoughts. I should sit and write a story.

It's Wednesday, December 7, 1988. In the end, stretching something too far causes it to break, like an overstretched rubber band or empires flung too far. If further mention is necessary, we can begin with our neighbor, Turkey, and go back in time to the Persian, Roman, and Byzantine empires.

All of a sudden, there occurred an eclipse of the sun. The sun? Does it ever become eclipsed? No, it was my room that became dark. The warmth of the sun is still inside of me, in my veins, in the core of my being.

What happened? Does anything happen suddenly, or is any given event

the result of a certain aggregate or course?

An infernal racket, a tumult, an aggregate of billions of noises had filled the space, and my room was dark.

I felt my face, my eyes, and my ears; I rubbed one hand with the other to actually get a feel of myself. Do I exist? What happened? Did war break out suddenly? Or did another country, in violation of an alliance treaty, attack Armenia, just as Germany had invaded the Soviet Union in 1941?

How many bombs were dropped over Leninakan, plunging me into darkness like this? I'm in a spiritual darkness, I'm in hell, all I can hear is noise, noise, and more noise.

I hear cries for help coming from all four sides. I'm bewildered. I touch my eyes. They're there but I can't see anything. I'm engulfed in darkness. Nothing but darkness. My eyes are open but I can't see. I'm like the mole which can't see either.

What happened? I can't figure it out. Since I'm alive, I can think and, therefore, that which we call time exists too. I don't know how long I've been in this state. Now I hear voices. Someone is shouting, "Mama!"; another, "Oh, my foot, my hand, my head is about to explode, rescue me, someone, anyone, save me, help!" . . . pitiable voices, which now rush upon me.

I, in turn, shout, "I'm here! I'm alive! People, I hear you, do you hear me?"

One of them says, "I hear you, I hear; oh my arm, help me!"

I move yet I don't know how to get around in the dark. I try to walk with my hands extended. This is my room. I'm holding my pen. I was going to write a story. This is my desk. Now, in this darkness, when I don't know what happened in the world, in Leninakan, as I was thinking about the fate of prominent writers, about the sun, about my own happiness, the light has gone, or darkness has obstructed it. Now I hear plaintive voices. It is as if tanks are rumbling on top of my head, crushing my skull, my brain, and my thoughts under their caterpillar tracks.

Suddenly I shout, "No, I shall not commit suicide, never mind that Koestler and Primo Levi committed suicide, I shall not. Richard Wright, one of the founders of the American Communist Party, committed suicide too, in Paris.

If Richard Wright, the author of the novel *Native Son*, was an optimist, then why did he commit suicide?

Now I began to think that Leninakan is an earthquake center. I began to think that a war couldn't have broken out. I began to think that those infernal noises weren't caused by bombs; rather, they were the result of the remission, separation and collision of rock and earth.

If lightning results from the clash of clouds charged with positive and negative electric energy, then the earthquake causes death and destruction. Accordingly, I am under ground. Or buildings have collapsed on my house. Thus, pleas, cries for help, and unceasing voices are coming from beneath the ruins.

Extending my hand, I figure I'm touching the right wall of this room of mine. A few steps the other way is the left wall. This is where the door should have been. This is my desk; this, my chair. I sit down. I was going to write a story. I was going to write about myself. I was going to write about the sun. That story was going to resemble me, yet despite the presence of my desk, my papers, and my pen, I'm unable to write even one line. I am afraid that even if I should write until morning, I will not be able to write even one good line.

Until morning? What is morning? What is evening? Darkness is everywhere. I've opened my eyes wide but I can't see anything. How many hours have I been in this condition? Has it been six hours? I don't know, maybe it has been as long as two days or two months.

The voices around me have begun to grow faint, but tanks continue to roll above my head, crushing my brain, my thoughts.

I wonder, are people above ground coming to their aid?

Now I look around but can't see. However, I can hear. What a marvelous thing it is to hear! I hadn't previously thought about this. Now, though, if I can't make a connection with the outside world through my eyes, at least I can do so through my ears. I hear voices, clamor, the rotation of metal; I hear the sound of footsteps, the sound of rocks. I distinguish the sounds.

