

Portrayals of the Armenian Genocide in Australian Literature

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Statement by Candidate

This thesis is presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Research at Macquarie University. I certify that this thesis is entirely my own work and that I have given fully documented reference to the work of others. The thesis has not previously, in part or in whole, been submitted for assessment in any formal course of study.

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Abstract

This thesis consists of a work of creative writing and an interconnected research component. Despite Australia's historical connections to the Armenian Genocide, there has been little research into portrayals of the genocide in Australian literature. This thesis analyses three such novels: Joan London's *Gilgamesh*, Marcella Polain's *The Edge of the World*, and Katerina Cosgrove's *Bone Ash Sky*. These novels demonstrate how popular portrayals of traumatic histories can work to keep the memory of such events 'alive' in society and, following Adorno, can act as a form of resistance against barbarity. These authors use narrative strategies such as psychic distance, narrative gaps, perpetrator motivations, and blurred perpetrator/victims roles to create a sense of alterity in order to confront complicity and do justice to the genocide's victims without alienating readers. The Australian contexts of the novels engage with the comparative dispossessions in both Australian and Turkish history to portray the challenge of remembering those dispossessed. The exegesis analyses how these three authors resist barbarity through their imaginative investments in the Armenian genocide's 'postmemory' and offer models for the working through of traumas such as genocide. In the creative work, a novella set in 1980s Sydney, the Armenian protagonist struggles to reconstruct the Armenian cultural narrative in a way that achieves a sense of justice.

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Exegesis:

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Introduction: Enshrining violence

How does the portrayal of the Armenian genocide in Australian literature contribute to its memory in Australian culture? This thesis presents a literary analysis of portrayals of the genocide in three Australian novels: Joan London's *Gilgamesh*, Marcella Polain's *The Edge of the World*, and Katerina Cosgrove's *Bone Ash Sky*; and further addresses the research questions raised through an interconnected creative component, a novella set in Australia in the midst of a series of historic Armenian terrorist attacks perpetrated internationally against Turkish diplomats. While grounded in literary studies and creative writing, this thesis is transdisciplinary, drawing on genocide studies as well as memory and trauma studies. The correlative relationship between the research and creative practice is detailed at the conclusion of the exegesis.

Despite being the world's first modern genocide (as defined by the use of communications and transportation technology), and causing the deaths of at least one million people (Babkenian and Stanley 4), the once infamous Armenian genocide of World War I has been largely forgotten in Western cultural memory (outside of academia and Armenian and Turkish communities).¹ In contrast, the Holocaust has become a cultural touchstone and is often discussed as a limit case (Klein 140). As well, although it is often portrayed as a stand-alone event, the Holocaust is better understood within the context provided by the methods and ideology of events that led to it, of which one of the most significant was the Armenian genocide (Balakian, *Burning Tigris*).

In contrast to the Armenian genocide, the Holocaust is often referenced in popular culture.² In *The End of the Holocaust*, Alvin Rosenfeld supposes – rightly, I think – that many people gain their understanding of historical events like the Holocaust from popular culture instead of from historians, and thus their understanding may not accurately reflect the actual events (14-15). As a result, he asserts that the Holocaust has become 'trivialized and vulgarized' in today's

¹ See Babkenian and Stanley for details of the genocide's wide recognition throughout Australia through the 1920s, and Balakian's *The Burning Tigris* for details of its near-global recognition, particularly as the focus of the world's first international aid campaign.

² An example of Holocaust history being seamlessly woven into modern narratives is its use in the character arc of one of the comic-book superheroes in the 2011 Hollywood blockbuster *X-Men First Class* (Kinburg; for further detail, see Kalagian Blunt 'Life After Genocide').

culture, resulting in the loss of its historical weight and ‘the sense of scandal that should necessarily attend it’ (11). I suggest, however, that popular portrayals of traumatic histories are valuable in that they can serve to keep the memory of these events present or ‘alive’ in society, and can act as a form of resistance against barbarity, as this exegesis details. For this reason, there is a cultural need for writing about the Armenian genocide and many other lesser-known historical events that seem to be aberrations of human history but are actually an all-too-common occurrence, as genocide scholar Norman Naimark maintains.

One other significant contrast to the Holocaust is that the Armenian genocide has not ended: its final phase, denial by the perpetrator, has continued for a century (R Hovannisian 202).³ It is in part because of the Turkish government’s denial and the resulting lack of recognition in countries such as Australia and the United States that the Armenian genocide has been largely forgotten in Western culture. This is perhaps more surprising in Australia because Anzac history has close links to the genocide (see Babkenian and Stanley). For this reason, Robert Manne prompts us to consider the connections that can be drawn between the Armenian genocide and the Aboriginal dispossession perpetrated by English colonialists (323-4). As my selected texts are written by Australian authors and published in Australia, this exegesis analyses the Australian context of these narratives and considers connections between the Armenian/Ottoman and Aboriginal/Australian histories, as Manne suggests.

Little has been written about the Armenian genocide in Australian literature. While some previous research has worked to define Armenian literature within a given diasporan community, my aim is to explore literary works featuring the Armenian genocide regardless of the author’s ethnicity.⁴ While the genocide is a major aspect of many English-language novels, I have limited my discussion to novels by Australian authors because of the need for further exploration of Australia’s entwined history with the Armenian genocide.

This exegesis first examines the ethics and aesthetics of portrayals of the Armenian genocide, considering in particular how the violence achieves its purpose in each text, and then analyses portrayals of Marianne Hirsch’s concept

³ I have written in-depth on the consequences of the denial in the twenty-first century (see Kalagian Blunt, ‘After a Century of Injustice’).

⁴ See Khachig Tololyan for an overview of Armenian-American diasporan writers.

of ‘postmemory’ as modeled by certain characters, as well as through the writing itself, in the novels of London, Polain and Cosgrove. Throughout, these discussions are framed within the context of Theodor Adorno’s urging to confront complicity and challenge reader complacency. Adorno is well known for commenting that ‘to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric’ (Adorno and McDonagh 60). For Adorno, all aspects of culture ‘after Auschwitz’ are complicit with Auschwitz because they are a part of the culture that engendered the Holocaust (Mandel 221) – in this lies their barbarity. That complicity, however, must be confronted. Naomi Mandel argues that within the context of complicity, describing the Holocaust or any aspect of it as ‘unspeakable’ is a way of sidestepping the ‘morally questionable implication of seeming to comprehend, to simplify, to judge’ (222). As a society we have an urgent need to speak the unspeakable to confront our own complicity (228). Thus the paradox of contemporary literature: while it is barbaric to create art after Auschwitz, ‘literature must resist this verdict, in other words, be such that its mere existence after Auschwitz is not a surrender to cynicism’ (Adorno and McDonagh 61).⁵ In effect, while it is true that as part of the culture that engendered the Holocaust, there is an inherent and inescapable complicity, it is also true that to write literature in understanding of this complicity is an act of *resistance* against barbarity. Without an understanding of its complicity, Adorno contends, literature and the act of writing itself would be an acceptance of its own futility. Thus an understanding of complicity is essential for a work to be seen as resisting barbarity, even as it acknowledges its own barbaric nature.

This paradox can be understood in simpler terms: to abhor the reality of the violence of the Armenian genocide (or any traumatic event), writers must enshrine it, to promote its memory amidst a forgetful, cluttered culture. That paradox echoes in each of the three novels discussed here, as the following analysis details. By its nature, writing that enshrines violence, even with the intention of abhorring it, risks turning readers away. Such writing also risks imbuing meaning into meaningless fates, ‘an injustice to the victims’, Adorno, writing with Francis McDonagh, notes, ‘yet no art which tried to evade [the victims] could stand upright before justice’ (61). Marcelle Freiman’s

⁵ Adorno and McDonagh attribute the origin of this ‘retort’ to Hans Magnus Enzensberger.

interpretation of Adorno builds on Mandel's analysis of complicity. Freiman describes the challenge of art as finding 'a way of representing suffering and violence without transfiguring it and giving it objective meaning, hence diminishing its horror'. This echoes Rosenfeld's concerns that popular representations of Holocaust suffering will 'inhibit a sober understanding of or sympathetic feeling for victims of gross historical pain' (15). Unlike Rosenfeld, Adorno believes this can be mitigated through the artistic effort to create alterity, the sense of '*should be otherwise*' (Adorno in Freiman, original emphasis). This alterity works to avert such reader complacency, and in a narrative that resists barbarity by recognising complicity, such alterity can engender sober understanding and empathetic feelings for victims.

The three novels discussed here approach the task of portraying the enormity of the genocide's violence and legacy in distinct ways while confronting complicity. Polain's *The Edge of the World* combines the techniques of psychic distance with narrative gaps to portray violence in a way that creates a buffer for readers. Cosgrove's *Bone Ash Sky*, in contrast, portrays violence through perpetrator perspectives in order to explore justifications and motivations and blur perpetrator and victim roles. Both texts also portray key instances of what Slavoj Žižek refers to as objective violence, that is, the violence in the functioning of language and our political and economic systems.

In addition, this exegesis analyses the Australian contexts of the three texts to conclude that London's *Gilgamesh* engages with the comparative dispossessions in both Australian and Turkish history to portray the challenge of remembering those dispossessed; *The Edge of the World* acknowledges the narrator's complicity in her lack of attention to this historical parallel; and *Bone Ash Sky* resists barbarity by suggesting the need for more nuanced and empathetic perspectives in Australia. Finally, this exegesis considers how all three authors resist barbarity through their imaginative investments in the Armenian genocide's (post)memory and offer their own models for the working through of traumas such as the genocide that, even as they slip from mainstream memory, continue to fester like open wounds among certain communities, preventing us, as a global society, from moving forward.

Buffering violence through psychic distance and narrative gaps

The Armenian genocide was among the most violent events in modern history, thus a novel that follows characters from the beginning of the genocide in 1915 to its end in the early 1920s and beyond, as *The Edge of the World* does, will necessarily contain significant violence. Instead of alienating readers, however, certain aesthetic techniques in the portrayal of violence can engender the alterity Adorno urges. Psychic distance, for example, can serve as a buffer between the violence and readers, while enabling empathetic insight for the extent of the victims' suffering by giving readers room to develop their own responses. Andy Kissane uses the concept of psychic distance to describe the 'filmic' writing style of Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*: a third person objective narration style that creates the impression of watching a film. McCarthy's choice to portray events 'from afar' engenders a 'distance that controls the way readers approach the text' (Kissane). By providing no access to the interiority of the characters, *Blood Meridian* provides space for readers to form their own responses, through empathy or otherwise.

The approach in *The Edge of the World* is different: it features either a first person or highly subjective third person narration with direct access to the interiority of the characters. But I suggest it creates a similar psychic distance in the way that many scenes of violence are crafted with minimal detail and in character *reflection* rather than at the time of action. Benyamin Vartevarian, the Armenian protagonist, reflects on the torture he experienced while imprisoned by Turkish authorities: 'I thought I couldn't bear the beatings. I thought I couldn't bear the cell. I thought I would die when my hands were broken' (87). Readers discover these details after they have already happened, creating simultaneous shock and relief – his hands *were* broken; he *didn't* die. While readers understand that Benyamin is describing the circumstances of his imprisonment, the effect of learning these details through Benyamin's reflection provides a buffer for readers, a temporal distancing from the violence itself, and an emotional one as well. Benyamin himself is contrasting present and past in the repetition of 'I thought': at the time of the violence, he felt he did not have the resilience to withstand it; but his present reflection refutes this even as it emphasises the extent of his suffering.

This distancing shields readers from the acts of violence themselves: by depicting them only after the fact and through reflective brushstrokes rather than detailed scenes, a psychic distance is achieved. This access to the interiority of the victim creates an intimacy that urges alterity; yet simultaneously, we have only a sparse impression of the violence, and only *after* it has happened: we are effectively distanced from it. By providing access to the interiority of the victim, this technique enables readers to develop empathetic insight to character suffering, without the extent of the violence experienced by that character functioning to alienate readers.

The creation of psychic distance as I've described it is closely connected to the concept of narrative gaps in narrative theory. Reading is a process of aesthetic interaction with a text, and in this process readers encounter two aspects of the text: what is provided, and what is not provided, the so-called 'gaps' in the text (Iser 292), which are one way of creating Adorno's sense of alterity, the effect of *should be otherwise*. It is impossible to portray everything that is happening to all characters at all times, thus all narratives contain gaps by necessity. Readers create an understanding of the text by filling in the narrative gaps: in effect, readers collaborate with the text in order to create 'interpretative closure' (Porter Abbott 88). The process of gap filling is a matter of both using what is provided in the narrative and our imagination, to varying degrees (96). Such gaps can be strategically employed so that instead of crafting a portrayal of violence on the page, the violence can be made clear (or left vague) to readers in the process of gap-filling.

Much of *The Edge of the World* combines the technique of psychic distance with effective gaps to portray horrific violence in a way that, as shown in the example of Benyamin's torture, creates a buffer for readers. When Benyamin's wife, Hovsanna, discovers much of her family has been massacred, we are again provided only glimpses of the scene through Hovsanna's memories of it after the fact. Hovsanna describes what she finds after being rescued from the convoy and then returning for her mother: 'I know it is my mother. I know because I recognise her clothes. I recognise her hands and feet. The rest doesn't matter. I will find the rest of her later' (136). As in the previous example of Benyamin, which left many gaps – how his hands were broken, for example, and what other torture he was subjected to – here narrative gaps are powerfully

employed. All readers know of the mother's fate come from these few sentences. We see only parts of her, leaving the precise circumstances of her death in the narrative gaps. The narrative 'gains by leaving out, by suggesting and not specifying' (Porter Abbott 92). Hovsanna sees her mother and the hundreds of others in the convoy 'lying, a long dark mark upon the earth' (Polain 132). Here again we find the portrayal of monstrous violence portrayed with minimal details. Sparing specific details (such as the exact number of dead, the methods used to kill them, what has happened to the remainder of the mother's body) creates an overwhelming *impression* of the violence in the gaps (Porter Abbott 92). Yet again, there is a further distancing from the violence: the scene in which Hovsanna discovers the murder of her mother and the convoy is left in the narrative gaps: readers learn of this violence only after, once Hovsanna has returned to the perceived safety of her rescuer's home and is working through her *memory* of her discovery. In its conveyance as fragmented memory, the narrative strategy enables such sparse portrayal of detail. In this way, *The Edge of the World* strives to do justice to the extent of the violence suffered by victims of the Armenian genocide – an effort at acknowledging complicity – yet the writing achieves this while strategically leaving much of the violence in the narrative gaps and providing a degree of psychic distance between the violence and readers.

