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Lory Bedikian

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On the way to Oshagan
by Lory Bedikian

I stop the car, cross the dirt road
to see what it is the old woman's
selling. Hoping for a cold drink, an extra
postcard to write this evening, I find
her tucked behind a table, under a tarp
with fly swatters swaying above her head.
Stacks of Marlboro boxes, packs of gum
are the only things I can recognize among
the odd Russian, Armenian labels.
She must not hear me, because she keeps
rolling a square of newspaper into a cone
and fills it with roasted sunflower seeds.
I ask for one, saying "meg hahd hahjees,"
fumbling to find a *dram* among my dollars.

Her eyes, the color of two almonds
rise for only a moment before she asks
me with a low, coarse, parrot-voice
if I like America, if I'm married and where
exactly is this place called "Glendale"?
With an awkward smile I drop indifferent
answers for her, like coins in the palm.
Until this exchange I had convinced myself
that I do not look like a tourist. After all, having
an ancestral name, firm family tree, the language
ironed to my tongue since the day I was born,
how could I be just another *Amerigatzi*? I say
this to myself, though I'm the one with the walking
shoes, the camera and plaid-patterned pants.

She interrupts my thoughts with “Welcome to Armenia. Please take these seeds for free.”
When I extend the money, I notice her face shrinks in the afternoon light. Back in Los Angeles I would have insisted to pay. But with this unexpected visit I simply remembered how I was raised, before the textbooks, the corporate cubicles, before I learned to get fashion magazine haircuts, attend culturally sponsored events. I hear my parents say love this seven-member family all your days and nights, learn to take every offering with grace, no matter the given size. I bowed my head, said thank you. She insisted it’s nothing and asked that I come back soon.

Forgetting why it was I stopped at all,
I walk back across the dirt, cracking
one open. Its shell tastes of the same
salted seeds tucked by my grandmother
into coat pockets before evening walks.
Like a small communion, I contemplate
the seed with my tongue and swallow.
I almost turn to wave, but get back
in the car. For miles around, there is nothing
but land I follow on the map.
There is nothing but this old woman
and her convenience stand
made of brick and wood
on the edge of a beaten road.