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Dances for Armenian Women

Hars: Armenian for bride

Par: Armenian for dance

Harsnapar: intended to be a solo for the new wife, but often including her old friends

1

She is not named after a queen. She is not one of many born with crowns on their heads, those precious metals. Ornaments. Those heavy badges of honor. She is the culmination of all those women, the part of a flower just above and below the dirt from which everything branches, and then breathes. This is what I mean by crown: the end and the beginning. The child's head before she is pulled from the root. The child becoming visible from the depths of her mother's darkness. She is the Word, and not one example of it. *Epitome*, meaning both *in addition* and *to cut*. *Epi* and *temnein*. Two in one. What perfection in the abstract. I have plenty of definitions. I am just full of meaning. My mother, Tagui, three syllables, three distinct sounds in one expression. Two and one. If God is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, then you must believe in my magic, too: This essay is not just about her.

After years apart from the place where she was born, she returned, thinking the only thing that had changed was the name of that city. In 1991, a Union had dissolved. In 2006, a mother brought along a daughter to prove her existence. When she walked down the streets, she did not cry out, I am here, I am here, but let's consider each smile at those walking by, each wretched note escaping her throat, a bird begging to sing. To sing, I said. Let's remember how not one of her neighbors met her eye. Let's remember them meeting mine. What was it her old neighbor said? She had slowed down to stare. The white streaks in her hair, the smudge of red lipstick on her cheeks, not rubbed in. I had smiled at her because it was my turn to smile. I followed her hand as it moved to touch my arm, but then it changed direction, and oh, how I missed that touch like it was mine to miss! I'm telling you now that

it was. That if I could go back, I would grab her fingers between mine. I watched, instead, the woman's hand reach for the other, for her own. I'm sorry, she said. You look like someone I once knew.

As a little girl, my mother would sit on her father's knee. She grew taller and continued sitting. My grandfather welcomed her new heaviness, at ten, at twenty, at thirty and forty. When he was disappearing, it was my mother's weight on his knees that kept him visible. In the final years of his life, she'd sit on the sunken arm of the sofa where he'd be resting, and she'd drape her legs over what she could. No. Not drape. Hover. She floated her legs, afraid. Her weight lingered in the air. In that space, my heart exploded. From the floor I would watch them. My father would watch from the door, hand curled around the knob. And she let us. Just watch, she was saying. Just you wait. This is how I learned to love.

She only considered leaving once. By consider, I do not mean thoughts, or dreams. I mean not looking your child in the eye and going down the stairs. Hours later, she was back. What happened? Where did she go? I have never asked. Only know that when the door opened, she exhaled and I inhaled. To be a daughter means this: to take and take and take what she is willing to part with, air, socks, earrings, to take and take and take until it was never hers to begin with, pictures, stories, memories, to take and take and take until she's left with nothing and you everything. You will carry it, everything she has spent years carrying. You will bear her everything in your womb until you, too, can one day pass it on.

Sometimes she just wants to sit in front of the television and close her eyes. Sometimes she cleans, finds things to clean. Sometimes she fights for what she wants. She has raised her voice only at her children. My sister and I used to quarrel over who would get to brush her long hair with our fingers. My mother purred under us, under our hands. Purred, I said. I was eight or nine when she asked me to come into the bedroom. Young. I remember her hair was parted to the right. Her hair long and thick, a cascade of dark waves swelling wildly over her breast and into her waist, thinning out at the edges over her hips. She gave me my father's camera and told me to take a picture and I pressed down without thinking. Flash. My mother taking the kitchen scissors to her hair, snapping it off as she would chicken bones or celery stalks

for dinner, her eyes tightly shut, her face turned away from the sight and sound. That may have been me. May have been? No, no, that was.

Growing up, the most affectionate I had seen my parents was when they'd slow dance at family weddings. A Russian song, and she would look at him in this shy way, her mascaraed eyelashes making her almond eyes look heavy, hopeful. She'd nudge his hand with her wine glass, tapping it with her long fingers. If my dad had had a couple of shots, he'd initiate the dance himself, with a brisk nod of the head. She never refused. If my father wanted to, he could've brought up his hand from her waist to touch the small of her back. He could've held her more firmly, his palm drawing her closer to smell the faint trace of her perfume—she always used so little. Just a touch, she'd say, that's all I need. But it took him years. My mother knew how to wait, and oh, how I'm grateful. Oh, how they're finally close to happy.

2

Tap. It's everything attached to her foot that reverberates. It's what keeps her modesty as she cries out against a hard surface. Every step she takes echoes and will echo. Every ground she walks on is that hard surface. Dirt can be hard, too. Dirt where she comes from is always mixed with rubble, sometimes bones. Sometimes she is the dirt from which she herself grows. The definition of echo is forever, is how long she's been walking, will walk. The tone she makes with her left foot reveals where it has been, right, where it will go. That thing which echoes is screwed into being, but when that is not enough, other bonds must be used to tie her to her place, to allow her to make sound, to cry out against hard surfaces. All surfaces are hard. The sky. The soil. She is hard, too.