Honest confrontations of complicity in perpetrator perspectives

Thus far the examples drawn on have considered violence portrayed from victim perspectives, but acknowledging complicity can be powerfully accomplished through the portrayal of violence from perpetrator perspectives. This is because this alternative and potentially confronting perspective can provide greater insight into the motivations of the violence. Drawing on Norman Mailer, Kissane suggests readers desire insight into violence – not to condone it, but to better understand its possible motivations. In contrast to the witness/victim perspective, writing from the point of view of the perpetrator is more likely to alienate readers, but this can be mitigated if the violence offers a critique (Kissane).

To portray violence purposefully, however, requires writing with the honest context that confronts complicity. Kissane draws on Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* as an example, describing the novel as 'directed towards dramatizing the violence of our colonial history'. Yet, he notes, Grenville spares her central

character, English settler William Thornhill, by ‘muting’ his violence: by switching to passive voice at the very moment Thornhill murders an Aboriginal, the focus is on the gun instead of the man holding it. As Kissane notes: while ‘it is easier for readers to accept a violent hero if the focus is on the gun and not on the character who kills’, the literary deflection at this crucial moment in Grenville’s narrative is a form of dishonesty.⁶ If we return to our consideration of the paradox of literature – that writing is an act of barbarity but can simultaneously resist that barbarity through acknowledgment of complicity and the effort to create alterity – it is clear that honesty is a paramount factor. In subtle dishonest shifts, like the one Kissane points to in *The Secret River*, the acknowledgement of complicity is weakened, whatever the author’s motivation; in contrast, direct, active and honest portrayals of violence from the perpetrator perspective can more effectively create alterity.

Cosgrove’s *Bone Ash Sky* is a meditation on violence that blurs the distinction between victim and perpetrator with a confronting focus on honesty in its portrayals of violence. The connecting thread between the novel’s narratives is Anoush, the granddaughter of genocide survivor Minas and daughter of Phalangist militia commander Selim, returned to Beirut years after her father’s death to attempt to understand his legacy. She summarises the novel’s repeated theme: ‘There are no sides. We’re all persecuted. All victims, all the time. And sometimes perpetrators too’. Anoush’s Armenian grandfather Minas is one of several characters who are both victims and perpetrators. As a teenager, Minas witnesses the deaths of his parents and survives first the march through the desert and then seven months in a Turkish death camp before escaping, which critic Peter Pierce describes as ‘one of the most harrowing extended passages in recent Australian writing’. As an adult, Minas joins a Maronite militia to fight revolting Muslims in Lebanon. After Minas shoots an unarmed woman, a young child begins to cry, and Minas fears this noise will ‘betray him to the snipers’. After luring the child near with some food, Minas

⁶ Kissane speculates that Grenville softens the moment Thornhill commits murder because his character is based on her great-great-great grandfather, which seems plausible.

... lowered the barrel of his gun. *Am I really doing this?* Her fair head swam then focused into vision. *Murderer*. He swung the gun at her head once, twice, then closed his eyes. (300)

Written in close third person subjective, this scene gives readers access to Minas's thoughts at the moment of action. *Bone Ash Sky* offers readers the brutal honesty that *The Secret River* shied away from – momentarily but significantly, as referenced earlier. In *Bone Ash Sky*, 'He swung the gun at her head' is both an active statement and an unambiguous indictment – even Minas labels himself a murderer. The scene is sparsely portrayed: Minas moves to aim his gun but then questions himself; his swimming vision further indicates his struggle with the reality of his actions. He chooses not to shoot the girl, but to kill her by striking her head. The reason for this decision is one of the gaps in the scene (does he feel that striking her is more humane than shooting her? Or is he concerned the noise of the gun will draw sniper fire? Or both?). Regardless, the internal struggle indicates that the act of murdering the child does not come easily to him; this is reinforced when he closes his eyes as though unable to bear the sight of the fallen child.

There is a sharp sense of alterity in the contrasted portrayals of Minas as a book-lover and budding scholar in his youth and as a militiaman after his survival of the genocide. The violence Minas commits achieves its narrative purpose through explication of his motivations leading up to the killing scene. Readers 'want to understand the motivation, justification and consciousness of a person capable of excessive violence, understand what makes him/her tick, understand the "inner life"' (Kissane): it is this desire that enables *Bone Ash Sky* to explore the premise that in varying ways, to varying degrees, all perpetrators are motivated by their experience as victims. By the time Minas joins the militia, readers have experienced the loss of his family and his months in the death camp with him; his motivation for joining the militia has also been made apparent: Minas understood, through French and Lebanese propaganda, that the revolting Muslims would overrun the Lebanese Christians – thus the violence Minas commits is defensive. In this way, the narrative is able to honestly portray his actions while not alienating his character from readers.

In contrast to Polain's *The Edge of the World*, Cosgrove's *Bone Ash Sky* neglects any form of psychic distance. As in the example of Minas, its depictions of violence are written in direct and honest language and are continually framed within the context of the assumption of readers' desires to glimpse the perceived motivations of the perpetrator. Another possible strategy for writing violence from the perpetrator's perspective is to 'organize the narrative from the perspective of a "less-violent" character', meaning to contrast the violence of the point-of-view perpetrator with other, more violent, perpetrators (Kissane). The effect is to make the point-of-view perpetrator – and thus the text – more palatable to readers: 'a reluctant killer, an honest man with a conscience, is easier for a reader to empathize with than a cold-blooded murderer' (Kissane). *Bone Ash Sky* features the perspectives of two major protagonists that could be described as 'more' perpetrator than victim, and both have significant third-person subjective narrations.⁷ Issa Ali is a fanatic fundamentalist with Islamic Jihad; Selim Pakradounian, the son of Minas, seeks revenge against Muslims for the genocide as a Christian Phalange commander. Yet just as the novel avoids psychic distance, it also avoids the less-violent character device. The narratives of both Issa and Selim centre on violence, but neither could be described as 'less violent' than the other: one commands troops during a massacre; the other is a suicide bomber.

Cosgrove's *Bone Ash Sky* aims not only to provide insight into the motivations for violence, but also to spur reader empathy and/or sympathy for its perpetrator protagonists, as with the example of Minas. This goes to the novel's thesis, the framing of everyone as victims, especially perpetrators. Before Issa commits his suicide bombing, readers learn that his Hezbollah commander has sexually assaulted him and that as a child he witnessed his mother beaten by Israeli soldiers in their Palestinian refugee camp; in this way he is a sympathetic character even as a perpetrator. Much could be discussed regarding Issa, but I will focus here on Selim, whose character in this text is complicated by his parents' survival of the Armenian genocide. Selim's militia 'had been instructed to kill every living thing in the Sabra-Shatila camps' (261). This is another historical

⁷ Likewise whether these two characters are protagonists or antagonists could be debated; it can '[depend] on your point of view' (Porter Abbott 177). Though mutually antagonistic, these characters can both be understood as protagonists in the overarching narrative.

event woven into the narrative, and at first readers have the impression that the massacre will be portrayed in the passive voice and register of followed orders: Selim *had been* instructed; the camps' refugees '*were all to be* knifed or machine-gunned to death' (261, emphasis added). Yet when Selim calls his troops to advance, he watches as a soldier slits the throat of a pregnant woman – and then, in active language, he 'entered the hut and killed her husband with one shot' (262). Again in contrast to the choice of passive voice, which deflects protagonist complicity in *The Secret River*, here the choice of plain, direct language indicts the protagonist.

Selim's victimisation is simultaneously unpacked: this scene at Sabra-Shatila interweaves his memories of his father's emotional state. Selim's childhood was overwhelmed by the trauma Minas suffered after the genocide and after his own experience in the militia. During the massacre, Selim recalls his father's tearful 'late-night rants' (269) about his experience during the genocide. By juxtaposing Selim's violence with the intergenerational trauma he experienced growing up, the narrative blurs his role: he becomes both perpetrator and victim. Seeing the massacre in the context of his father's suffering makes Selim ill; he finds himself 'afraid to be involved at all. At the same time frightened to become the deserter, *the enemy they might turn on*' (270, emphasis added). The narrative draws a direct parallel between father and son, highlighting the way violence echoes through generations: just as Minas joins the militia to defend his community and finds himself forced to act violently to save himself, Selim realises that, although the events around him are unfolding in a way that frightens him, withdrawing would jeopardise his safety. In effect, Minas and Selim are prisoners of their own violence – Minas kills the young girl to prevent her cries from giving away his position; Selim remains with his troops throughout the massacre despite his fear, because to desert would be to make himself a target. In these ways, the narrative draws connections between these characters' experiences as both victims and perpetrators.

This approach risks mitigating responsibility and the moral implications of the perpetrators' violence. However, the individual choices made by Minas, Selim and Issa to become involved with their respective militia groups are made clear in the text. As well, the narrative begins with Anoush's arrival in Beirut to attend the United Nations war crimes tribunal responsible for assessing guilt of the

commanders of the Sabra-Shatila massacre, including the character of Selim, and hence the narrative opens with a focus on responsibility. *Bone Ash Sky* succeeds not in absolving perpetrator responsibility but in offering readers an honest portrayal of its perpetrators' actions while providing in-depth context for insight into the perpetrators' motivations and justifications. In this way, the magnitude of the violence portrayed justifies its central focus in the novel.

Within the numerous depictions of protagonist violence in *Bone Ash Sky*, there is a strong indication of where the line of perceived reader tolerance for violence from the perpetrator perspective lies. Although rape and torture were significant aspects of both the Armenian genocide and the Lebanese civil war and are frequently referenced in the narrative, none of the protagonists commit these offenses. Significant violence is depicted from the perspectives of Minas, Selim and Issa; however, these depictions can all be described as 'clean and quick' – a shot fired, a few hits to the head, a truck of explosives driven into a building. This is explicitly referenced in the narrative: when Selim reflects on his actions at Sabra-Shatila, he acknowledges that he was responsible for the deaths of many people; yet he concludes 'my hands are clean. I didn't rape any of those girls pleading with me, didn't torture any men' (274). Even when Issa captures Selim, his personal nemesis, for torture and execution, it is other, nameless characters who commit the violence. Issa watches but doesn't participate, except to 'kick Selim into consciousness' (403) before leaving him to be executed. *Bone Ash Sky* succeeds in abhorring violence while enshrining the memory of traumatic historical events in large part through its direct and honest exploration of the justifications and consciousness of its perpetrators; within this, the text implies the perception of a strict limit in reader tolerance for portrayals of violence from the perpetrator perspective.

Portrayals of objective violence

So far this discussion has focused on what Slavoj Žižek refers to as 'subjective violence,' meaning the violent actions associated with bullies, criminals, terrorists, or in Žižek's words, 'violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent' (1). Žižek urges us to broaden our understanding of violence, however, to include 'objective violence', which has two aspects: the violent capacity of language, engendered by the 'imposition of a certain universe of meaning' inherent to

language (2); and the violence intrinsic to the workings of politics and economics. Kevin Brophy effectively explicates the power of objective violence in recounting his family's experience as victims of their neighbours' antagonistic behaviour. The neighbours rarely committed subjective acts of violence (and when they did, they were minor acts of property violence, such as bricks thrown through windows); it is the objective violence faced by Brophy's family – from the neighbours' verbal abuse, and within that, the looming *threat* of subjective violence, alongside Brophy's unsuccessful efforts to seek protection from the bureaucratic justice system – which highlights the traumatic capacity of objective violence. Objective violence was a significant aspect of the Armenian genocide (as with the Holocaust and other comparable events), both in the form of prejudicial language used against Armenians and the passing of detrimental laws that targeted their communities. As well, the denial of the genocide is another form of objective violence, one so significant it has been described as the final phase of genocide (R Hovannisian 202). A consideration of the portrayal of objective violence amidst the subjective violence of the novels discussed here provides another means for analysis of the texts' acknowledgement of complicity and efforts to avoid reader complacency.

It is worthwhile to further analyse the strategy of blurring victim and perpetrator roles in *Bone Ash Sky* by expanding our consideration of violence to include its objective aspects. The narrative blurring of victim and perpetrator in this text is perhaps most successful in the minor character of Suleiman, a Turkish man who purchases Lilit (the sister of Minas) at a slave market 'not because he wanted one, but because *not to do so* would invite recrimination' (131, emphasis added). The choice of 'recrimination' is revealing: it implies that *not* purchasing a slave at the market would serve as an accusation against those who either run or support the slave market – or both – and thus invite counter accusations from them. Implied in the narrative gap opened by this comment is that Suleiman understands that in his community there is a pervasive attitude of 'with us or against us', and as such he needs to publically demonstrate his support of the slave market. This sense of threat that Suleiman references is a powerful form of objective violence: he purchases an Armenian slave not because he *wants* one, but because he *fears* the unstated repercussions of doing otherwise. Despite being a financially independent, free Turkish citizen in the era of Ottoman Turkification,

Suleiman too is a victim, though more subtly. In this way, *Bone Ash Sky* strives to create alterity by engendering a broader understanding of the genocide's victims: Suleiman's narrative provides insight into the victimisation of Turkish citizens during the genocide, many of whom were also at the mercy of their government's objective and subjective violence.

While Suleiman is a victim of objective violence, he is simultaneously a perpetrator. Lilit suffers occasional subjective violence in Suleiman's home, when he strikes her; but it is the objective violence that she experiences that creates alterity in these scenes. Lilit is given a Turkish name and is forbidden to speak Armenian; this example of objective violence is one of many ways the decimation of Armenian culture continued after the subjective violence of the genocide ended. Suleiman also insistently denies the genocide. When Lilit describes what happened to her family, he replies: 'You're making it up. Turkish soldiers would never do that. Unprovoked. To civilians? Impossible.' This example of the objective violence of the denial effectively creates alterity: unlike Suleiman, readers have experienced the actions of the Turkish authorities with Lilit and so are intimately aware she is not 'making it up'. Whether Suleiman fully believes what he says, or secretly suspects his government's complicity, is left in the narrative gaps. When Lilit emphasises that her family was murdered, Suleiman hits her. In this way, while he is only a victim of objective violence, Suleiman's character intertwines objective and subjective violence as a perpetrator.

