

ARMENIAN-AMERICAN POET GIVES VOICE TO A LEGACY OF LOSS

By Eleanor Berry

When I noticed several slim books by David Kherdian on the shelves of the Oregon Poetry Collection at the State Library, my curiosity was aroused. His name was familiar, but I didn't remember reading his poetry.

I was immediately drawn to the delightful woodcut illustrations of a book titled *Country, Cat / City, Cat*. The woodcuts accompany short, haiku-like poems of domestic and wild animals through different seasons and in rural and urban settings. This little book is a collaborative work of Kherdian and his wife, artist Nonny Hogrogian.

Leafing through the other books by Kherdian on the shelf at the State Library, I found an autobiographical trilogy revisiting the poet's hometown of Racine, Wisconsin, and the community of first- and second-generation Armenian Americans in which he grew up.

Through Kherdian's poetry, I vicariously experienced his childhood with parents who had lost their homes, their homeland, and everyone close to them, and settled in the U.S. among fellow refugees from the Armenian genocide. As he puts it in a poem addressed "To My Sister," "A family is a strange thing when a living / racial embrace has been broken and the / earth or the world are no longer home."

That poem is from *Homage to Adana*, the first book in Kherdian's autobiographical trilogy. Adana is the birthplace of his father. In a short poem, "For My Father," the poet remembers their quarrels about the vegetable garden and the color to paint the fence, and wonders, "Why have I waited until your death / to know the earth you were turning / was Armenia, the color of the fence / your homage to Adana."

The second book in the trilogy, *I Remember Root River*, is filled with tributes to and laments for friends and elders from Kherdian's childhood and youth in Racine. Threading through them is the image of the river where, following minnows, he was led to "silt and mud hollows / of tadpoles and star- / flecked sun-spotted falls, / into a home I can / never leave."

In *Place of Birth*, the last volume of the trilogy, Kherdian follows the flow of memories to deeper recognitions. Several of its poems are written in the form of a breathlessly extending sentence, spilling over the lines—a form that embodies the jostling tumble of memories. In "Beneath the Tree," the memory of a mulberry tree beside the garage leads to an encompassing recollection: ". . . I remember / that we were poor and simple and / somehow alone though surrounded by / others like us, a family of people, / a race, a substance of days based on / a remembrance that was best forgotten / because of the anguish and loss"

While the poems of the autobiographical trilogy are soundings of the poet's and his family's past, those of *The Farm* are written out of intense attention to the present. The setting is a farm in Aurora, Oregon, owned by followers of an Armenian philosopher, G. I. Gurdjieff. In an introduction, Brother Jeremy Driscoll compares the dedicated life in the Benedictine monastery at Mount Angel Abbey to that at the Gurdjieff-inspired farm: both provide their members "with an atmosphere and a disciplined way of life in which they can be present to the present."

The poems of *The Farm* are rich in vivid perceptions. They also reflect struggle. In "I Ride the Red Tractor," the poet, surrounded by a flock of starlings as he drives a farm tractor, exclaims, "O if I could only be to bird and animal / red tractor or green / And come with them at will / across this vibrant, mysterious land" Kherdian, shadowed by his people's tragic past, must have found it hard to "be present to the present."