Waltz. As once she stood on her father's toes, now another man will stand on hers. It is custom to anticipate the second beat. A peasant dance made respectable by a Russian ambassador's wife. She is respectable now, too, in this closed position. Turn like the black hands of clocks—this is the natural direction. Change-steps only change the direction of the rotation. She will always begin where she ends. She must only continue. All her life, she is continuing from one black hand into another. When she wakes in the morning, she moves toward the

sleep of night. When she sleeps at night, she is only a dream away from the morning. A right change means the man starts from the right foot. Now. Go on. Follow.

Limbo. A dance for island women, popularized by children. She learns the name for this dance the first year she is moved to America or France or Argentina, somewhere dances have names and only their history matters, not hers. She learns the name for this dance though she has been doing it her entire life. Bend your head, bend your knees, bend your back. The dance is simple because it has only one rule. How hard is it to not fall?

Belly dance. It's for her husband and not for her husband. It's for her father and not her father. It's for all men and no man. It's for what she gets in return: a moment when her body is not her own. It's for a sort of relief. It's for something like a God in her. See the stomach drop. See the arm extend. See the hip twist. It's for control and no control: It's an illusion, how hard she works to make her body this soft. It's an illusion, how it all feels like instinct. Of course her body was supposed to roll. Of course she can make infinity loop around her waist like her mother once did. Each movement punctuates. Drop, rock, hit, and lift: These are the movements that save her, that then undulate, that then kill her. Isolation tricks improve flexibility. She must isolate what she can, herself. Drop her heart to the bottom of her stomach. Her thoughts to the back of her head. The tongue to the back of her throat. But she will hit back when she is hit. She will hit back when she can, at someone who won't hit back. She will try to prove to her little girl that she is hers and not hers.

Macarena. A favorite at weddings, sweet sixteens, bridal showers. A song not in any of her languages, but still in a language she can follow. She learns just by watching all the other women. On the dance floor, young and old, everyone has caught on. She puts her hands forward and touches the places where she bends easily. Brings them to her head, the sides of her chest, to her hips, feels every part of her jump when she cries out. Jump, and face a new direction. Face a friend, a sister, or a daughter. Even here, so far from home, the movements are the same. It doesn't matter which way her feet point. She will always cry out a woman's name. She dances for a woman she no longer knows or because she always has known. She dances to keep herself standing.

When the music stops, she never does. When the music stops, she tells her daughter she must keep dancing. We know the truth: Once you sit down to rest, that's when your feet hurt. That's when everything hurts.

Flamenco. Associated with the Romani people of Spain. *Gitanos*, Gypsies. *Ciganis*. Though she, too, has many names, she is no nomad, no exile: The only victims in her line died long ago. This music has no regular rhythm, but remember, too, that what makes sound echoes. The purest form requires her to dance by herself, forces her to improvise, to invent as she goes along. She used to beg to make her own decisions. Here, now, let's see her dance. Wear a beautiful gown and dance in the shadow of herself. Dance at her daughter's wedding. This is the only backdrop. This is what's pure. The drop of a shawl, snap of a fan, the swell of a guitar across its curve. The guitar's curve, *aro*, meaning hoop. In this dance, everything interacts and conveys meaning. When she jumps, we know what she's jumping into. When she stomps, we know how she got here on this pile of dirt. *Duende*, a spirit released as a result of her dance. *Duende*, a spirit inspired. This lesson she will pass on: Dance to keep quiet, dance to cry out, dance to make sounds only other Armenian women can hear.

Ballet. Standing on her toes is what has kept her standing. Creeping into the rooms where all her loved ones store their anger, their disappointment, all their madness. On her bloodied toes, she walks into these rooms, collecting into her arms all that she can hold. No one is as light as she, and no one can carry as much. Keep telling yourself this. She is so thin, she needs to be weighed down. A ballerina exhibiting *ballon* would jump off the floor and appear to pause midair before landing, like she's hesitating, like she doesn't want to come down after all. She hovers, she floats, already a ghost, seeing through everyone, but who can see her, except her daughter, at the end of her dreams, so, so close to waking? *Couru*: running in small, quick steps. Travel forward, backward, left and right—*couru* into these rooms, you Armenian women. The stage is large, the props plentiful, all the characters caricatures. You are the star, and though you hurt, you know others do too, and this keeps you standing on your two broken feet. Take a bow in the bathroom, in front of the mirror, in front of yourself, the only one who's watching, who's clapping, the only one who knows you creep, no, *couru*, into everyone's rooms, making sure their chests rise

and fall to the music you hear in your head, sometimes adagio, sometimes andante, but always like a heartbeat, always like your own. It is you who keeps everyone alive. You, something like a God in you. You, who breathes on tiptoes. You, who bleeds where no one sees.