A century of objective violence: the denial of the genocide

As the example of Suleiman in Cosgrove's *Bone Ash Sky* indicates, objective violence is an important dimension of the genocide's legacy, particularly in that, in contrast to the subjective violence, which ended in the 1920s, the objective violence of the genocide continues through the 'sophisticated and diplomatic denial of the Armenian genocide by successive Turkish governments' (Alayarian xxvi). Aida Alayarian links the ongoing denial to continued trauma: 'This collective state denial of the genocide ... is preventing the survivors and their descendants from healing' (xxvii). Here I will focus on one more example, drawn from *The Edge of the World*, which effectively portrays the contemporary objective violence of the denial of the genocide, and in particular, how it affects the descendants of survivors and how it operates in Australia.

The objective violence of the Australian government's non-recognition of the genocide due to its geopolitical and historical relationship with Turkey is a significant aspect of the final section of *The Edge of the World*. This section, a 'fictional autobiography', is set mainly in Western Australia, where the unnamed narrator, the granddaughter of genocide survivors, grew up attending Australian schools. Traveling in WA, the narrator and her family encounter a statue of Kemal Ataturk by chance in a museum in Albany:

Later – some years later – we would talk about the statue without ever naming it. ... At the time, we said nothing. We stood about it, the four of us, looking at his face, his hands, re-reading the plaque. ... I glanced at my mother. She was staring past the statue into the middle distance. She looked like someone had hit her. (250-1)

As the founder of the modern Turkish Republic and its first president, the image of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk serves as a symbol of the Turkish nation, but the significance of this statue in *The Edge of the World* is more literal than symbolic: Ataturk's government orchestrated significant subjective violence against Armenian communities and also institutionalised the policy of genocide denial in the newfound Turkish Republic. The mother's look in the above passage, 'like someone had hit her', links the experience of objective violence – a statue symbolising the Australian government's allegiance with the Turkish state – with the experience of subjective violence. The encounter with the statue takes place decades after the genocide, but the effect on the family members is clearly significant: it takes them years to talk about the statue, and when they do, they cannot bring themselves to name it. What exactly the narrator's mother is thinking is left in the narrative gaps, and here again, as in the example of the massacre scene discussed earlier, the *sense* of her emotional response is perhaps more powerful than her specific thoughts could be.

Here it is useful to briefly consider the Australian government's position on genocide recognition, as represented by the statue. The government's policy of denial of the Armenian genocide, through lack of recognition, is an inherent form of objective violence, at least from the perspective of those who do acknowledge

the historical fact of the genocide.⁸ From the perspective of Turkish denialists, of course, the opposite could be said: recognition of the genocide would be a form of objective violence. There is a moral argument to be made, however: the passive denial of the genocide can be seen as a form of objective violence against all of humanity – that by denying the historical reality detailed even within its own national archives (as analysed by Babkenian and Stanley) and thus giving comfort to the perpetrators of the denial, Australia subtly encourages future acts of subjective violence at the state level, if only by *not* actively discouraging their denial. Žižek concludes his text *Violence* by noting, ‘Sometimes doing nothing is the most violent thing to do’ (217). Though the contention that doing nothing can be the *most* violent thing seems to contravene logic, the example of complicity with genocide denial in contradiction of historical fact does support the position that doing nothing can be an act of violence itself, as the experience of the narrator and her family in *The Edge of the World* demonstrates.

Further Australian contexts

This exegesis analyses the portrayal of the Armenian genocide in Australian literature specifically. As my three selected texts are written by Australians and published in Australia, and each of their narratives references Australia through setting, character or both, an analysis of their Australian contexts contributes to the transdisciplinarity of this exegesis with genocide studies. This section considers the Australian contexts of the three texts with particular focus on London’s *Gilgamesh*, the plot of which frames the legacy of the genocide within a rural Australian narrative.

Genocide is a pattern repeated throughout history (Naimark), yet far too often its memory and study is compartmentalized into specific instances of genocide. Despite the historical connection to the Anzac landing at Gallipoli and the heroic efforts of some Australian military personnel in saving Armenian lives, the genocide remains unrecognised by the Australian federal government

⁸ As Foreign Affairs Minister Julie Bishop stated in a 2014 press release: ‘The Australian government acknowledges the devastating effects which the tragic events at the end of the Ottoman Empire have had on later generations, and on their identity, heritage and culture. We do not, however, recognise these events as “genocide”’ (quoted in Robertson 153).

(Babkenian and Stanley; Manne). In his exploration of Australia's lack of attention to this shared history, Manne suggests:

in the birth of both [Australia and Turkey] there was, for another people, a dreadful price to pay. ... I do believe that the histories of both Australia and Turkey have been burdened by the shadows cast by these events. (323)

Perhaps, Manne posits, there is empathic feeling in Australia, if only subconsciously, for the desire to forget those dispossessed. Of the three texts, *Gilgamesh* engages most with the comparative dispossessions in both Australian and Turkish history, specifically through the narrative's juxtaposition of an Australian settler story and the echoes of the Armenian genocide. Though London was writing several years before Manne's essay, *Gilgamesh* makes a similar but distinct case about the challenge of remembering those dispossessed.

Gilgamesh demonstrates how coming to understand the legacy of the Armenian genocide – as much as possible for someone who was not involved – can be an aspect of developing maturity and worldliness. Yet it also contests how such empathetic awareness of the ongoing effects of one traumatic event may not translate into awareness of the trauma of similar events, in this case the colonial destruction of Aboriginal communities in Australia. The protagonist of *Gilgamesh*, Edith, lives in rural Australia, and develops a relationship with Aram, an Armenian visitor. Aram tells Edith that his father was hanged in 1915 and 'he and his mother were marched in a convoy of women and children across the desert to Syria. By the time they reached the Euphrates, his mother, like most of the convoy, was dead' (45). Because Aram was so young at the time, he does not remember these events. He describes them through factual statements devoid of emotional comment. This emotional gap (the lack of emotion where it would be expected) creates the sense of remoteness from events, another sort of psychic distance for readers, which is echoed by physical and temporal distance from the events. Edith makes no comment on this revelation from Aram, and this gap – the uncertainty of how Aram's story of survival and family loss affects Edith, if at all – is left unfilled. Years later, however, after she has travelled to Armenia in search of Aram to tell him about their son, Edith meets another genocide survivor, Miss Anoosh. Miss Anoosh describes

the march along the Euphrates, the beautiful Euphrates bearing bloated Armenian bodies. Raped, murdered, or as with her mother and little sister, hands tied together in suicide. ...

In this Miss Anoosh was like every Armenian Edith had ever met, starting with Aram. How you became aware of the place in their lives of loss, lost family, lost land. Of buried anger, for monstrous crimes unpunished, for the world's indifference. It was always there, as if the end of grieving would be the final loss. (185)

Miss Anoosh's story is not so different from Aram's, and is likewise reported factually, although with slightly more emotional resonance, through choice of detail such as the 'little' sister, the repetition of 'Euphrates', and the contrast of the 'beautiful' river with the 'bloated' bodies. It is Edith's interior response, however, that is markedly different: whereas she offers no reflection on Aram's survival story when she first learns it, Edith has now *become aware*, as she points out – aware of the nuanced emotion underlying such stories. In Edith's description of the sense of loss and 'buried anger' common to Armenians she has met, she demonstrates the empathetic understanding she has gained on her journey. Edith clearly has capacity for empathetic understanding – but, as I will analyse, she uses it selectively. In this way, *Gilgamesh* acknowledges complicity to which Edith is blind.

Gilgamesh draws an explicit comparison between Australia and Armenia, beginning with Aram's comments on his visit to Western Australia: 'This land made him think of Armenia, he said, Armenia without mountains. The terrain of his homeland was also wild, ancient and barren' (45). Edith's father, a migrant from England, cleared the land her family lives on, and the displaced natives make her uneasy. As she notes: 'Didn't all [her family] sense something in the bush? A presence they didn't understand? That made them suspect they didn't really know this land at all' (34). On her return to Australia years later, the idea of foreign and native is contrasted when Edith describes her half-Armenian son, Jim: 'He looked so foreign here, black-browed, with full serious lips' (194). The description echoes the Aboriginals that Edith was coached not to look at as a child. When Jim asks her whose country they are in, Edith says 'Ours! Well,

every Australian's' (194). Implied in the gap between this statement and her comment on Jim's 'foreign' appearance is the question of whether Edith's conception of 'every Australian' would include Aboriginals. In this way *Gilgamesh* subtly but powerfully confronts complicity: even though Edith develops insight into the Armenian legacy of trauma after living in Armenia, she still cannot empathetically connect that understanding to the experience of the destruction and dispossession of the Aboriginals in her community. Manne contends that Australian recognition of the Armenian genocide may force an uncomfortable examination of Australia's own traumatic history, in light of their similarities. In contrast, *Gilgamesh* contests that empathetic insight into the tragedies of one group does not necessarily open one's eyes to the traumas of another.

The unnamed narrator of *The Edge of the World* also connects the parallels between the violence committed against Armenians and that against Australian Aboriginals, and in doing so, the text suggests an acknowledgement of the narrator's own complicity. Despite the Western Australian setting of the 'fictional autobiography' section of *The Edge of the World*, it includes only one reference to Australia's first inhabitants. Yet this reference is a significant moment that reads as both an acknowledgement of the shared history of victimisation and dispossession and an admission of failure to connect those histories more broadly. The narrator includes this recollection of her teenage years:

Up ahead, a young thin Aboriginal woman in a stop-sign red long-sleeve shirt moves off the track, her head bowed. As we pass her there's a silence. Then one of the boys in the front [of the car] grins at the driver, *Don't know our way around there, do we mate*, and jerks his thumb back towards the creek. *Nah*, the driver grins back. *Never been down there*. They all laugh so I laugh too. (269-270)

Her male companions' commentary on the woman, though vague, is clearly dark, particularly within the context of narrative as a whole and the portrayal of the woman as vulnerable, as indicated by her description as young and thin, as well as her appearance alone at the side of the road. This character connects to no other part of the narrative and is never mentioned again. The narrator's response to her

companions' comments is significant: she joins in with the laughter despite having no clear understanding of her companions' meaning: this is implied in the choice of 'so I laugh too', instead of 'they all laugh and I laugh too' or simply 'we all laugh'. This acquiescence to the attitude of the others despite her uncertainty of what has actually happened between the teenage boys and the Aboriginal woman (if, indeed, anything) reads as a representation of the narrator's general lack of attention to the violence committed against Aboriginals: she follows the dominant societal attitudes. Yet the narrator turns to look back at the Aboriginal woman, who has vanished into the dust. This could likewise reference a teenage effort to 'fit in', and the moment of looking back, in contrast to her companions, a hint at the familial history that sets her apart from them. In the context of the novel as a whole, these few sentences read as an admission of the narrator's failure to empathetically connect the trauma inherent to her Armenian heritage with that of the Aboriginal woman, and more broadly the novel's lack of acknowledgement of the shared histories of trauma between her ancestral homeland and the country where she has grown up. In effect, this short but resonant vignette acknowledges the lack of attention to the Aboriginal experience in *The Edge of the World* that is so directly addressed in London's *Gilgamesh*.⁹ In doing so, the former enforces the case for the challenge of empathetic connection across ethnic (or otherwise distinct) groups.

While *Bone Ash Sky* does not explicitly reference Aboriginal history, its narrative emphasises Manne's argument more broadly. The narrative draws connections between violent histories, specifically the Armenian genocide, the Holocaust and the Lebanese civil war.¹⁰ As the setting is almost exclusively the Near and Middle East, the lack of reference to Australian history is unsurprising. There is one reference to the author's home country, however: the character of Rowda, a Lebanese Australian woman working in Beirut. A significant antagonist in Anoush's narrative, Rowda is vocally anti-Semitic, judgmental and lacking

⁹ Though I planned to model *Gilgamesh* in drawing strong connections between the comparative disposessions in Armenian and Aboriginal history in my creative work, word-limit constraints reduced this to passing reference. This is an area I would like to address with greater attention if the novella is expanded into a novel.

¹⁰ *Bone Ash Sky* expands this connection: in killing Muslims, Selim believes he is continuing the Crusaders' legacy (64, 266).

empathy. As the sole Australian character in a novel focused on the nuances of violence, prejudice and forgiveness, Rowda can be interpreted as a representation of an attitude that the author sees as prevalent in Australia; if this was not the intention, Rowda could be from any part of the Lebanese diaspora, such as the United States; or Anoush, the protagonist, could likewise be Armenian Australian, instead of Armenian American. Yet Rowda is conspicuous as the singular reference to Australia throughout the text. She is limited by her prejudices, which distance her from others, and she fails to change in any way. In Manne's consideration of the legacy of the Armenian genocide, he suggests the need for more empathetic feeling in Australia for dispossessed peoples both at home and abroad; through the insertion of the character of Rowda, *Bone Ash Sky* goes further to suggest the need for more nuanced and empathetic perspectives in Australia generally. The novel resists barbarity by drawing connections between the subjective violence of perpetrated events such as genocide and the objective violence of prejudice and racism, where, as Geoffrey Robertson and others who have studied mass violence point out, genocide traces its roots.¹¹

Imaginative investment, projection, and creation: drawing connections between postmemory and writing

The genocide was an attempt to see Armenia 'annihilated politically and physically'.¹² As such, it is a site of cultural trauma, which occurs when atrocious acts threatening group identity permanently affect the group's collective identity and memories (Alexander). While the genocide has been largely forgotten in mainstream Western culture, for Armenians it has become the 'overarching cultural narrative' (Manoogian, Walker and Richards 577). The trauma experienced by Armenians extends beyond the survivor generation to their descendants, in part because the denial, which is a symbolic repetition of the same factors that drove the perpetrators to kill (Alayarian 30), targets all Armenians, not only survivors. Psychological studies have made the suggestion that being the descendant of an Armenian genocide survivor significantly correlates with higher

¹¹ In *An Inconvenient Genocide*, Robertson describes genocide as 'the most dangerous crime – the easiest to foment by theories about the superiority of a dominant racial group' (94).

¹² This quote comes from a 1920 cipher telegram sent by Ataturk's government in Ankara (quoted in Balakian, *Burning Tigris* 328).

levels of secondary traumatic stress (Boyadjian; Kurzian; Kyupelyan; and Mouhibian).