Now I am in love with my ears. My ears, I'm glad that you exist. You connect me with life; you keep me from becoming despondent; you even make me optimistic. Thank you, my ears!

Suddenly, my thoughts are transformed into sound; I wish to hear my own voice, so I shout—"Thank you, my ears." "What?" I hear a far-off voice. "Thank you for hearing," I shout again and again.

I told myself out loud that I would not lose hope, that I wouldn't be like Andre Gide. He gave up all hope.

Andre Gide was one of the great friends of the Soviet Union, who became quite despondent and said, "When I heard about Stalin's barbarous acts, I was horrified and, from that day on, I decided that justice doesn't exist under tyrannical regimes."

If Andre Gide was horrified by those acts, then what choice did those who experienced those brutalities have but to go mad.

What was Charents to do, the Armenian poet of the October Revolution, later accused of being nationalistic? What was Bakunts to do, the founder of modern Eastern-Armenian prose? What was Haik Bzhshkiants to do, the legendary commander of the "Iron" Sixth Regiment of the Hunchaks in 1914?

I ask you, Andre Gide, what were they to do? They didn't just hear about those cruelties; their bodies bore the worst of those tortures. They were shot to death. In other words, truth was executed and you knew very well, Andre Gide, that justice could not be executed by shooting. That is why Charents, Bakunts, Haik Bzhshkiants are still with us today; that is, justice is still alive.

I confess that, at this moment, I'm not physically injured. You can see that my mind is working more methodically than a clock. I can also hear. My being able to hear helps my brain function effectively. However, I must say that my condition doesn't resemble that of the voices I heard, with one crying out "Oh, my foot," another shouting "Oh, my hand," and a third screaming "My head's exploding" "Help!"

They are experiencing the pain. I, in turn, hear the pain experienced by them. My soul is agitated but, I wonder, can I feel their pain the way they do?

Upon hearing about the pain, Andre Gide lived on, only to become despondent. Others, however, experienced the pain without losing hope.

I feel as if I'm under the rubble of the apartment buildings in Leninakan leveled by the earthquake—the child of those who never lose hope. Perhaps I will not be able to emerge from beneath the ground, to come out from under the rubble. The air has already become heavy, I'm having difficulty breathing but I shall not give up hope.

I shout, "Friends, brothers, don't lose hope, you shall live, people up there are doing what they can to get to us, I hear the sounds of their tools, can you hear them too?"

I recalled my friend, Haig. What a time to remember him! Here I am in the dark, while he's in Chicago. Well, I'm alive, Haig, I'm under ruins,

thinking about you. Did you in the Diaspora hear about the earthquake that shook Armenia? I, your old friend, even while I'm under the ground, I am thinking about you.

Haig, your smile now is a ray of light which pierces my soul and illuminates my earth-covered body. I recall your telling me about the time you took the poet Gostan Zarian to the airport for his flight to Armenia where he would live out his remaining days.

Zarian said to you—

"Loneliness is taking me to Armenia."

Haig, I'm beneath the rubble. I'm not alone. See? I'm talking with you, I'm gaining strength from you, I'm gaining strength from the Diaspora, Haig!

Recently, a high-ranking official from Armenia, during a visit to America, proclaimed that Armenia doesn't need the Diaspora.

We need all the Armenians of the Diaspora and Armenia. We need adults and children alike, we need the wisdom of babes. See, Haig, my dear friend, my beloved Diaspora, even as I remain in the dark, under the rubble, the thought that we need the crystal-clear thinking of our children has illuminated my room. It's as if my eyes met the sun's rays; I closed my eyes tight and thought about how many children remained under the rubble, and how many crystalline thoughts were buried, never to come to light . . . I felt dizzy, Haig; that thought floored me. I don't know or remember how long I remained like that. The meaning of time has long since escaped me. My watch is phosphorescent so I was always able to see the hours and days clearly.

Again I look at the hands of my watch. They have stopped moving. The day, time, has stopped on December 7. I wonder, is today December 7th too? Has time in general stopped, like my, watch? I feel nauseous. I swallow my saliva. I have a piece of bread the size of an ear so I figure on finishing it off, eating it because my stomach is growling, but what can I do in this darkness?

