If Saroyan was a Post-Soviet Armenian woman living in the 21st century

#America_place Pregnant

#America_place 16

Our American apartment is in a wooden building. In a four-story American building where our university's Soviet-born students and the Midwest's Soviet-loved, Somali-born refugees live. In the Soviets of my childhood, we helped the starving Somalis. In the America of my American grandma's childhood, they helped the starving Armenians. I have made a black-and-white collage from the photos of Armenian and Somali starving children featured in the newspapers of my American grandma's childhood and my own. Pinned it on the inner wall of my head, in a place that I can look at only when I want to. But I am pregnant now. I don't look at the collage anymore. I have thrown it away, so I can easily smile when greeting my beautiful Somali neighbor, and forget that our common homeland is hunger.

#America_place 17

Our American apartment has a bedroom, a kitchen, and a living room. White walls, beige carpets, many built-in closets with white doors. The round wooden table and blue-colored chairs are a present from my American family. My American father built and painted the chairs with his own hands. We also have a loveseat as a gift from them. Loveseat. This is what a couch for two is called. It is dark yellow. Soft. In the evenings, the two of us sit down on it and watch a movie online. Bergman. When we learned I was pregnant, we brought inside the huge convertible sofa left in the parking lot of our building by residents who had moved out. Take me, said the writing on it. So we took it. It is beige. Matching the color of the carpets. Now I sit down on the carpet, lean on the sofa, stretch my legs out and read. My class readings. About America. Where there are loveseats, Somalis, dishwashers, war veterans, dryers, Protestants, sofas left in parking lots, Trotskyists, deer freely walking in the city, Mexicans, doggy bags, Soviet Jews, garage sales, the Midwest, African Americans, kitchen sinks, WASPs, yuppies, nine-one-one (911). There is also a toilet and a bathtub. In our apartment.

#America_place 18

We have a stove, a dishwasher, and an all-swallowing kitchen sink. Yes, it swallows everything. Food leftovers—eggshells, onion peels—can be left in the sink just like that. You push the button; it grinds it all and drains it to the sewage with the water. I once even sent some broken glass there. The washing machine and the dryer are for shared use by the residents of our floor. There is a special room in the lobby. They are there. You put in a quarter, pour the liquid detergent, push the button, and your washed laundry is ready in half an hour and dried in another thirty minutes. In this timespan, me and my beautiful Somali neighbor say "hi" and smile at each other, and for a moment enjoy the commonality of our destinies in a narrow space without doors and windows, next to the rotating laundry. I miss the washline, where the laundry hanging in the sun and wind confirms the continuity of life. A transient piece of eternity. When, on the roads of a hastily lived life, you meet a color-coordinated washline of laundry and suddenly realize that the laundry is yours. In this laundry room with no doors and windows, my homeland is sun-soaked laundry. From the window of our Yerevan panel apartment block. Also online.

#America_place 19

I am pregnant. Very pregnant. It is winter outside. A real one. Minus 20°C. It is plus 30°C inside. I never manage to convert this to Fahrenheit. Turns out wood is the best thermal isolator in the world. It gives warmth not only through burning. Wood. My friend from 1992. In a furnace heater. I, a product of the cold and dark '92, have put two sweaters on my round belly in this hot apartment in our wooden American building, and am now sitting on the sofa, with my legs bent under me, reading Remarque printed out from lib.ru. The smell of lentil soup in my nose. The smell of lentil soup in the apartment. The smell of lentil soup on the white walls. On beige carpets. Hanging from the low ceiling. Hiding under the window and on the kitchen table. *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Lentil soup, the rear of the Western front. Lentil soup. Boiling on the stove while I set fire to another volume of Lenin in our Yerevan panel apartment. Our neighbor's Lenin, the neighbor who had a Ph.D. in Philosophy. He had left it in the hallway. He had not written "take me." He had said it. Probably. And I took it. On the eastern, western, and all possible fronts, my homeland is lentil soup. Also cooked on Lenin. When I am pregnant. And not only then.