Memory studies has moved toward an understanding of such traumatic memory as having ‘an inter-individual, social dimension’: in effect, memories that could not be worked through by survivors have been passed on to subsequent generations (Alloa, Bayard and Phay 2). Marianne Hirsch has described this phenomenon as ‘postmemory’, summarised by Emmanuel Alloa as the ability of events that took place before a person’s birth to ‘affect the person’s life profoundly and ... come to eventually constitute a memory of his or her own’ (43). It is important to distinguish postmemories from *literal* memories, however: postmemory functions similarly to memory but refers to events *not directly experienced* by those remembering them, and thus are ‘mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation’ (Hirsch *Writing and Visual Culture* 5). In this way, postmemory ‘[draws] attention to a past that was never present’ (Alloa 46). This occurs when that past continues to urgently impact the present, as in the case of the Armenian genocide. Hirsch has distinguished categories of postmemory: *familial* postmemory refers to the postmemory experienced by those close to survivors, generally within the family, who absorbed their memories intimately. *Affiliative* postmemory relies on ‘horizontal, intergenerational processes of transmission and identification’ (Alloa, Bayard and Phay 3), or, according to Hirsch, ‘the result of contemporaneity and generational connection with the literal second generation’ (‘Generation of Postmemory’ 115).¹³ In effect, affiliative postmemory may be experienced by people with no direct connection to the trauma, but who nonetheless feel effected by the traumatic events and have made the effort of imaginative investment.

Complicating our understanding of memory through the concept of postmemory can engender greater insight into persistent post/memory within society. Throughout the development of memory studies, critics have warned of the risks of employing imagination to find meaning in remembrance of the past (for example, see Sicher 84). There is value in correlating memory with historical records as possible – Armenians have been urging the Turkish government to do

¹³ Hirsch has also posited the category of connective postmemory, which refers to the (re)connective web of memory created by digital media (*Writing and Visual Culture*).

so for decades. Yet even one's own memories cannot be conveyed as facts: part of the reality of the human experience is recognising the process of imaginative investment that is inevitable in the working through of memory, as memoirist Patricia Hampl has explicated in 'Memory and Imagination'. Though we might like to believe memoir 'is a matter of transcription' (24), memory is much more complex. Hampl expresses the need for everyone 'to become sophisticated about the function of memory' (36), which she posits is to explore the meaning of lived experiences: we need to unpack the significance of what is persistently remembered amidst the quotidian minutia of what is forgotten, at the level of both our individual pasts and our collective past. Inaccuracies can then be sifted out, to get at the core of the memories themselves. For Hampl, making sense of memory requires this process of 'working through', which memoir writers model. Hampl refers to historical atrocities such as the Holocaust and the Vietnam War to suggest that 'our capacity to move forward as developing beings rests on a healthy relationship with the past' (33). As the narratives of the three novels discussed here each detail the struggle to move forward for genocide survivors and their descendants, Hampl's understanding of the function of memory suggests that societally, we have an unhealthy relationship with the legacy of the Armenian genocide that urges us to 'learn what our stories tell us' (33).

While all three of my selected texts are published as fiction, Hampl's consideration of the function of memory is nonetheless relevant because all three texts draw on the memory of historical events. As Toni Morrison notes, memory can be integral to creative practice. She describes the 'specific milieu', drawn from memory, that fuels literary practice, providing 'an entire galaxy of feeling and impression' (385). Morrison is referring to literal memory, but I suggest her point is relevant to *postmemory* as well. Morrison separates factual research ('the way it really was') from the way events are remembered and *why* they are remembered as such (385). She describes 'the deliberate act of remembering [as] a form of willed creation' – a direct connection to Hirsch's description of *postmemory* as a form of imaginative investment. *Postmemory* is the result of 'an affective link to the past ... an embodied "living connection"' (Hirsch 'Generation of Postmemory' 111), and this living connection represents a deep need to work through this unresolved past. One way to do so is through creative practice that draws on (post)memory, as in the case of the novels discussed here.

In each of the three novels, there are characters that present postmemory, often as a significant part of their narratives. In Cosgrove's *Bone Ash Sky*, both the second and third generation characters are affected by familial postmemory. Growing up, Selim regularly witnesses Minas, his father, struggling to deal with memories of the genocide; through this experience, Selim 'became his father' by reliving his father's memories in his own mind (263). Unable to process his trauma, the father, inadvertently passes it on to Selim: '*Why now, why all this guilt?* Selim could remember wanting to say, yet not having the courage to ask' (263, original emphasis). As these memories-turned-postmemories are not Selim's own, he likewise struggles to process them. He cannot understand the trauma his father experiences – thus his questions, *why now, why all this guilt?* – but he lacks the courage to confront his father's trauma; instead, he absorbs it, becoming his father. Minas has an unhealthy relationship with his traumatic past (through little fault of his own), and his son develops that same relationship.

Whereas the character of Minas struggles with his postmemories and turns to violence as an adult, Anoush's narrative models a working through of postmemory. As noted, she returns to Lebanon for the purpose of attempting to understand her father's legacy, and in doing so, she must also work through her grandparents' legacy as survivors. She likewise experiences postmemory, often commenting on her inherited memories:

I imagine my Armenian ancestors, struggling to retain their dignity, the child destined to be my grandfather trudging alone into the night. Selim dogging his father's footsteps, civil war raging around him, killing, being killed. I know all the details. Did I make them up? (71)

Here Anoush acknowledges the imaginative effort she makes to understand the experiences of her Armenian ancestors while questioning whether she has invented the vivid details she remembers. Yet throughout the narrative, she reasserts the validity of these details, which she learned so intimately that they reside in her mind as postmemories. Her comments frequently emphasise this point: 'I know all too well the details of the deportations, forced marches through the desert, the cattle trains that came out of nowhere' (125). Her earlier self-doubt – *Did I make them up?* – may be Anoush questioning her imaging, creating and

projecting, without recognising this effort as the process of *postmemories*, which are, by definition, based on the memories of others. In effect, Anoush questions the validity of her postmemories because she is uncertain whether she can in fact have such detailed *memories* of others' experiences. This is where the distinction between literal memories and postmemories is imperative.

Similarly, London's *Gilgamesh* references postmemory in a minor but nonetheless resonant way. The character of Edith explicitly engages in the development of postmemory: 'She told Jim [her son] everything she knew about [his Armenian father], from his birth to his death. What she didn't know she filled in with *what she had imagined*, all those years ago' (218, emphasis added). Edith has engaged in this process of imaginative investment to understand a past that, for her, was never present. As well, though Jim never meets his father, Edith suspects that he has inherited the grief and agony of his father and grandparents (220). This echoes the suggestion that 'memories' (in fact postmemories) can be inherited at birth, as Patrick Modiano, recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature, describes in his own case (in Alloa, Bayard and Phay 1-2).

Polain's *The Edge of the World* is distinct in that, though it is published as fiction, a significant portion of the book comes from oral history passed down from the author's mother (6).¹⁴ There are strong indications that the unnamed narrator of the fictional autobiography section experiences postmemory, such as when she describes the experience of absorbing her grandmother's memories: 'My mother passes the things she heard her mother tell others, her eavesdropping, on to me and I pass them on to my children and so our stories are like our photographs and *live inside us like our blood*' (228, emphasis added).¹⁵ These stories are not stagnant repetitions of someone else's experiences – instead they become living parts of the narrator and her son. As *The Edge of the World* is a fictional retelling of the experiences of Polain's grandparents as genocide

¹⁴ In 'Writing with an Ear to the Ground', Polain highlights her novel's use of family memories and personal experiences.

¹⁵ This in itself is part of the Armenian experience, as Reuben Zaramian notes: 'Oral narration has become one of the primary modes of communication ... for victims displaced in diasporic settings ... creating a body of oral literature that expresses the shared past of most Armenians around the world' (32).

survivors and the effects of this family history on the narrator, I suggest that the novel itself is a working through of Polain's familial postmemory.

As shown, characters of all three texts reference postmemory, and in *The Edge of the World* and *Bone Ash Sky*, characters model efforts to work through postmemory, to learn what these stories have to tell us, as Hampl implores – but in the narrative effort to engage in Morrison's 'willed creation' of narrative based on the memory of historical trauma, the *writing itself* models the working through of postmemory on the part of the authors. London and Cosgrove have no familial connections to the Armenian genocide, yet both their narratives can be understood as attempts to work through a sort of – if not quite *affiliative* postmemory – an *authorial* version, just as *The Edge of the World* is a working through of familial postmemory. London and Cosgrove are, to recall the definition of affiliative postmemory, people with no direct connection to the trauma, yet who clearly have felt sufficiently moved to intimately learn its details – its memory – and through their creative practice, demonstrate the effort of imaginative investment. In effect, the sedulous understanding of the specific milieu necessary to craft historically based fiction capable of alterity, as referred to by Adorno, suggests the embodied 'living connection' of affiliative postmemory on the part of London and Cosgrove. This effort by the authors – their *imaginative investment, projection, and creation* – is in and of itself a form of resistance against barbarity: it abhors the reality of traumatic events by embracing the burden of postmemory left in their wake. In making this effort, these authors, like Polain, offer their own models for the working through of traumas that prevent us, collectively, from moving forward.

Armenian terrorism in Australia: the creative component

This thesis has been sometimes practice-led, sometimes research-led, resulting in close dialogue between my creative and critical sections. A number of researchers have worked to elucidate the nature of creative writing practice within the context of academic research (cf. Brady; Kroll 'The Exegesis' and 'The Creative Writing Laboratory'; Goodall; Smith and Dean; and Kroll and Harper). Jeri Kroll compares scientific and creative researchers, noting how both 'research, test hypotheses, innovate and produce results' ('The Creative Writing Laboratory' 122). Hazel Smith and Roger Dean link research, research-led practice and

practice-led research in their iterative web cycle model, demonstrating how the processes of each can be undertaken separately or interconnected in myriad ways (19-21), and how the academic and creative processes can blur into each other (Brady), as was the case in this thesis.

The creative work that follows this exegesis is a novella set in Sydney in the midst of a series of Armenian terrorist attacks against Turkish diplomats that took place around the world from 1973 through the early 1990s. This violence has been described as a result of the frustration and disenfranchisement felt in Armenian communities due to the ongoing denial of the genocide, which has exacerbated the sense of rage and loss experienced by both survivors and subsequent generations (Bogosian 295). In other words, the ongoing objective violence of the denial led to further subjective violence in the form of Armenian attacks on representatives of the Turkish government. Both the objective violence of the denial and the subjective violence of the terrorism can be understood as resulting from what Hampl might describe as an unhealthy relationship with the past on the part of these communities.

Research into the two attacks against Turkish diplomats in Australia has grounded my fiction within the historically plausible. While I've drawn on journalistic accounts (see 'Hunt for Killers'; Mannix; and Nicholson), my main characters are fictitious. My intention has been to reflect the 'specific milieu' (to use Morrison's description) of the Armenian diaspora in early 1980s Australia. To do this, I've researched the lived realities of diasporan Armenian communities through memoirs (see Arlen; Balakian, *Black Dog*; and G Hovannisian) as well as historical and sociological studies (see Bakalian; Bogosian, Kaprielian-Churchill; and Kirkland 'Armenian Migration' and 'Armenian Immigrants'). Through such research, I've aimed to portray the materiality of my characters' lives and motivations while exploring the questions raised in the critical component.

Because the novella's protagonist is part of a group of Armenian diasporans planning an act of terrorism, one of the main challenges was to write from the perspective of a terrorist in urban Australia without turning readers away. As in Cosgrove's *Bone Ash Sky*, the novella's main characters are perpetrators, but they are also victims of the denial. In this way, I've aimed to provide insight into the characters' motivations for violence. Unlike in *Bone Ash Sky*, however, I have chosen to use the 'less-violent' character device to contrast

my protagonist's cautious, in some ways reluctant approach to violence with that of the more adamantly violent antagonists. As well, as my research progressed and I continued to redraft the creative work, I developed my understanding of the strategy of implying violence in the narrative gaps. In each draft, more of the grandfather's experiences of the genocide moved into the gaps, potentially leaving readers with a darker impression of the violence than detailed description could convey.

The protagonist's understanding of both his family history and the Armenian cultural narrative of genocide are expressed through his postmemory. A point from Hirsch aptly describes his experience:

To grow up with overwhelmingly inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one's birth or one's consciousness ... is to be shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic fragments of events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension. (*Writing and Visual Culture* 5)

The novella's narrative thus centres on the protagonist's struggle to *reconstruct* the Armenian cultural narrative in a way that, to his mind, achieves a sense of justice. He is working through the traumatic fragments of his postmemory in an attempt (however misguided) to develop a healthy relationship with the past, from which he and the Armenian people can move forward. My aim for this novella was not to mitigate responsibility for this global series of terrorist attacks, but, by honestly acknowledging complicity, to craft a work of resistance against the barbarity of the violence portrayed.

Conclusion: creating traces

The Armenian genocide has been described as an attempt to commit 'a crime intent on leaving no traces' (Nichanian 143) – in other words, a crime that leaves no evidence it occurred. As such, 'not only do genocidal undertakings imply complete annihilation, they equally imply the annihilation of all traces of annihilation' (Alloa 49). For this reason, the effort to *create* traces that prompt memory, as in the examples of these three novels, is a meaningful act of resistance against the barbarity of annihilation.

I began with the contention that popular portrayals trivialise and vulgarise the lived experience and historical accuracy of traumatic events such as genocide. While Rosenfeld and others make many important points about the risks of ‘over-popularising’ traumatic memory, this thesis, through both the exegesis and creative work, suggests that popular portrayals of traumatic histories can not only work to keep the memory of these events ‘alive’ in society, but also act as a form of resistance against barbarity in a number of ways. In writing fiction drawn from a specific historical milieu, this resistance can be crafted through honest portrayals of violence that confront complicity; through connections between the subjective violence of events such as genocide and the objective violence of prejudice and racism; and through *imaginative investment* that abhors the reality of traumatic events by embracing the burden of postmemory that lingers, burdening future generations.

In its necessary brevity, this exegesis could not provide a sufficiently in-depth analysis of these three novels, but has instead focused on their portrayals of the Armenian genocide, and in particular on their portrayals of the genocide’s subjective and objective violence and its legacy, and how the presence of postmemory models the working through that the unresolved legacy of the genocide urges. That three novels portraying the Armenian genocide have been published in Australia since 2000 (London’s in 2001, Polain’s in 2007 and Cosgrove’s in 2013) may be a positive indication of some resurgent interest in this once widely known but now largely forgotten genocide.¹⁶ This echoes the paradox that underpins this thesis: to keep the memory of violence alive in order to work through it societally, writers must enshrine that violence through its artistic recreation, striving to portray it honestly – without doing injustice to victims or alienating readers – and in doing so, model the working through that will enable us to move forward, engendering a vision of the future without genocide – perhaps even without violence.