Now I recall your meeting, as you told me, with the English writer Christopher Isherwood. This man had taken part in the Spanish Civil War. He died in Los Angeles at the age of 88. You met him inside the Chicago Opera House. He declined your dinner invitation and said, "I have totally devoted my life to silence and writing. The human soul's value increases in silence. . . ."

I wonder, were those words the reason why I, lying under the rubble, remembered you? I wonder, was this relative silence the reason why I remembered you and the humane writer Isherwood, who wrote the book *I Am A Camera*?

No, my dear Haig, I am not a camera. Many phenomena can escape the eye of that mechanical device, which is a human invention. Isherwood's eyes had the power of a thousand machines. If only this great writer, born before the turn of the century, had gone to Armenia, seen our country with his own eyes, witnessed this earthquake which shook all our people, and described everything for posterity's sake.

At present, I can't see the frightfulness of what happened. I am in the dark. I merely can hear feeble cries for help, Haig.

Now, Haig, get ready to hear me, I'm going to shout so loud that you'll be able to hear me in Chicago.

"Haig, I shall survive. I shall see you again and talk about literature, about the Black movement, about the Armenian cause, about this earthquake, about our salvation, about my salvation."

Do you hear me, Haig?

Oh, what kind of man am I? How long have I been sitting in this deep dungeon? I'm groping along in the dark, I feel the walls of my house, all the paintings are still in place.

This is Minas Avetisian's painting. His birthplace, Djadjoor, isn't far away. There, in Djadjoor, there was a permanent exhibit of Minas's paintings. I wonder, did anything happen to the village? Are Minas's paintings still there? If not, this is the umpteenth calamity to have struck Minas. Minas, call out from the other world. When fire consumed some of your works, I came to Yerevan and said to you, "At least you're alive, Minas, you'll create new works. Don't despair." A gentle smile crossed your face. Well, now that you are no longer, if your paintings are destroyed, who is going to paint them anew from scratch, who is going to bring them to life?

I have a hunch that your paintings are still intact. They shall exist forever, Minas.

The air became heavy. My breathing became labored. "My wife, my life companion, help me out." As it is, I can't raise my voice enough to call my daughter and my son.

See, I only called you when the air became heavy. When someone's in a bind, whom does he call for help, if not his immediate relatives?

Where are you? Do you see the sun? I hope you are among those searching for those who are buried. I hope you didn't have an accident or weren't tossed upside down by the jolt of the wild beast, like me.

I didn't call out to my mother or father for help. They witnessed the Armenian Genocide, soon tired of this life, and departed.

How can I call out to those who have gone? Since when have I been here anyway? I've lost track of the days. My breathing has become labored and, thus, I feel the taste of death in my mouth. Death has the taste of the earth; that is to say, it can cause new seeds to flourish. You, my life companion and my children, you have remained outsiders. Perhaps I may turn to dust, in which case it's up to you to cultivate this soil.

However, I have a hunch that I too shall remain a tiller, yes, I shall hang on.

I can visualize the movie version of Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. We saw that movie together, right? We were in Beirut then. The movie was showing at the Rivoli Cinema.

When the lights went on, we saw that we were the only ones left in the theater. All the viewers had left because there weren't any love scenes in it, just the victorious hero-old man.

Now that I'm under rubble, Hemingway's old man gives me strength.

I am that old man who conquered the elements. My dears, I shall come out from under this rubble.

It was Hemingway who said, "You can kill man, you can scorn man, you can exploit or humiliate man, but you can never defeat man."

See here, I am that man that Hemingway was talking about, I shall join you. Search for me, help me. I, in turn, am looking for you every minute, and I know that I will reach you.

However, my dears, what I don't know is why Hemingway, the author of *The Old Man and the Sea*, the man who took part in the Spanish Civil War, put a stop to the work of his heart which beat for mankind. He committed suicide.

Didn't the old man of the sea, the hero that he created, who has now come to my aid, rush to help the one who created him?

Why?

This is the riddle which torments one who stands close to death.

Hemingway, I shall not follow your example, nor that of Wystan Hugh Auden, one of the greatest English poets of the 20th century, who was a