#America_place 20

In our state, many have Scandinavian roots. Probably as narrated by Hamsun. They were probably starving like the Armenians and Somalis. I haven't seen it myself, so can't imagine it. My American mother is Swedish and my father is Finnish. The weather in our state is also Scandinavian. Winters are cold, summers are short. It's a pleasure to watch Bergman here. Especially in the winter. When it gets dark early and the crosswind cuts outside. The one that passes from the north to the south across the middle of America and across you, if you happen to be outside. One by one tickling your bones. We watched *The Seventh Seal* tonight. Late in the evening. I woke up at night from the dance of death endlessly stretching in my dream. Turned out the dance was in my womb. And the smell was of wild strawberries. It was a bright smell. Forestial, sunny, summery. In winter, my homeland is wild strawberries. Also narrated by Bergman. Black and white. Also, strawberry-colored.

#America_place 21

That night alarm again. And me, in pajamas, in an overcoat hastily put on with the buttons unfastened around my belly, my bare feet in boots. Who is cooking at this late hour? The firefighters walk in and out quickly. This time there is smoke, too. I freeze and shrink. I hug my belly with my hands to protect it from the cold. Akram, my Azeri classmate, is in front of me. He is constantly pacing. In his slippers. Carelessly wearing a short jacket and tightly holding a briefcase. He keeps all his documents in one place, so if he ever needs to quickly run away he knows exactly where his documents are and doesn't need to look for them. He laughs. He says he inherited this habit from his mother; when they fled from Aghdam they did not manage to take anything. And this caused problems for many years afterward. They could not leave the country: they had no documents. And now, in this center-of-the-world America, from where people do not flee, he knows what is important. In life. Especially when there is a need to flee. Perhaps his homeland is the briefcase with documents.

#America_place 22

It was Karine. She said it's a good one, let's go. Me and my belly got out of the building. Again, 911 is in front of the building. Smiling firefighters are actively strolling around. They respect my belly and clear the way for us. *Kill Bill*. Who told you to watch that movie when you're so

pregnant? Karine did. She doesn't talk to me to this day. Since that day. The movie theater is full. Chomp-chomp. Popcorn in my mouth and Thurman opens her eyes in my head. Thump-thump-thump. Thurman walks in my head. Shots. Glass. A white bride with a pregnant belly and lots of blood. A sea of blood. Everything is red. Is that my period? How could it be? I am pregnant. She has entered my belly. Turned everything upside down. I run away. The bride is after me. Karine and Thurman in my head. I lost Karine that day. She does not talk to me, does not say hello. Turns out my homeland is my womb.

#America_place 23

We set a beautiful Christmas table, with my American mother's Swedish grandmother's silverware and white-blue plates, which had crossed the ocean. I am in an Andersen fairy tale. About Elisa and her brothers. Because the dishes have blue swans painted on them. Not the delicate festive dishes of my American family, but the set that my American mother gave to me to host guests in our apartment. Huh? Could it be that my homeland is Andersen's fairy tales? No. It is the Christmas tree. In my childhood, I would always sleep around the Christmas tree on New Year's Eve. And right before falling asleep, I would imagine the toys waking up at night and visiting each other from branch to branch. I would even develop conversations. Until I opened the present left under my pillow in the morning. My homeland is New Year's morning. The most silent morning in the world on all possible fronts.