¹⁶ This is in addition to recent non-fiction texts published in Australia, including Geoffrey Robertson’s *An Inconvenient Genocide* in 2014, and Babkenian and Stanley in 2016.

Creative section:

A Flicker of Justice, No More

On 17 December 1980, at 9:47 am, two men shot the Turkish consul-general to Sydney and his bodyguard near the consul's home in Vaucluse. The assassins aimed, fired, and vanished.

Vrezh was home the morning of 17 December, across the harbour. The lab's holiday shutdown meant he could sleep in, sticky with sweat from the thick night. He woke to his mother shouting in Armenian, and was pulling a t-shirt over his head as he stumbled into the kitchen.

The assassination was on the radio.

'What are they saying, Vrezh? Who are they saying is responsible?' His mother forgot all her English when she got flustered. She wore her apron, sleeves rolled up, her hair in rollers. The kitchen smelled of ground lamb and onion. Vrezh's grandfather Arshag, his father's father, sat at the table, a tiny cup of coffee in front of him, a blanket around his shoulders.

The baritone newsreader's voice hit Vrezh like adrenaline.

'What is it, Vrezh, I cannot understand!' his mother shouted again.

'The Justice Commandoes of the Armenian Genocide – a woman called the station, claiming it was them.' Vrezh focused on translating the announcer's words, struggling to smother his excitement. 'The caller said the attack was retaliation for the injustices done to the Armenians.'

His mother removed her glasses and pressed her palms into her eyes. Held them there while the newsreader moved on to other stories.

'My good Lord. This terrible violence that never ends.'

Then came the metallic *brrrrriinnnggg* of the wall phone. Vrezh's father, calling from the jewellery store, wanting to know if they'd heard.

'Publicly we must call this a deplorable crime,' his father said, his voice lowered.

Vrezh nodded, his face blank. Like his father, he had followed the actions of the Justice Commandoes and ASALA, the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia, since they began five years earlier. Attacks against Turkish diplomats in LA, Athens, Paris, Beirut, Madrid. Finally they had reached Sydney.

For the first time, Vrezh felt empowered.

From the corridor where the phone hung against a wallpaper of yellow and orange flowers, Vrezh could see into the kitchen. His mother bending over the

stovetop, tasting the meat for the *kufteh*. His grandfather's shaky hand reaching for his coffee, the cup slipping from his fingers, the brown liquid running in rivulets over the rust-orange plastic tablecloth, dripping onto the floor. And the absence of his brother Armen, the one person he burned to speak to.

With his forearms wide and heavy on the table, his head and shoulders back, Vrezh's father presided over platters piled with roast eggplant, capsicum and lamb skewers.

‘Where is your brother tonight?’

Armen still wasn't home. Vrezh shrugged, eyes on his plate. ‘Out with Gavik and Vartan. Where else?’

Where else?

His mother leafed through the day's letters while they ate, from Vrezh's aunt in Boston, his uncle in Moscow, his grandmother – his mother's mother, still in Egypt. Their family, scattered like ashes across the earth. As a child, Vrezh had imagined his family reunited in Armenia. What was this ‘Soviet Union’ that was so powerful it could prevent them from living in their homeland? Sometimes he envied the perspectives of childhood.

Alone, Vrezh spread every newspaper article about the assassination across his desk. He held a magnifying glass over photos from the scene, analysing where the shooter had stood, how the motorcyclist had manoeuvred along the residential streets to escape.

None of it revealed what he really wanted to know.

Vrezh fell asleep on the sofa in the lounge downstairs, adjacent to his grandfather's room. He was doing this more often, giving his mother a break.

Weak-throated shouts roused him. He ran the few steps to his grandfather's room.

‘The Turks! They're coming for me!’ Arshag's hoarse voice was like an echo of terror across a chasm of six decades. One foot on the floor, the other tangled in sheets. Naked arms fought something unseen.

‘Grandfather, it's Vrezh.’ He repeated this, trying to steady the old man before he fell and shattered a hip. His mother's fear – that Arshag would die in a hospital surrounded by indifferent strangers. *They will put him in a straight jacket*

again, Vrezh. It is a like a prison for him! Vrezh remembered the jacket, hung on a hook beside the hospital bed, its three oversized buckles used to trap the arms behind the back. They restrained him at night, his mother explained, so he couldn't hurt himself.

Now Arshag lay on the bed in his room, lamplight catching the skeletal edges of his cheeks. His bulging eyes stared at the ceiling. Sinking into the armchair, Vrezh kept a hand on his grandfather's forearm, squeezing, as if to transfer his energy into the old man's withered muscles, his terrified face.

*

The cup of water teetered on the table's edge and dropped. The plastic cup bounced, splashing water across the linoleum.

'Look at this mess!' Arshag's arms flung wide, his eyeballs about to pop out of their sockets.

Vrezh jumped back. His scrawny fingers gripped the edge of his grandmother's apron. He was as tall as her hip now.

'It's only water.' Seda pulled a cloth from her apron pocket, leaning to the floor.

'Encouraging him! He needs to toughen up!' Arshag was still shouting as he stalked out the back door, slamming it, a breath of dusty Cairo air blown in behind him.

'Sorry, *tatik*.' Vrezh snuffled.

Seda returned to her chair and the bucket of peas on the table. Vrezh settled on a stool by her feet, holding a smaller bowl of peas on his lap.

'Do you know that when your grandfather was your age, his father went missing?' Her voice remained calm as she separated peas from pods.

'They lived in a town called Erzincan, in Anatolia. His mother cried for two days. Then there was a knock on the door, late at night.'

Vrezh's hands dropped the peas. He searched his grandmother's face, saw nothing unusual there. Yet he tensed, sensing something shift in the room.

'Turkish soldiers. They tore apart everything in the house. Your grandfather stood with his mother and brother at the front door. He had a little brother, did you know that?'

Vrezh shook his head.

‘His mother shouted at the Turks. They hit her with their guns. The soldiers made all the Armenians in the town leave, right then, in the middle of the night. They started walking, hundreds of people, the Turks on their horses, snapping their whips to make the Armenians walk faster.’

Vrezh was still shaking his head, as if this might stop his grandmother from saying any more.

‘In the town square, a row of men were hanging from ropes. In the moonlight, your grandfather could see his father’s face.

‘They kept walking, into the desert. They had almost no food. One night his mother vanished. He searched for her, asking the other Armenians. No one answered him. He held his little brother’s hand tight, kept him right at his side. But his brother started crying. The Turks shouted at him, but he wouldn’t be quiet.’

Vrezh wanted his grandmother to stop now. Stop. That was enough.

‘His brother cried and cried. Finally, the soldiers stopped him. A group of women dragged your grandfather away, forced him to keep walking. For days his brother’s cries echoed in his ears. He still hears them.’

Seda’s voice was still as steady as if she was telling him what was for dinner. She peered over her glasses, into his eyes.

‘When your grandfather shouts, it’s not about you. He’s shouting about his father and mother, and the little boy who was his brother. You understand?’

Vrezh gave one quick, tiny nod.

‘The Turks say none of this happened,’ Seda’s hands were finally still. ‘They want the whole world to forget. You and Armen, you must not forget.’

*

Vrezh ignored the engineering papers piled on his desk. It had been twenty-four hours since the assassination. Things were happening that mattered much more than spectroscopic analysis research.

His mother was out, no one else home except Arshag, asleep in the lounge room. Vrezh headed down the hall to Armen’s bedroom.

They'd moved to Sydney, to this house, when he was eight. The city so empty, so quiet compared to Cairo, the sky so wide and blue. When their father announced the brothers would have separate bedrooms in the new house, Vrezh swallowed the feeling he was being abandoned. He modelled Armen's relief.

Why don't we live in Armenia? Vrezh asked his father as they unpacked boxes in the new house.

The Turks stole our homes and murdered our families. But one day, Vrezh, we will take back our homeland.

There was no lock on Armen's bedroom door – you don't lock yourself away from your family, their father decreed. Inside Armen's room, however, were many locks. On his desk drawers, on the trunk at the foot of his single bed, and on a carved wooden box he kept under the closet floorboards.

When he started staying out longer, staying away for days, Armen, with his loud politics, his militant attitude, had also gone strangely quiet. Something had changed, something unspoken. Vrezh questioned his brother, paid close attention. Armen revealed nothing.

Now, this shooting.

Vrezh opened the blinds above his brother's bed a few centimetres. January heat radiated off the glass. Bottles of cologne cut a straight line across the top of Armen's dresser, labels facing front. Clothes stacked like they were on sale at David Jones, shoes gleaming. Armen insisted Mother iron even his socks. She obliged – she was an Armenian mother – though she nagged him to get married already, so she'd have some help with the laundry.

He could simply ask Armen about the assassination, but Armen would deny it.

If he could just find something.

The locks were no problem. Vrezh had picked them a dozen times, enjoying the simple mechanical challenge. As a teenager, he spent long afternoons alone with stacks of espionage magazines, learning to read the deltas and ridges of fingerprints, teaching himself to pick locks. If he were Australian, he might have become a spy.

Armen's desk held sheaves of ARF paperwork, the words *Armenian Revolutionary Federation* encircling the crossed quill, sword, shovel and flagpole. They'd attended ARF meetings together, until Armen stopped without

explanation. What could have taken his brother away from something so central to himself?

Vrezh had his suspicions even then.

The trunk held Armen's box of medals, most for boxing, some for wrestling. In the bedroom the boys had shared in Egypt, their father would hang each medal on the wall beside Armen's bed. Car headlights would catch the reflective surfaces, the medals winking at Vrezh as he lay on the other side of the room. The wall above Vrezh's childhood bed was empty of adornments. In Year 12, he received a gold medal in the science fair. His father never suggested hanging it. Vrezh left the medal dangling from his doorknob for a week. Then he put it away.

From outside came the rumble of an engine, the metallic slam of a door. Vrezh's heart stopped – if Armen caught him, who knew what he'd do. Flip out, smash something. Maybe never speak to Vrezh again.

Vrezh peered through the narrow slat of window exposed under the blind. Could Armen be stopping in for lunch already?

No Rug King delivery van along the row of tidy Artarmon houses.

Maybe he was hearing things.

Underneath the medals were Armen's childhood scouting badges and uniform, pressed and folded. The feel of the stiff cotton took Vrezh back to the marches. One of the first times he'd worn his own scout uniform. Cairo, 1965.

He was six, stepping inside the club's gated courtyard, where torches illuminated a cluster of boys in haphazard lines loosely arranged from oldest to youngest. They marched round the courtyard, most dragging flags, some hoisting the burning torches.

Armen hustled Vrezh into the midst of the marching boys. Fathers and grandfathers stood to the side, arms crossed, expressions heavy, shouting an occasional command. It was a familiar place, but the torch smoke and the hardened faces even among boys his age, made the place feel foreign.

He tried to slip his hand into Armen's.

His brother slapped his hand away. *What's wrong with you?* Armen wore his boxing ring face: focused eyes, tense jaw, tight lips. He shoved the corner of a flag into Vrezh's chest. Grabbing it, Vrezh flicked his wrist and the flag twitched,

its single white star and crescent moon not so different from the ones visible overhead.

They marched in circles, dragging the flags over the courtyard bricks. The jerking shadows cast by the torchlight reached out for him. His father and grandfather leaned against the concrete wall, their thin Egyptian cigarettes trailing smoke. If Vrezh dropped the flag and ran to them, if he said he wanted to go home, they would call him a coward. His eyes welled. He sunk two teeth into his lower lip.

The column swung right and Armen popped into view, marching ahead, torch hoisted in one hand, flag dangling from the other. Chest puffed out like a warrior's. Vrezh tried to mimic his movements. The rhythm of the march came into his legs and his knees lifted higher.

At the following year's march, that first uniform now too tight, Vrezh stomped the blood-red flags with enthusiasm. Now the march fitted like a puzzle piece into his grandmother's stories. Across the courtyard, Vrezh sought his grandfather's eyes. The older boys poured kerosene on the heap of Turkish flags, and the crowd sang memorials to bloodied soldiers sacrificing themselves for their homeland as the *whoosh* of the flame caught, their eyes stinging with the foul smoke. Even then, Vrezh sensed these rituals were bound up in the meaning of his name – *revenge*.

Shaking his head to clear the rush of memories, Vrezh set aside the scout uniform and emptied the rest of the wooden trunk. He pressed two fingers into the corner to reveal its false bottom. His brother often hid money there – surprising amounts, once over a thousand dollars – and sometimes photographs and timetables.

Vrezh reached into the dim space. Empty.

He stood in the middle of the room, traces of stale cigarette smoke and Ice cologne in his nostrils.

Pulling all the heavy wooden drawers from the desk, Vrezh set them on the rug, the same traditional Armenian rug that had been in their shared bedroom in Egypt.

Footsteps in the hall – like a lightning bolt to the chest. Drawers were spread across half the room. He'd never get them back in place.

Vrezh flung himself toward the door, pressing his face against the carpet to see underneath. If Armen was heading for him, the door would smash his face.

Dainty feet in flesh-tone tights turned, headed into the adjacent bedroom. Just his mother. He sighed silent relief.

He remained motionless until she retreated to the kitchen, then replaced the drawers in slow motion. As an afterthought, he ran his hand along the wooden seams of the desk's interior – and that's where he found what he needed.

*

Soghomon Tehlirian. A teenager in rags in the desert, witness to the soldiers murdering his mother, raping his sister, splitting his brother's head open with an axe.

Tehlirian coming to consciousness in a pile of corpses. A sort of good fortune, that the future Armenian hero wasn't thrown into a well or some rocky chasm to be crushed by the bodies of others.

Tehlirian, a tall, reedy adult, his face sketched in simple lines, a billboard forehead. On the surface, he was a sombre foreigner in Berlin for a mechanical engineering degree. In fact, Tehlirian had come to stalk Mehmet Talaat.

Of all the men who planned the great crime against the Armenians during the First World War, there was Mehmed Talaat, Minister of Interior Affairs. The title belied his power.

When the Turks lost the war, the German government helped these men escape. Smug Talaat, fat like a walrus, climbed aboard a submarine in Bolis – what Australians call Istanbul – and stole away to Berlin.

Mehmet Talaat, convicted war criminal, tried in absentia, sentenced to death, yet living in Berlin under an assumed name.

Talaat and Tehlirian on Hardenbergstrasse. This was Tehlirian's moment. His long, steady stride, the angle of his brown fedora, the way he concealed his pistol. Sometimes it rested at the small of his back, other times it was tucked into a holster hidden by his pressed coat.

