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# William Saroyan: A Man Worth Cherishing

ARMEN D. BACON

My mother knows of my obsession with Saroyan, and as I begin penning this essay, she is quick to remind me he ate dinner once at our home in the late fifties. Due to shoddy memories, neither of us can fill in the narrative of how or why he showed up at our doorstep. Not knowing, of course, creates a sense of mystery and intrigue, a sheer heyday for my imagination, although such vague recollection disappoints the yearning to discern minute details, or anything that might bring him back to life.

I close my eyes momentarily in search of the burly curl of his mustache, a feisty staccato in his sentence structure, that fierce eye contact, his appetite for my father's shish kabob, and my mother's pilaf. He sat opposite my dad at the head of the table, his reflection exaggerated by an oblong mirror intentionally placed to make the room appear larger than its actual size. He most certainly did not need any such assistance. I do remember that.

Squinting with eyes wide shut, I hear the colossal voice as if he is talking right at me, using his hands as props. I'm certain this was not the case, but nevertheless I conjure and embellish fictitious discourse between us. This is foolish because what would he have said to an eight or nine-year-old chubby, self-conscious Armenian girl? We did once converse outside the Fresno County Free Library, as it was called in those days—a conversation I have written and bragged about on numerous other occasions. We shared a love for books and the original downtown structure that housed them, and we welcomed our separate, yet tandem visits.

I would prefer to write that the old man and I spent hours on a lone park bench on a warm summer day, eating *lahvosh* (Armenian cracker bread) sandwiches and sweet seeds from a ripened pomegranate in Courthouse Park, bantering back and forth about our poor yet rich lives in Fresno and our shared infatuation of Paris. But that would be a lie. I only know Saroyan through the lens of his writings.

It is years later now. My fascination has escalated with time, punctuated by my involvement with tribute festivals celebrating his life and literary contributions. I have read, reread and then read again most of his works. One man in particular, a close friend and confidante of Saroyan, Robert Setrakian, lassoed me into his inner circle when he arrived in Fresno on a beautiful fall morning in 2001, delivering ambitious plans for this city of ours—a desire to organize a long overdue Saroyan Festival. Within minutes of hearing his vision, dizzied with excitement, I said yes, at first because Setrakian’s last name ended in “ian,” but truth be told, I had contracted Saroyan fever. Cancelling morning appointments, I was putty in his hands, willing to do anything to spotlight the man whose books were my bible.

I had admired Saroyan ever since laying my hands on a copy of *My Name is Aram* back in sixth grade, required reading in Seth Atamian’s 6th grade classroom at Winchell School. Years later I would begin to grasp Saroyan’s depth of understanding of the human spirit, his love for outcasts, and his attraction to anyone fighting insurmountable obstacles. In the back streets of my own private world, I was waging a personal war, one I couldn’t confess or explain yet to anyone, not even William Saroyan.

Like many of his trademark characters, I felt vulnerable, isolated, and displaced, like a stranger in my own skin. I arrived home that night full of hope that the team of Saroyan and Setrakian might force-feed me words as oxygen and ammo to endure my own secret battles. Was it possible that the prolific man who used words and language to resuscitate a peach might also revive me?

A few days before the launch of the Festival, Setrakian accompanied me on a private tour of the Fresno Art Museum galleries, showing me priceless, never before seen works of William Saroyan, our native son, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author and playwright from Fresno. A sacred hush, intoxicating to my senses, filled the room and shot straight through my veins to a sweet spot near the vicinity of my soul. I wandered aimlessly at first, but then took notice that much of Saroyan’s artistry was composed on Paris hotel stationary. How serendipitous that I had also collected hotel stationery during my yearlong travels

through France. Stunned, I sat breathless in the gallery, but later that night hunted down my stash and at 2:00 a.m. began writing. Saroyan had thrown me a lifeline.

I read somewhere that when writers die and go to heaven, they go, in fact, to Paris. Yesterday's mail brought a 1961 *Saturday Evening Post* in pristine condition with a centerfold Saroyan essay titled "Paris is the place for you."

Amused by my own excitement, I spent a good part of the afternoon inhaling the musty aroma of ancient magazine newsprint, enchanted and enthralled by the sight of the author's name in bold, prominent font. Careful not to rush the moment, I cleared the kitchen table moving coffee mugs and residual mail in slow motion, spreading open the essay as if unveiling it to the world for the very first time. In handwritten cursive, the subtitle: "One man's love letter to a lost sweetheart" transported me far away. Opposite the page was a series of French stamps, Palais du Luxembourg, Anniversaire du Armistice, Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite. I am still staring at them, 24 hours later.

The story is vintage Saroyan, playful yet husky in voice as he urges a long lost love to join him in Paris to live out their remaining days. At the time of the writing, he is in his sixties, the age that I am now. Secretly casting myself as his "lost sweetheart," at least while sitting here home alone, I devour each word, as if they are directed to me.

Saroyan and I share Paris. This was the city I fled to in the early seventies, exactly one decade after he penned the story I am now reading. We missed each other by ten years, I think to myself. By now my imagination takes me to a café near Rue de la Victoire where Saroyan took up residence in a modest but very Parisian third floor apartment. I am the more fluent of the two of us; Saroyan has barely mastered numbers and days of the week, according to the story.

Standing up to stretch, eyeing the stacks of his books towering atop my nightstand, I chuckle to myself. The Saroyan affliction persists. *Essential Saroyan* faces the ceiling, *My Name is Aram* rests in its usual anchor spot, and the two are distanced by a slew of Armenian writers and a letter acknowledging my book's submission as a contender for the 2014 Saroyan Prize. Framed prints

and acrylic renderings hang on walls and will soon be diverted to my new writing studio, which is near completion in an upstairs bedroom, once occupied by my son who was born the same year Saroyan died. Both are deceased now; two native sons, gone from the face of the Earth.

My favorite quote sits as a ready reference to the side of my desk. The verse has rescued me on more than one occasion, its message now a permanent appendage as I navigate life's uncertain journey.

*"In the time of your life, live – so that in that wondrous time you shall not add to the misery and sorrow of the world, but shall smile to the infinite variety and mystery of it."*

I visit Saroyan's grave regularly. Some of his ashes are also buried in Yerevan, Armenia, usually on the same day I visit my father and son's graves.

Stubbornly loyal to his roots, Saroyan was a man who carried the underlying pain of genocide. While his words dance on the pages of life, it is between the lines that readers learn that he suffered from terrible griefs, somehow borrowing his authority from death. But in the end, he was a man full of impulse who loved life: a man worth cherishing. His messages resonate now more than ever when we face the hollowness of the American dream, the loneliness of displaced foreigners, and the suffering that is part and parcel of our human condition.

In the Armenian culture, pomegranates signify a wide range of emotions, the seeds symbolic of hope, choices, and possibilities. Like a pomegranate, Saroyan will forever nourish my insatiable appetite for all three. Many Armenian fairy tales end with the following words: "Three pomegranates fell down from heaven; one for the story teller, one for the listener and one for the whole world."