#America_place 24

It was my doctor. He said it's obligatory, that's the rule. Pregnant couples must attend childbirth courses. So, we have been here since morning. Together with ten pregnant couples in their seventh to eighth months of pregnancy, like us. The trainer-midwife has put ice in my palm. She says we should hold it for an entire minute. I close my eyes. My hand is burning. Smoke and fire will come out soon. Pins and needles. I bite my lips. My husband extends his hand for me to give it to him. I don't. It's mine. He hugs me from behind. My eyes are closed. The midwife counts the seconds: 10, 9, 8, 7, 6 . . . that's it, you can drop the ice. It doesn't hurt anymore. My eyes are open. I don't even want to drop it. It melted and escaped. And now I massage my face and neck with my wet hand. The midwife says childbirth is like that. In the beginning you cannot stand it, but you go through it and forget. The Black woman next to me is going to deliver in a day or

two. But she is so large that her belly is not visible. Her husband is half her size. Skinny, short, and with a fat golden cross on his neck. He was rapping all the time so his wife would not drop the ice. Our homeland is the pain experienced together.

#America_place 25

We go north. For a seminar. On community-based development. Three hours by bus. It's boring outside the window. Nothing interesting inside, either. Two native Americans, two feminists, one retired professor of economics, a pastor from a god-forgotten community, and two sociology students. And me alone, with my collages. What if I die in childbirth? From a blood infection. Or I don't know. What if a miscarriage happens on the road? Or an accident. We'll be staying in a camp. Wooden huts. In a pine forest. Mine is the second floor of a bunk bed. The result of drawing lots. It's a wooden bed with wooden stairs. The one beneath is an old feminist. From Vermont. Her body is her right. She decided not to have a child at a very young age, when she became a hippie. In her hippie commune, everyone has many children. But they respect her decision. And she respects theirs. She has lain down under me and talks to me. About her commune. Their commune runs a natural farm in Vermont. She grows vegetables. She has fallen asleep. I can't sleep. I'm afraid of falling down. The collage in my head spins. In the years when the "Starving Armenians" made the headlines of American newspapers, Armenian women gave birth on the road, hungry and thirsty, cut the umbilical cord right there with whatever they had at hand, no matter how far from sterile, swaddled the baby and immediately continued walking. In the movies and books about the Second World War, they delivered babies under shelling. It's the twenty-first century now, you are in the center of the world, and your state is the center of that center when it comes to healthcare. The last case of maternal mortality was recorded here some twenty years ago. And she had thousands of illnesses. And she was not young. She was not educated. But you are healthy, young. In this almighty place. In the homeland of the Happy Ending. Your body, your right. To have a child. The homeland of the woman beneath me is her body. Mine, too, is my homeland at the moment. In the homeland of the Happy Ending. On the second floor of a bunk bed.

#America_place 26

There is a store owned by Soviet Jews in one of the suburbs in our city. They opened it back in the eighties. The customers are almost all exclusively Russian speakers. Almost all from the former Soviet Union. I come here once every two months. I take three buses. But my heart desires *grechka*, and the supermarkets don't have what it longs for. There are always announcements posted on the door of the store. In Russian. I hang around a bit, read the posts. Someone is looking for an apartment. Or renting one out. There are concerts, given by Soviet Jews. Mostly classical music. Someone is looking for a missing dog or a cat. And so on. The shop sells *Borjomi*, rye bread, *manka*, kefir. I always buy *grechka*. And usually something in addition. On the days when I go shopping there, my homeland is Oleg Dal's "A Moment" from *The Land of Sannikov*. Performed by my father. And the Russian-speaking Soviet Union. Then I discovered the Iranians' store. Where they sold walnut preserve and apricot jam produced in Armenia by an unknown firm, with a low-resolution picture of Ararat posted on its jars. And grape leaves made in Turkey. This is where it struck me: my homeland is apricot jam. No, perhaps it is the walnut preserve after all.

#America_place 27

My color-coordinated laundry breathes the sun and wind. The imminent winter is felt from the balcony of our Yerevan apartment block. My son is eating an apricot jam sandwich. He had a fight at school today. They were instructed to memorize a poem about the homeland. He did not. He declared at school that his homeland is America. His classmate blocked the classroom's doorway and said: "I won't let you in until you recognize the Genocide."

Translated by the author

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