And now, here came Tehlirian, crossing the bitumen towards Talaat, passing him so he could confirm every detail of Talaat's walrus face, naked now without his trademark moustache. Turning, drawing the pistol.

Firing a single shot.

Vrezh started awake. The lounge room, sharp December sun in the windows, his grandfather snoring in his armchair, wrapped in blankets despite the muggy air. He stood up, confused – had he seen Armen since the assassination? No, no, he'd been waiting for him to turn up for lunch.

The dream's sensations lingered. More often he dreamt of his great grandfather in the moonlit night, hung from thick rope, vacant eyes open, his face blurring into Vrezh's own father's. After that first telling in their Cairo kitchen, Vrezh had heard Arshag's story many more times. Always from Seda. He'd imagined the experience so many times, the details seemed to feel like Vrezh's own memories. He could feel the broiling sun, the sharp rocks under his bare feet. He could smell the blood of the little boy who would have been his great uncle.

Tehlirian in Berlin, 1921. *That* was the antidote. Decades before Vrezh was born. Yet lingering on the moment Tehlirian took aim – when victim became avenger – was like the drip of a morphine IV.

Other events took place before Vrezh was born: the return of Talaat's remains to Istanbul, sent by the Nazis, special delivery. Talaat's ceremonial burial at Istanbul's Monument of Liberty. The naming of Turkish streets in Talaat's honour, and an elementary school.

How the Turks had gotten away with it for so long, Vrezh couldn't understand. But that would all change. He patted his pocket, where the scrap of paper retrieved from inside his brother's desk waited.

*

Vrezh quickstepped the three blocks to Uncle Dikran's carpet store, shoulders hunched, thumbs squeezed inside fists.

Armen had been working for Uncle Dikran since they first arrived in Sydney, back when Dikran sold rugs from his lounge room and cleaned carpets in his garage. Dikran often told Armen to 'be more entrepreneurial, think bigger.' But maybe Armen would clean carpets all his life.

The shopfront bell jangled as Vrezh pushed through the glass door.

'Is Armen here?'

Dikran shrugged, ran a hand over his bald head. 'Should arrive any time. You want to help in back?'

Vrezh had spent many afternoons in the cleaning room, a high-ceilinged concrete space, garage-like. The routine was familiar. He diluted the rug cleaning powder, its astringent smell stinging his nostrils. He set the cleaning machine at the correct height for the thickness of the pile, pushing it over each rug with slow steps.

Was Armen the shooter? When Vrezh asked the question, it was himself he pictured climbing off the Honda's pillion seat, walking toward the car, drawing the gun, aiming through the windscreen. He was surrounded by two dozen hanging rugs in Uncle Dikran's cleaning warehouse, but he felt himself on the street in Vacluse, Sydney's early morning sun heating his motorcycling leather, his arm raised, fingers tight around the gun handle.

Using the pulley, he hung each freshly clean rug over wooden beams, catching their underbellies on the beams' exposed nails and hoisting them toward the ceiling.

The delivery van arrived as the day's heat peaked. Armen climbed out, t-shirt sleeves rolled over his shoulders. He wore aviators, his eyes mirrored. Sweat streaked his forehead. Was he nervous, thinking about the police closing in? He couldn't help but sweat though – the van had no air conditioning.

The police had found the Honda 500 used in the assassination, abandoned in Bondi. A \$100,000 reward and still no suspects. The police theorised that the assassins had left the country, that they'd been flown in for the job. A suggestion to cover up their ineptitude, Vrezh guessed.

'Hey,' Armen called, pointing this thumb over his shoulder, toward the van full of tightly rolled rugs. He strode toward the side door to Dikran's office.

Vrezh hesitated a moment too long, no words coming to him, and Armen was gone. His mouth felt dry. Cicadas buzzed like a headache.

The driver – or the shooter? A curious pride drove the question. And envy. His brother was a hero. What did that make Vrezh? A nothing, all the worse because his own brother had left him out.

Armen reappeared in the doorway, eyes swinging from Vrezh to the rug-filled van.

'Get these outta here, what're you doing?'

Vrezh stood between Armen and the van, his voice lowered. 'I know about yesterday.'

Armen shoved past him.

'I've got more houses to hit, c'mon.'

Vrezh pulled the map from the back pocket of his jeans. It'd been caught in the desk's wooden seam, unintentionally, Vrezh assumed. A couple of folded squares torn from a larger map, Vaucluse and Dover Heights, a route traced in pen. Not the exact route yesterday's assassins had used, but it started from the consul's house. An early draft? How long had Armen been planning this? Who had he worked with?

And how could Vrezh join them?

Armen snatched the map fragment, his lighter under its corner. By the time Vrezh's limbs reacted, grabbing for the paper, it was already in flames. Armen dropped the last corner on the concrete floor and crushed it into ash under his shoe.

'You're supposed to be the smart one in the family.' His voice low, steel running through it.

'Tell me what you're planning.' Vrezh tried to match Armen's tone, but desperation lingered.

'There's nothing.' Grabbing a broom, Armen swept the traces of ash into the grated drain. Then he started hauling rugs, piling them along the wall.

Vrezh followed, close enough to see the textured ridges of the scar across Armen's left cheek, memento of a late night in Kings Cross. 'I want in!'

Armen leaned in fast, his body tensed, fists tight. Then he turned and grabbed another rug, the sweat patch on the back of his shirt spreading.

Vrezh grabbed a rug too. Said nothing.

When the van was empty, Armen drove away.

*

By the time the family moved to Australia, Armen had only a few months of school left; he didn't bother with it. But Vrezh found himself in a classroom full of red-headed Rebeccas and sandy-haired Jasons. In their mouths, *Vrezh* became *Reg*. The pale, speckled Aussie kids teased him about the *dolma*, vine leaves

stuffed with rice and lamb his mother packed for lunch, about his clumsiness on the rugby field. About his name.

At Armenian school in North Ryde, the kids looked like him, even though their families had moved from Iran and Israel, Lebanon and Turkey. And Egypt. They sang and studied history and read the great Armenian poets and ate *dolma*, all wishing they didn't have to spend their Saturdays in class.

In Year 7 at The Forest High School, Vrezh's class researched their family trees, crafting them on poster-paper, branches extending from their earliest known relatives. One of his classmates could trace ten generations. Others were descendants of Australia's first colonists.

Vrezh was keen to complete the assignment. But Seda, his grandmother, was left at the gate of the British consulate in Moush, as a toddler. She didn't know her own name, let alone the names of her parents. Arshag never spoke his parents' names, and Seda was no longer alive to ask.

It was the same on his mother's side.

Vrezh left most of his tree blank, without explanation.

His Year 9 class studied the Holocaust. When Vrezh's father saw the textbook open to photos of Bergen-Belsen, he hurled the book to the floor. 'Wasting your time on the attention-seeking Jews!'

Vrezh's Year 11 history teacher, Mrs Thomas, assigned individual presentations on twentieth-century historical figures. Vrezh chose Tehlirian without a thought to anyone else, even General Antargit.

He was finally ready to share Armenia's story. He'd accepted the poor grades on his family tree, on his Holocaust essay, feeling ashamed and confused. Now he wrote about the genocide and Mehmet Talaat and the war tribunals of 1919 that declared Talaat guilty in absentia. And how, two years later, Tehlirian killed Talaat in the street in Berlin with that one clean shot.

Vrezh imagined Talaat collapsing in the street with little fanfare, his horrible, earthshaking power gone before his head touched the pavement.

In that moment, Tehlirian gave himself up to the Germans. At the trial, the judge listened to Tehlirian's story. About the deaths of his mother and sister and brother. Other witnesses came, German men. They spoke about the actions of their wartime ally.

The judge declared Soghomon Tehlirian not guilty. For Vrezh, this was proof that justice, if as rare as snow in Sydney, did exist. For his grandparents' families left unburied in the deserts east of Bolis, for all the Armenians like himself barred from their homeland, there was one shining moment of true justice.

Vrezh presented Tehlirian's story in Mrs Thomas's class. His peers were still mostly blondes and gingers, though a few mirrored his darker complexion. One of these olive-skinned students, he later learned, was a Turk.

The following week, Vrezh was called to the principal's office.

*

Vrezh sucked in a shaky breath, then climbed into the Commodore's boot. It was 5 am. Curling into the awkward space, he checked his pockets one last time. Penlight, compass, strip of duct tape to rig the boot lock so he could let himself out.

He pulled the lid closed.

It'd been a month since the assassination, and Armen wasn't saying anything.

The first time Vrezh tried to follow Armen's burgundy '76 Commodore, he hung back too far and immediately lost him. Borrowing his father's Centura was tricky enough, not knowing when exactly he'd return, and the damned lemon yellow paint job was too recognisable. Vrezh lost Armen a second time just outside Willoughby, and a third, not much further.

He wasn't enthused with this new plan. It felt like a high school caper, the sort of thing he might have done as a teen. If he'd had any friends to do it with.

Vrezh's calves were already cramping when he heard the scuffing of dress shoes on bitumen. Dress shoes – an Armenian trait. Any Australian would be wearing slapping thongs on a hot Saturday. Vrezh had debated with himself that morning and finally decided on trainers, unsure if he might need to make a quiet escape.

It must be Armen. Their father would never get up so early on a Saturday. Vrezh tensed, praying his brother wouldn't open the boot.

The door creaked, the car shifted.

He fixed the penlight on the compass. It spun randomly. Vrezh wanted to slap himself. Of course the compass wouldn't work surrounded by the metal of the boot.

They were on a highway, judging by the consistent high speed. Vrezh checked his Timex again. And again. The car droned on the smooth surface. He'd assumed Armen was going somewhere in Sydney, but they must be outside the city by now. Maybe he had it all wrong. Maybe Armen had a secret girlfriend in Wollongong, some blonde who walked barefoot to the shops.

He tried to picture the landscape they might be passing. Fields. Cattle. Gums. He wondered what the land had looked like when there were only Aboriginals here, but the thought flitted away. Vrezh had never met an Aboriginal, wasn't much interested. Instead he daydreamed of the powerful, snowcapped mountains of Armenia. He longed to breathe the air of his homeland, to dig his hands into its earth. But even getting a tourist visa to the USSR was difficult.

Suddenly Vrezh's head slammed against the boot, shocking him awake. His mouth opened in a shout of pain but he caught himself, just. Gravel ricocheted beneath him and the ride became rough. He braced himself, straining. This must be a driveway.

But the bumping continued another forty minutes before the car slowed, stopped, the engine cut out.

The door opened and slammed shut, shoes crunched on gravel. Armen's footsteps receded, vanished. A currawong called. Then silence.

Vrezh waited. He'd been squeezed in the boot for almost five hours. His whole body ached.

Biting his lip, he released the duct tape from the lock and cracked the lid.

For a moment he was blind. Then, bush. A thick gnarl of gum trees, scrub, tan-coloured rocks.

Where was Armen? The car must be facing whatever building was out here – unless this was just a rendezvous point in the middle of nowhere.

If he got out, he might be able to peer under the car, figure out what to do.

Hearing nothing, Vrezh pushed the boot's lid up just wide enough for his shoulders. He tried to slither out, but his hamstring seized and he collapsed onto the sandy gravel. He gripped his thigh to quell the spasm.

Footsteps came fast toward him.

‘Stay down!’

But adrenaline caused Vrezh to shoot up, palms at chest height, his heart seizing. He’d hardly processed the figure coming at him when he was struck across the face and landed abruptly on his back, skidding over rough stones.

‘Fuck, it’s my brother.’

Vrezh didn’t recognise the first voice – older, booming, a strong Armenian accent – but the second was Armen’s.

The stranger held a pistol pointed low, right at him.

‘Get up, Vrezh – what the fuck?’

Vrezh didn’t move. Pain spread across the left side of his face into his temple, his teeth.

‘It’s okay, Softie, it’s just my idiot brother.’

Softie slid the gun away. ‘So this is Vrezh Melokian.’ Vrezh recognised the accent. *Gyumretsi* – from Armenia’s north.

Standing, Vrezh could make out the wrinkles around Softie’s eyes, the grey streaks in his hair. A man in his fifties maybe, but solid, his chest twice as wide as Vrezh’s, his shoulders military square.

‘A pleasure to finally meet you,’ Softie said, extending his now-empty hand.

Sunlight shone through narrow, glowing windows in the corrugated tin shed, a space the size of a three-car garage, if that, filled with scattered worktables, rusting farm equipment, half an ancient ute. A folded blanket and thin pillow sat at the head of a military surplus cot. Dust drifted.

‘I understand you took it upon yourself to get here today, Vrezh.’ Even when his words were casual, threat rumbled in Softie’s voice. The gun – a Beretta, Vrezh thought, though he’d only ever seen pictures – was holstered at his hip. ‘It must have been an uncomfortable journey. Your efforts show determination.’

Vrezh nodded his thanks. Blood trickled beneath a wadded up handkerchief pressed to his nose.

‘Retrieve another glass for us, Armen.’ Softie gestured to the bottle of Armenian cognac and two glasses arranged on one of the worktables.

Armen ground his jaw as he brought a grimy glass, wiping it with his shirt.

Softie settled onto a tall stool and poured the cognac. ‘Sit, sit.’

Vrezh did as told. Armen remained standing, arms crossed, his hip against the ute's corroded cab.

'Has Armen described to you our efforts?' Softie kept his gaze on Armen, and didn't wait for Vrezh to answer. 'Armen and I are part of a brotherhood with a sacred duty. My father was part of General Antarig's orphan army. Despite our struggles much of our homeland remains in the bloodstained hands of the Turks.' Softie raised his shot. Armen and Vrezh followed. 'To a free and prosperous Armenia.'

As soon as the empty glasses were set on the table, Softie refilled them.

'I have insisted Armen bring you to meet me for several months, Vrezh. Every time I asked, he has excuses. I began to suspect I would have to find you myself. Now here you are. Like destiny.'

Softie's eyes bore through him like an x-ray.

'I'd have gladly come any time, sir.' He glanced at Armen, who glared.

'I have heard you are studying at Sydney University.'

'I started a PhD last year.'

'Tell me, Vrezh, have you heard about the shooting of Mr Ariyak that occurred in December?'

Vrezh nodded, wondering what kind of test this was.

'And what was your opinion?' Two gold teeth glinted between Softie's lips.

Vrezh pushed his glasses up with his index finger and wiggled on the stool, trying to sit a little taller.

'It lived up to Tehlirian's example. Punishing those responsible for the genocide and its denial. It was just, and brought attention to our cause. I was – I was very impressed.'