3

I'm saying I see it all. I'm saying that I had a friend who shared the same name as me. I'm saying her mother had what I feared my mother was born with. Disease in her breasts. I'm saying her mother and mine worked the same job. I'm saying her father was like mine, too, rendered useless in America, without the right language, the right temperament, without knowledge that here, daughters did not belong to them. In Armenia, daughters belonged to the village. Belonged to other ears and eyes. Belonged to shame. I'm saying in America, the only things daughters belong to is guilt. To their mother's wombs. Why did we leave? Why were we ripped out? Why did we go so gently? Stop crying so quickly? Why do we keep moving farther and farther away, out of their reach? Why do we keep doing this to them? Why do we do this to ourselves?

I'm saying that my mother is the love of my life, but I now share my bed with a man. I'm saying sometimes I forget to call her back. I'm saying sometimes I don't forget. That sometimes I don't call. I'm saying I cry at night because she will have to work until she's sixty-nine. I'm saying that I cry because I could have stayed. I'm saying that I cry because I know she has cried, too, that she is still crying. Her mother lives in a renovated garage by herself, or with a grandson who is thirty-four and has a twitch from the earthquake he survived when he was eight. Sometimes he goes on long trips and doesn't tell her he's going, so she never knows if he's coming back. I'm saying my grandmother lives by herself when she can live. I'm saying she's tired. I'm saying she's angry. I'm saying my mother's angry, too. I'm saying I'm fucking pissed.

This is what happens to us in America. A son spends his days working to save up money for a house in a different state. A house he can afford. A son sees his sons act like fools and thinks that a house can change their futures. America! A daughter spends her days working and her nights, too. A daughter lets the mother-in-law control the house and her own husband. A daughter dreams of dancing to a new song,

only dreams. A daughter sees her own daughters act like fools, one after men's affections, the other after immortality, a life beyond hers, and she thinks I am working to pay off this house and I will die before it's done and, worse, the house will be empty when I do. America!

I'm saying my grandmother won't go to Nevada to be with her son. To live in one of his four bedrooms. I'm saying an empty house is worse than disappointment. She has loved her grandsons in ways she has never loved us, me and my sister, but what good did that do her? I'm saying she's full of regret that's beyond regret. She has danced the dance and now she just wants to sit in front of the television and close her eyes. I'm saying my mother can visit her more often than she does. I'm saying she's fucking pissed too.

I'm saying my mother is caught between three worlds. I'm saying my mother is in Armenia, America, and asleep. I'm saying she is not the only one. I'm saying people change or places change them or people and places no longer exist. You can't go back home again. I'm saying you're ashamed and guilty and angry that no one recognized you on the street. I'm saying you're ashamed and guilty and angry that they recognized me. Mistook me for you. They were not wrong. I'm saying the next time she goes back home, because she will, she must, they will mistake her for her mother. And they still will not be wrong.

I'm saying my grandmother won't move to a house full of something beyond disappointment because her renovated garage lies across the street from an old Armenian lady from her old Armenian town. Re-united after all these years! Girlfriends from childhood! America! I'm saying she babysits this woman's grandchildren. I'm saying that when I call her on the phone, she tells me all about them. I'm saying that I never say, Grandma, they are not yours. I'm saying that I understand what it means to live other lives through other people.

Other women who dance this dance: my sister, who as a teenager would volunteer at a hospital, buy a bear claw from the vending machine for lunch, and bring half of it home for me to enjoy. My aunt Karine, who thinks her Albanian friends from work and my Bosnian fiancé are of the same ethnicity and who loves them all equally. My paternal grandmother, who has never loved my mother, but who loves to sing and to eat and to cry. My aunt Vergine, who learned the hard way that loving a talented man wasn't easy but who always knew that

it was worth it. My friend Anna, who would rather lose friends than faith in the goodness of people. My second and third grade teacher, Ms. Ketenchian, who organized recitals and wrote plays and choreographed dances for our mothers to record and watch years later, in the dark and full of longing, hearts full of everything that has ever existed between them, mother and child, every fight, every birthday card, every poorly written poem, every roll of the eyes, every haughty dismissal, every missing phone call, every kiss under the neck, every rise and fall of the chest, every intake of breath, every damn miracle.

Before I fell in love with a man, before I fell in step with all the Armenian women I have loved, I had danced every dance with my father. But now I remember my mother putting her hands on her swelling stomach and swaying. I remember her making a hammock with bath towels and swinging me gently, a priest and his crying censer. I remember hands circled my chubby wrists and chubby elbows and moving to a song on the radio before I could even stand. I remember her mimicking my moves, always the same, never changing with the changing rhythm, always with my knuckles pressed together, my elbows raised and under my chin, me standing in place and jutting a toddler hip, me looking up at her tall and confident figure and seeing myself reflected. I have always known. Remember tangoing with my sister in matching dresses and my mother clapping in approval, her saying above the music, After I die, all you'll have is each other. Birthdays and holidays, parties and afternoons. I remember this last December, my mother putting on the pair of heels I had passed off to her months before because they had begun to hurt me, and I remember she had gray socks on.

And oh, how she danced.
Drunk on New Year's Eve.
In my old shoes.