

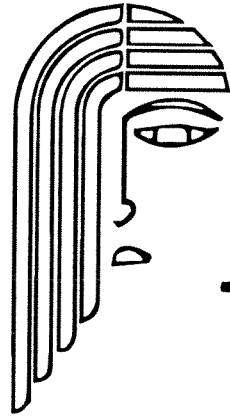
10 May 1993

Dear Harriett and Alan --

Enclosed is copy of PA's speech at Wellesley College on May 8 -- I thought you'd like to see it. She got a standing ovation!

Love,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to be 'Ley'.



A . I . W . A .

**"THE IDENTITY OF  
THE ARMENIAN WOMAN"**

Second Symposium and Annual Meeting  
Wellesley College, Wellesley, Massachusetts

Saturday, May 8, 1993

Sponsored by:  
Armenian International Women's Association

Speech delivered 8 May 1993  
Wellesley College  
AIWA Annual Symposium

## STONE STORIES

By Laura Kalpakian

I would like to thank Natalie and Cerise, the Armenian International Women's Association, for inviting me to speak today, to be included in this Symposium and to be honored as a person of achievement here in the midst of so many women of achievement. I am reminded of the words of that flinty New Englander, Nathaniel Hawthorne, who once said something to the effect that, as a novelist, he could all but hear his Puritan ancestors scoffing at him: You! A writer of stories! Why, you're no better than a fiddler!

Today at Wellesley we ask how can we maintain the integrity of our Armenian experience in the larger context of our lives as women. We inquire after our place not only in the community, but in the diaspora. In a larger context yet, we inquire after the place of the diaspora, not merely in history--the past--but in the future.

I am flattered to be here as part of the process of inquiry, these questions of identity, particularly as I am not wholly Armenian. My background is very strange and I've never met anyone else whose immediate family was both Mormon and Armenian. I do not speak Armenian, save for a few words--mostly connected with food. I do not read Armenian. I do not live in an Armenian community, or even near one. I live--as do we all--in the diaspora. My Armenian cousins all have last names like Bown and MacKellar and Donnell. My unmarried name was Johnson and I was married to a man named McCreary. No doubt many of you also have names like these in your families. My experience, however, may be unique in that I am Armenian by conscious choice.

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When I began to write (and when I began to publish--which, I must say, were not at all simultaneous events), I took my mother's maiden name, Kalpakian, for my own. Now, twenty years later, I understand that to adopt a name not your own is to assume an identity. More than that, to create an identity. In becoming Laura Kalpakian, I was coming to be a writer.

I took the name Kalpakian as an act of affection and respect for my grandparents who had four daughters and so, with my grandfather's death in 1963, the name vanished, or at least what we knew of it vanished. Like all Armenian families there are, there were, somewhere, once upon a time, cousins, perhaps, in any event, people who vanished or were lost, swallowed up in the cities of Europe. So I did indeed consciously hope that I could do my grandparents the honor of preserving their name, that it would live in my work, but I have no recollection of sweating out such a decision, gnashing intellectually over the implications of the choice. At the time I was too busy sweating out, gnashing over my fears that I would never be a writer at all. What would it matter what my name was, if I could not write?

To tell the story of my career from this vantage point, here before this group, the mere listing of the credits seems to testify to the inevitability of success. That is not the way it truly happened. Certainly it is not the way it felt. The sense of inevitability is part of the trouble--and the beauty--of telling stories. Family stories evolve from the happenstantial to the inevitable: words gradually accrue, congeal around a set of events, and with every telling the words grow harder and stronger, until the stories seem to be set in stone, to become stones, nuggets of family experience, modeled into words, cast in stone.

But to return to the question of my becoming Armenian by choice, as well as by blood, whatever the story may be, the truth is, I did this without very much gravity or forethought and

I asked no one's permission.