Softie raised an eyebrow. Then he locked eyes with Armen and nodded as if in slow motion before pouring three more shots.

'Your intelligence is obvious, Vrezh. Many people have told me this.'

Vrezh gave a small nod, but privately felt the glow of recognition.

Softie lifted his glass again. 'To your father's health and the freedom of our beloved homeland.'

It was that easy. Vrezh strode out of the shed, raising his smiling face toward the blue sky. He turned to Armen, for a moment thinking his brother might offer to shake his hand, welcome him to their splinter of the Justice Commandoes.

Armen slammed the car door. He gripped the steering wheel like he might tear it from the console.

Vrezh crossed his arms, keeping his eyes on the barren landscape rushing past. Armen lit one Marlboro after another, the smoke rushing out the open window.

They were on the highway by the time Vrezh broke. He smacked his fists to his thighs.

‘You dick! Softie wanted to meet me – you never told me!’

‘I’m about two seconds from flinging your door open and kicking you out of this damn car! You have no idea what you’ve gotten into.’

‘Fine, I’m so stupid – tell me.’

Armen shook his head. ‘You know why he’s called Softie?’ He flicked ash onto the mound spilling out of the Commodore’s tray. ‘A joke. He was in the Battle of Berlin in ’45, eighteen years old. Ran out of ammo, killed a Nazi with half of a brick. Got out of the USSR, ended up in Beirut. He’s got ties to the PLO. You don’t fuck around with the PLO.’

‘So what’s his real name?’

‘Listen to me! You gotta have balls to work with someone like Softie. This isn’t for chess-playing lightweights!’

Vrezh’s fists came up in frustration. ‘You think you’re the only person in the family who can be a hero!’

Armen responded with reflexive defense, his right fist raised, then opened to slap the back of Vrezh’s head, their father’s trademark move.

Vrezh batted Armen’s hand away, shouting. Armen shouted back, leaning into Vrezh’s face. The car turned with him, into the oncoming lane, and only at the last possible second did the scream of a horn and the dodging manoeuvre of the ute driver shock Armen’s focus back to the highway. He righted the Commodore with both hands on the wheel and the rage of every lost boxing match in his eyes.

‘Try not to get us killed,’ Vrezh muttered.

*

The Forest High School principal wore a black vest with a wide white strip over his white dress shirt. He tented his hands when he spoke. His office smelled like liniment, an old man smell.

‘The problem, Reg, is that history isn’t so – straightforward, you understand.’ In the pause he ran his tongue over his top front teeth, his upper lip bulging with the movement. Vrezh was resigned to the mispronunciation of his name, but the principal’s tongue disgusted him. ‘Mrs Thomas completed an Honours degree in history, wrote her thesis on Renaissance influences in Tudor England, in fact. She knows how contentious various – narratives can be.’

He gestured to his left, where Mrs Thomas sat with her arms tight against her chest, nodding.

‘In light of your, let’s say, *glorification* of an assassin, which your classmate Kerem – and his *parents* – found personally offensive, his parents have asked that you be suspended and removed from Mrs Thomas’s class.’

Across the wide desk, Vrezh sat, shoulders hunched, hands shoved under his thighs. Since arriving in Australia, his relationship with teachers had been strained. Now this, his first time in the principal’s office. And that baby Kerem, crying to his parents.

‘Do you have anything to say to that, Reg?’ The tongue again.

Vrezh shrugged, eyes on the floor.

‘Well. We feel it’s an unnecessary step – at this stage. However, we’ve informed Kerem’s parents that you have failed this assignment – which you have – and you’ll be required to stay late for the next fortnight to complete a make-up assignment.’

‘An essay on Simpson and his donkey,’ Mrs Thomas said.

‘Which you’ll read at the Anzac Day assembly on 24 April.’

Vrezh’s fingernails dug into his palms.

*

After the obligatory round of shots one afternoon, Softie turned to Armen.

‘You would be advised to check the oil levels of your vehicle at this time.’
Each word heavy.

This must be important. *Finally*.

It’d been two months, and Vrezh was getting antsy. Armen drove him out to the shearing shed about once a fortnight, the same Charles Aznavour cassette playing there and back. Vrezh got the impression Softie owned the bush property, maybe lived there sometimes. Gathered around one of the worktables, the trio discussed the little evidence the police had on the Vacluse shooting. The reward for information was now \$250,000.

It made sense, lying low after Vacluse – but why had Softie wanted to meet him if they weren’t doing anything?

They discussed the Turkish officials in Australia, made note of any mention of them in the news. They analysed the news from Paris, where the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia, the sister organisation to the Justice Commandoes, assassinated two Turkish government officials.

But Softie said nothing about plans to come. Why weren’t they discussing the next shooting?

Armen headed outside, narrowed eyes fixed on his brother. He walked past the car and up the road, Marlboro at his lips.

Softie leaned toward him, his voice low. ‘Vrezh. You understand that by coming here, you’re implicated in what this country’s government views as criminal activity. This is a fact.’

Vrezh nodded. This was the moment. Softie was finally going to reveal their next target, and Vrezh’s role. Was this how Tehlirian felt when he was invited to join Operation Nemesis, when he learned he would be tracking down Talaat?

‘And you understand there is enough evidence against your brother to put him in prison for many years.’

Vrezh felt his cheek twitch, hoped it wasn’t visible. He nodded again.

‘Your grandparents suffered at the hands of the Turks as my parents did, as their families did. Are you prepared to become a soldier for our sacred cause?’

The air felt electric. Vrezh gave another sharp nod.

‘Excellent.’ Softie leaned back, crossed his arms. ‘Tell me what you know about ammonium nitrate.’

Vrezh blinked, thinking he’d misheard. The question floated between the two men for a moment, until the full meaning hit Vrezh like a bucket of ice water.

‘I – uh, well, I haven’t had much, uh, experience with ammonium. Actually, um, none. I know more about rifles and – ’

Softie raised one meaty hand.

‘Let me rephrase. I require you to be an expert on ammonium nitrate. Specifically in relation to detonation and timing equipment. Blast radius. Shrapnel. Alternatives and their advantages. Report back to me next week.’

The concrete floor turned to jelly beneath Vrezh. Despite the autumn chill, his glasses slid along the sweat of his nose.

All this time, he’d assumed they would plan another shooting.

*

The three hundred students of The Forest High School slumped in their auditorium chairs, few bothering to look at Vrezh. Still, his tongue had become a dead slug. He gripped the edges of the wooden podium.

‘Tomorrow is April 25,’ Vrezh began.

The principal and Mrs Thomas didn’t realise it, but they’d given him an opportunity.

He inched closer to the microphone.

Yesterday Mrs Thomas had made him read his Anzac speech aloud twice before letting him go home. Now he began with the same lines.

‘It’s an important day in Australia, known as Anzac Day.’

The principal sat a metre away from him on the stage.

‘But today is April 24 and it’s also an important day. Today commemorates 56 years since the Armenian genocide, when the Ottoman Empire killed one million Armenians.’

He’d laboured over the secret version of his speech, reading every Anzac history book in the library. That bastard Charles Bean hadn’t even mentioned the genocide.

‘Hours before the Anzac troops landed at Gallipoli, Turkish authorities arrested more than 200 Armenian religious and cultural leaders, as well as teachers. They were taken away to be tortured and killed.’

The principal was pushing himself to his feet now. Mrs Thomas was heading up the stage steps, straight for Vrezh. The students snapped out of their stupor, four hundred eyeballs locking onto him.

It was Alan Moorehead’s *Gallipoli* that came through for Vrezh, with three whole pages about the genocide.

Adrenaline replaced Vrezh’s nerves. If they could hear this part, they’d understand. Moorehead’s words ran together.

‘The government’s system “was to goad the Armenians to the point where they attempted to resist. At first their goods were requisitioned, then the women were molested, and finally the shooting began.” An Australian –’

The principal grabbed Vrezh’s arm, tugging at him. Vrezh lunged for the microphone just as Mrs Thomas yanked it away.

‘Liar!’ A voice from the crowd. ‘He’s *lying!*’

Kerem.

‘An Australian wrote that,’ Vrezh yelled, trying to twist out of the principal’s grasp. ‘An Australian wrote that!’

The podium tipped, then crashed to the stage, catching Mrs Thomas on the foot. The typed pages of Vrezh’s speech scattered like leaves. Students were on their feet now, teachers shouting at them to sit down.

The red-faced principal, his stubby fingers clamped to Vrezh’s bicep, pulled him off the stage.

Vrezh waited in the principal’s office alone for an hour, his adrenaline gone. When the principal came through the door, he jumped to his feet, thrusting a copy of his speech from his jacket pocket into the principal’s hands.

‘What is this?’ He glanced at the pages, then balled them up and dropped them in the bin. ‘Mrs Thomas is in hospital for x-rays. They suspect at least two cracked foot bones.’

Vrezh’s cheeks burned.

Part of his punishment was apologising to Kerem and his parents, his knees shaking with humiliation as he stood in front of them in the principal's cramped office later that week.

'What did you do to get expelled?' his father bellowed when the phone call came, that one forehead vein pulsing.

His mother held a hand over her heart. 'Disruptive conduct, Vrezh, what does it mean?'

'Got in a fight,' Vrezh muttered. Shame burned in his chest. He couldn't bear to admit how he'd failed them.

Later Vrezh learned that Kerem's father worked at the Turkish Consulate in Woollahra.

*

For days Vrezh dragged himself around the house, his mind churning over the possibility of a bomb. He'd abandoned his PhD work, pleaded illness to his supervisor.

'Vrezh, *jan*, are you all right?' his mother asked, the *lahmajoon* she'd prepared uneaten on his plate.

'Fine, *mayrig*.' He couldn't meet her eyes.

Alone in his room, he reread his stack of clippings about ASALA and Justice Commando attacks, kept in his own desk's secret compartment. Hunched over the articles in the midnight quiet, he dug his toes into the thick pile of the rug beneath him, feeling as though he'd swallowed acid.

There'd been car bombings in Athens, all unsuccessful. A few bombs at Turkish Airlines offices, with bystanders injured.

He'd always imagined Tehlirian having absolute conviction in his actions. Now Vrezh wondered if Tehlirian had questioned himself as he raised his gun on the street? He would have only known Talaat's face from the grainy black-and-whites of the era. Tehlirian had killed the right man – but how had he known at the moment he'd drawn the pistol? Did the risk of a stray bullet hitting one of the German civilians on Hardenbergstrasse cross his mind?

At the same desk where he'd re-written his Anzac Day speech a decade earlier, Vrezh dropped his head into his hands. Could he actually set a bomb,

watch it go off? Perhaps if it were a car bomb, if they knew the car's owner would be alone, if they had a remote detonator, could be precise ...

It would be simpler once Vrezh knew Softie's plan.

On their next trip to the shearing shed, he briefed Softie on his ammonium nitrate research, expecting a discussion about possible tactics.

There was no discussion. Softie gave Vrezh specifications and told him to get to work.

'We have a deadline. I am confident you understand the necessity of meeting it.' Softie's voice was low and dark.

Vrezh and Armen made the trip to the shearing shed most weekends, usually Saturdays. Softie requested updates on the cold details of compounds and blast radius, and Vrezh's progress. A tangle of wires, timing components, and handfuls of nails and ball bearings covered Vrezh's worktable. Vrezh tried to ignore the shrapnel.

Armen said nothing.

At home, Vrezh noted Armen's long absence more than once. He suspected his brother was with Softie, discussing the plan's full scope. In private.

It was as though Vrezh was outside a locked room, his face pressed to the keyhole, a sliver of activity all that was visible.

One Saturday the brothers arrived to find a rubbish truck parked beside the shearing shed. A hint of rot lingered around the truck.

'So the truck's part of things, Softie?' Vrezh asked, cups of coffee steaming on the table.

Armen glared at him. Softie's moustache curled at one side, lifted by a half smile.

'A curious nature is the mark of a scientific mind, Vrezh *jan*.'

When Softie finished his coffee, he walked outside, to the rudimentary shooting range alongside the shed, and starting picking off the tin cans in the distance. The gunshots rang in Vrezh's ears.

*

The cold gripped most of the house, but Vrezh's mother ran the oil heater in Arshag's mothballed bedroom. She and Vrezh took turns passing the night there,

to wake the old man before his nightmares overtook him. They feared a heart attack.

One night, the creak of the back door snapped Vrezh from his half-slumber in the worn armchair. It was 1am. Arshag's eyes were closed, his face relaxed.

Leaving the bedroom door slivered open, Vrezh stepped into the kitchen. The stove light cast a dim glow.

'How's Softie?'

Armen had a mouthful of dolma, taken cold from the fridge. He slid the container across the table, toward Vrezh. The dolma were slick with olive oil.

Vrezh reached for a chair, then turned and began to pace along the linoleum. Four steps forward, four steps back.

'Look, Armen. Just – is Softie going to tell me what the plan is?'

Armen took another bite, chewed. The weak light from the stove left half his face in shadow.

'I thought,' Vrezh felt his ribs tighten. 'Okay, look. I assumed it was like Vaucluse. We pick a target and we kill that person as – as justice. This thing Softie's having me build ... it's not going to be one or two people.'

But Armen must already know that.

Didn't he realise what it meant?

Armen huffed, shook his head once. He matched Vrezh's whisper and it came out as a hiss. 'What the hell did you think was going to happen when you got in the boot of my car? You'd just stroll in, have a look around, see if things were to your liking? Softie and me didn't need you sticking your ugly nose in.'

The rubbish truck was part of the plan. Vrezh had overheard Softie and Armen talking about it. Someone would drive it to the chosen destination. Park. Climb out. Start to walk away.

'I need to know where this thing is going off.'

Vrezh had a suspicion. Turkey's Minister of Foreign Affairs, İler Türkmén, would be in Canberra on 20 June. The *Australian* had an article about it. 20 June. Three weeks from now.

Armen chewed, swallowed. Took another dolma with his fingertips as he leaned back, the kitchen chair creaking under his weight. 'You're clever, Vrezh.'

'So it's the embassy. That's why we're out near Canberra.'

Armen thrust his chin out.

‘But what if there’s other people?’ This was the key question, *this, now, ask it ask it ask it*. ‘When will it go off? In the daytime?’

‘They’re Turks, *Vrezh*.’ Angry, derisive. ‘Why don’t you live up to your name?’

‘Other people go to embassies! Australian people – hell, what if there’s Bolsahay there, getting some paperwork or something?’ Bolsahay, the thousands of Armenians who still lived in Istanbul.