Had I asked my mother she would have granted permission instantly. My mother ought to be here today. She is truly an Armenian International Woman of Achievement. Born in Istanbul, she was an infant when, with her parents and four-year-old sister, she landed on these shores. And it is through her generosity of spirit--and her skills--that I can be here at all. When she and my father retired, they moved up to Washington State to help me and my children and they are staying with the children now so that I can come to Boston. Indeed, they have stayed with my children whenever I have had to travel. More than that, my mother typed every novel and story I wrote from the first time I set pen to paper, until 1985 when I got a typist. Last summer when that typist moved, we got a computer and my mother once again serves as my assistant. She is an artist at that keyboard. But up till 1985 she did all my work--in addition to her day job as a secretary to an orthopedic surgeon. To say that I wrote these many books and stories is not quite fair. I wrote and re-wrote. I continually write and re-write. My mother is fond of saying that in our family there are three things you can count on: death, taxes and revisions.

Had I asked my grandmother's permission to use the name Kalpakian, I don't know what she would have said. Probably she would have been aghast. After all, by this time, at long last, I had a husband. (I might add that this was to her everlasting joy. Those of you with old country mothers know whereof I speak.)

My grandmother would have been insistent that having finally got married, I ought to use my husband's name. She was very old country, not only in her respect for marriage, but in her respect for men--which was boundless. I often wonder how different that family would

have been if there had been a son amongst all those daughters. Make no mistake, my grandmother was of the Honor Thy Father School. At the same time, in my family--I suspect in many families--the power, the energy, the will, all emanated from the woman. My grandfather, a warm, wonderful man, enjoyed his patriarchal role, enjoyed sitting at the head of the table, wine glass in hand, making his usual toast--Welcome To Our Home--and we loved him. But we spoke always of Grandma's house and Grandma's car, and it was Grandma to whom we looked for all things. So had I asked my grandmother's permission to become Laura Kalpakian, her first thought would have been for the tender feelings of my husband, then of my father, and had I been able to convince her that the choice was immaterial to either of them, I believe she still would have been aghast.

My grandparents were the most assimilationist immigrants who ever drew breath. They were thrilled that their daughters all married men with conventional names, that the grandchildren had names like Jimmy and Patty and Nancy. Indeed, when they came to this country, Haigouhi Kulaksuzian Kalpakian quickly became Helen Clark Kalpakian, my grandfather, Haroutune, became Harry, my mother, Pakradouhi, became Peggy, so the bright bounce of names like Barbara and Ron and Richard must have been music to their ears. Had I asked my grandmother to use her Armenian name, she might have said -- What! You want to change your name back!

My grandparents had gone to such pains to assimilate. Perhaps the phrase is better put to say that they had gone to such pain. Such pain as is almost inconceivable. Still, they often told the story of their marriage, fleeing the old country, their arrival here, their hard work, their success. The story got told and re-told with a sort of funny aplomb, as though its conclusion had always been foreordained. Everyone in this room has heard this story, or one just like it. There

may be those of you who have told this story.

It goes something like this: Ah yes, we came with nothing, the clothes on our backs. We had no English. We had no home. We had your uncle (or your aunt or your cousin), but we worked hard and became successes, and look at us: Nice home, Nice car, Nice family. Fine lives. Swimming pool. Great Success.

Everyone who has heard, or told this story knows it is a true story, but it's not the truth. Not the whole truth and not even the whole story.

These stories we have heard and told all have a kind of smooth rotundity to them, inevitable as the fiddler's tune, all the roughness, the sharp stab of fear, the bright points of pain erased, worn down as the story is fashioned over time, as though the happy conclusions were predestined. In short, as if these stories were the product of art, not history. History has no editor. History is messy and sprawling and painful and chaotic. Art might strive to simulate the messy, the sprawling, the pain, but art cannot be chaotic. Chaos has no place there. For these stories to emerge, the history must be drained from them; the events must be drained of chaos, of random terrors, of horror, of sheer overwhelming fear. The historical questions facing the Kalpakians were not--would they enjoy success in Los Angeles? Would they eventually have the fine home on Olympic Boulevard and the four lovely daughters? But would they survive at all?