Why doesn’t that worry you?

Armen pulled out a cigarette, looked at Vrezh above the lighter’s flame. The refrigerator’s rumbling cut out abruptly, leaving a hollow silence. Vrezh listened for any sound from Arshag’s room.

His mind raced through what fragments of the plan he knew. The bomb would be in the rubbish truck. Rubbish trucks only came around in the daytime. When the embassy was likely to be full of people.

But maybe there was something Vrezh had missed.

‘Just tell me when you’re going to set it off.’

Armen threw his head back. ‘What *difference* does it make? You’ve gotta finish it either way. And you’ve gotta be more careful around Softie.’ He stabbed a finger toward Vrezh. ‘Yes or no, nothing else. You’ve been asking too many damn questions.’

‘We can’t kill a bunch of Australians! That makes us – ’

‘We need to make a *statement*. Besides, you think Softie’s going to let you take a pass?’

Vrezh squeezed the heels of his hands against his temples. How quickly could Softie have Armen arrested for the Vacluse assassination? Would he wait around to collect the \$250,000 reward – or just hand over the evidence and disappear back to Beirut? Vrezh pictured his mother collapsing at the news of Armen’s conviction. Her eldest son.

‘Just finish it.’ Smoke hung above Armen’s head. ‘I’ll make sure you don’t have to do anything else.’

Vrezh stared at his hands. ‘Are you setting it off?’

Armen shook his head. ‘Too many questions.’

The Armenian Cultural Centre in Willoughby had the chill of a freezer. Three-dozen men sat in their overcoats, scarves wrapped tight, their hands gripping lukewarm cups of gritty coffee.

Two of the Revolutionary Federation directors were debating the executive director about a point from last meeting's minutes, a budget item incorrectly allocated. The three men spoke over each other.

Vrezh couldn't focus. Across the hall, the winning image of that year's community art exhibition was directly in his line of sight. An oil work, Armenians hanging in the streets of Anatolia, their heads at unnatural angles, bodies limp. Their faces were his father's face.

He could feel each of his neck muscles, taut like the ropes in the painting. His scarf was choking him. He removed it with exaggerated slowness, certain the action would betray his guilt. The guilt of not being utterly committed – of not being Armen.

Just finish it.

Vrezh's fought his urge to run from the hall.

He couldn't go through with it. Even if someone else placed the bomb, if someone else detonated it – he was building the thing. He'd be responsible for any innocent people. This wasn't justice.

Why don't you live up to your name?

It was as if Armen had sliced through the flesh of his chest, peeling it away to reveal a heart that was Armenian, but not sufficiently so.

His mind raced in a loop. Armen in the dim kitchen light – *just finish it*. His high school principal taking the Turks' side, erasing the crimes against his homeland, his family. A lake of blood from the little boy who would never grow up to be his great uncle.

It had all been simple when he was young. Armen was his role model for bravery, Tehlirian his hero.

Now Vrezh had an opportunity to punish a denialist – a Turkish *minister*.

And he couldn't do it.

The man beside him interrupted loudly, something about the date of an upcoming fundraiser.

For the first time, Vrezh wondered if the Turks had meetings like this, when they planned the genocide. If fat-faced Talaat and the members of the Committee of Union and Progress drank bad coffee and discussed budget items while they planned the release of prison convicts on the condition they murdered Armenians.

Just finish it.

If he sat with Softie and Armen making plans that resulted in the deaths of innocent people, was he any different?

Vrezh walked home along dark streets, twice making wrong turns. Possums scuttled along branches overhead, screeching.

Justice was worth sacrificing yourself for. But Softie's plan – if Vrezh understood it – wasn't justice.

What were his options? He could go to the police, turn Softie in. He would, even if it meant he'd go to prison as well – but he couldn't risk the police discovering Armen's involvement.

He could walk away and sit at home, waiting for Softie to make good on his threats. Or for Armen to blow himself up tinkering with the half-built bomb.

There was one other thing he could do. But only if he knew without doubt what Softie had planned.

The front door's bolt thudded with the finality of a gavel.

Vrezh found his mother in the armchair next to Arshag's bed, a book of Charent's poems open in her lap, her eyes closed. Vrezh imagined the tears on her cheeks when she visited her sons in prison.

Whatever he did, he had to protect Armen, if only for his mother's sake.

'Mama, go to bed', Vrezh whispered, his hand light on her shoulder. 'I will stay with *papik* tonight.'

'Oh, Vrezh, he's been so upset tonight. Twice already I've coaxed him back to sleep.'

The armchair was still warm when he settled into it.

Hours later, Vrezh had a plan. It went against everything he'd been raised to believe. But it soothed that acidic gnawing he'd felt since the moment Softie had asked him to build a bomb.

Now, if he could just make it work.

*

Throughout the Saturday morning drive, the Aznavour cassette playing in the Commodore, Vrezh clenched and unclenched his hands. He silently practised the spiel he'd prepared.

At the shearing shed, Softie stood in front of the shed's narrow window, blocking the low-slanting sun like a solar eclipse. Vrezh couldn't make out the details of his face, but he could see the knife, the tip of which Softie was running under his fingernails.

'Describe to me your progress, Vrezh.'

Vrezh spread his hands wide over his workbench, the mess of wires and tools, the crude metal box he'd fashioned.

'Slow, Softie. The timing mechanism is – well, it's quite technical. I'm working with heat filament wire but it's not as reliable as I'd hoped. Is there – do we have other options? Or ...' He trailed off.

These days. Vrezh worked through as many Marlboros as Armen. He had one lit now, the trail of smoke wavering, betraying his unsteady hand.

'I have made clear my instructions. True soldiers do not question their commander's intentions.'

'I'm pretty confident about the chemistry, but the timing mechanism is an issue for an electrician – or, I don't know, a watchmaker. Here.'

Vrezh picked up a metal box with wires spilling out of its core.

'I'm sure I can get it working, but it'll take some time to calibrate the terminals.' He monitored Softie's face to gauge how much of the technical explanation he understood. Not much, it seemed. Perhaps his special forces training had focused on other areas. Or perhaps 'special forces' was an exaggeration.

'This delay is no longer acceptable.' Softie didn't need to raise his voice. He pointed the knife toward Vrezh. 'You will provide me with a working model within the fortnight.'

Vrezh's recent purchase stayed concealed in his jacket pocket. It was second-hand, found through a classified ad in one of his military espionage magazines. Cash only, the seller insisted.

He waited until Softie and Armen were outside, the first shots echoing from the firing range. Then he pulled out the recording device.

*

Standing in the kitchen at 5 am, Vrezh leaned over the blank notepad, pen in hand. But if this was goodbye, he couldn't figure out how to say it. He couldn't even work out what to say to his father about the car. And the note might tip off Armen.

Armen would be tipped off pretty soon regardless – in the driveway, Vrezh popped the Commodore's bonnet and cut the spark plug wires.

As he pulled out of the driveway in his father's Centura, he slowed, taking one last look at the house where he'd lived since primary school.

The speedometer stayed steady, just under the limit. Checking the clock, he stopped at a service station on the Hume Highway near Mittagong. He ordered a coffee and settled at a plastic table, watching the traffic pass.

Two days from now, the Turkish foreign minister would arrive in Canberra. In a way, Vrezh was sparing the man's life. The thought made him grimace.

The recording device had worked better than he'd hoped. He'd left it for a week, inside a mess of equipment he was sure Softie wouldn't bother to touch. Two days ago, he'd brought it home, listening late into the night while his family slept.

Sound activated above 50 decibels, the tiny device had captured a couple hours of sporadic conversation. Somehow Softie had gotten copies of the embassy's blueprints, Vrezh learned. The rubbish truck, packed with ammonium nitrate, would arrive at 11 am – not long after the minister himself.

The bomb's timing mechanism was supposed to allow Armen just enough time to walk away.

Though faint and tinny, the recorded voices were audible.

'Half the building, at least'.

There it was: Softie's true face, cleansing Vrezh of any doubt.

'The only loose end is your brother.'

‘I told you he wasn’t cut out for this. Always overthinking everything. Makes him squeamish.’

‘That he has proved to be a disappointment is immaterial. Whether he knows how to keep quiet, however —’

Hearing the threatening undertone channelled through headphones straight into his ear, Vrezh’s heart seized.

‘I’ll make sure he does.’

The service station coffee was cold. Vrezh threw it out.

The turnoff to the shearing shed was unmarked, the route a zigzagging mess, but Vrezh had every turn memorised.

Outside the shed, his knees threatened to buckle as he stepped out of the car. He slammed the door, overcompensating.

Softie came to the doorway, the collar of his black military jacket folded to avoid the shaving cream that covered half his face. A straight razor hung in his hand. His pistol sat snug in his hip holster.

‘Vrezh *jan*. *Barev*.’ A long slow pause as Vrezh’s feet crunched over the gravel. ‘You are on your own this morning.’

Vrezh forced himself to look Softie in the eyes as they shook hands in the doorway, the typical greeting. Vrezh tried to remember if Softie always squeezed that hard.

‘Armen has the flu or something. Can’t even stand up.’ The words came out stiff. ‘He said I could help get the truck loaded.’

Normally he and Armen sat with Softie over a coffee and a few shots of cognac. Softie asked about their parents. They discussed the latest ASALA attacks in Madrid or Beirut.

Today Vrezh crossed straight to his workbench, feeling as though Softie could see through him.

From here his plan became less certain.

The best-case scenario involved Vrezh getting back into the Centura and driving away. That was the version he’d concentrated on. But to do that, things had to look natural. He couldn’t turn from his workbench and announce he was heading after five minutes.

Water splashed in the basin.

‘You are putting on the coffee, Vrezh?’

‘One minute, I need to check something ...’

Among the scattered mess, Vrezh twisted four wires together. It was a delicate task, the entirety of his plan. He focused his full attention on it, ensuring the bomb – adjusted to his own specifications – would do its job.

Suddenly Softie rushed toward him, his pistol trained on Vrezh.

‘Step back! Now!’

Vrezh took two long, quick strides away from the table. He raised his hands like he was in some stupid movie.

A rush of calm spread through his chest, like menthol. There were no more decisions to make. If he could run, he would. If not – well.

‘It is very convenient of you to arrive here alone, Vrezh.’

There was no light on the bomb to indicate it was working. It was too rudimentary. Vrezh focused on sliding his foot backward, bracing and, keeping his eyes on Softie, who had positioned himself in front of the worktable.

‘I was mistaken to think you could be relied on.’ Softie centred the Beretta on Vrezh’s chest. ‘But I never make the same mistake tw–’

Vrezh pivoted and leaped, feeling the momentary resistance of the window glass against his shoulder before its sudden release, a heartbeat before the silent blast of heat.

The shed lit up like a thousand terrible suns.

*

A stout nurse hovered over Vrezh, adjusting an IV.

‘Reg, you are one lucky man.’ Her strong Aussie accent, foreign and familiar. ‘If your brother hadn’t gotten you here so fast, you might have lost more than just your arm. He’s a real hero.’

The blurry outline of Armen and his father stood across the room, arms crossed high against their chests. His mother slumped in a plastic chair. ‘Property of Royal Canberra Hospital’ came into focus.

His brother’s eyes were as hard and mean as Vrezh had ever seen. *Don’t say a thing*, Armen’s look told him.

Vrezh didn't know what was going on. He hadn't expected to see Armen – or anyone – ever again.

'How does a barbecue just explode?' Their father paced the room, shouting, flinging his arms. 'We should sue the manufacturer, and this stupid friend of yours. Was *he* injured? Will *he* be here to take care of you?' The nurses told him to lower his voice.

Their parents hovered, their mother staying late each night, just as she did with Grandfather. After three days, their father returned to Sydney to reopen the jewellery store. Armen convinced their mother to rest at the hotel that evening.

'Why the fuck were you there alone?' That was Armen's opener, the plastic chair pulled against the bed.

Vrezh hadn't factored in the Rug King delivery van. That was how Armen got to him, the shed coming into view past the gum trees moments before the explosion ripped it apart.

His right hand ached, even though his hand, and everything below his bicep, was gone. Sliced almost clean through by a piece of metal siding. Otherwise, aside from cuts and burns, he was surprisingly uninjured. The bomb was directional, like a claymore mine. Softie had positioned himself right in front of it. *Very convenient*, in Softie's words.

'What happened?'

'Looked like a hunk of metal tore through your arm. I wrecked my good belt making a tourniquet.' Armen leaned in, cologne wafting. 'Why were you there alone?'

'I don't remember,' Vrezh whispered.

'Softie call you up, tell you to come alone? He was fed up with you.' Armen shook his head. 'Thinking you're smarter than everybody and then you go blow yourself up.'

'I thought we would plan another shooting.'

'Because of Vaocluse? Softie wanted a bigger statement. We'd been planning a bombing there before that damn team came in for the assassination.'

Vrezh's shock pulled his eyes wide, dropped his mouth into an open *O*.

'But you were behind ...'

Armen made as if to slap Vrezh, pulled back. 'Softie let you think that.'

The fog of Vrezh's mind rolled.

'Now I've got nothing!' His spittle hit Vrezh's face. 'You think I want to spend my life cleaning carpets and listening to guys at the ARF argue about who spent three bucks on peanuts?'

He looked toward the door, made sure no one was coming.

'I buried what was left of Softie, but you better hope no one reported that explosion to the cops.'

*

Grey rain poured. A metal spring in the tollbooth seat prodded Vrezh's flesh. The endless stream of traffic marked off the months and then years he spent waiting for the police to come asking about Softie.

Still now, when he closed his eyes, he saw himself twisting the wires.

He wondered if some Turkish conspirator had ever contemplated killing Talaat. If it would have made any difference.

He had to believe it would have.

The ache in his right arm was constant. Phantom pain, the doctors called it.

He'd survived, but only in body. The hospital bedside was the last time Armen spoke to Vrezh. Even at their grandfather's funeral, they kept their distance.

When Armenia declared independence, Armen left within days. Vrezh felt his brother's absence like a cavity in his heart.

He never saw Armen again.

Now, the traffic slowed. Tehlirian intruded on Vrezh's thoughts. He was back on Hardenbergstrasse, watching the tall, plain-faced Armenian head toward Talaat.

Vrezh glanced toward his hero, then turned away, just another Berlin pedestrian in 1921, stepping onto a cross street or into a shop, never hearing the shot.

If there had ever been justice, it was a fluke, an aberration. It shimmered like a mirage, disappearing as Vrezh reached for it.

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