According to my grandmother's story, her father brought his family out of a mountain town in Turkey, down to the city of Adana in 1895, following a wave of destruction by the Turks. He brought them into the city to save them. Michael Arlen's book *PASSAGE TO ARARAT* suggests this did save them. Saved some of them anyway. Saved my grandmother who, by 1917

believed herself to be the sole surviving member of her family. She later found her brother, but that is yet another story which time forbids telling here. She was an orphan, living and teaching in the Adana Girls' Seminary, run by American missionaries. I have her graduation picture--not the least bit like the graduation pictures of her grandchildren, Patty, Nancy, Jimmy and so on. These girls in 1917, all but one, dressed in white, their dark hair smoothly drawn down around faces which regard the world solemnly, or wistfully, some suspiciously. My grandmother actually has the most lively expression in the group: a ghost of a smile hovers visibly at her lips. The smile shows spirit, I think, especially since she is standing beside the only girl dressed in black--a Turkish girl, the sole Turkish student in the school.

The spirit evident in Haigouhi's graduation smile allowed her to decline an arranged marriage and to choose my grandfather (who had equally declined attempts at arranged marriages; his family, so that story goes, was not joyed-over to see him marry a penniless orphan). My grandparents had met when he was a ribbon clerk, his family having left all their prosperous life in Mersin, had moved to Adana in the wake of persecution. The groom had to ask the headmistress of the school for the bride's hand in marriage. The headmistress agreed, but he was obliged to pay Haigouhi's still outstanding debts to the school. No Armenian churches were allowed, so an Orthodox priest came to the groom's family home to perform the wedding. The headmistress and two teachers were the guests. The groom was 31. The bride was 16. The year was 1917.

Imagine the questions facing these newlyweds--not where would they put the wedding china, but how would they live? Would they live? Imagine the fear that drove them to cross the border into Syria and to stay for only four months. Imagine the fear that drove them back



to Adana, because by 1918, their first daughter was born there. The questions before Haroutune and Haigouhi Kalpakian were these: How would they survive? How could they protect their daughter? Where would they live? Should they leave? Where should they go? Where could they go? Where would they be permitted to go?

Imagine the questions, the fears that took them to Greece and thence, to the United States. They arrived at Ellis Island a day late--the quota had been filled. They were turned away. They had to sail back to Greece. To wait.

Imagine the terror, the strain, the loss of all hope in Piraeus, Greece in 1923. Imagine the heat. The political uncertainty rumbling, erupting all over the mideast in the wake of the war. Imagine your money running out, the necessity of finding money to pay passage for yet another ship. Yet another trans-Atlantic crossing. Pregnant with yet a third child, when you had two already, a 5-year-old and a baby. Would the house on Olympic Boulevard have seemed foreordained--the nice house, the nice car and so on, would those things have seemed inevitable upon your merely working for them?

Or, would it not have been more clearly foreordained, in the words of 1923's Nobel Prize winner, that the center cannot hold--and things fall apart.

Imagine, then, the long voyage back to America six months later, the joy at being admitted this time, riding the train across the whole expanse of this vast country. Imagine, to eyes accustomed to the narrow twisting streets of Turkish, Syrian and Greek cities, what Oklahoma must have looked like.

Imagine the surprise of people whose necks still bore the metaphoric imprint of the soldier's bootheel, imagine their astonishment to land, feet first, as it were, in Los Angeles in

1923--the broad boulevards, the bright boosterism of a city already self-consciously styling itself the dream factory of America. Would not the dreams of these people be equally shot through with fear, a sense of desperation, terror of failure. After all, these were people of the diaspora. To be of the diaspora means you have no country, no old country. You have only the new country. You have no past to return to, only the future to fashion. No possibilities before you save survival, or the unthinkable opposite: failure.

My grandmother, who had another baby three months after their arrival, spoke English, yes, but my grandfather, the breadwinner, did not. Any of you who have ever tried to live in a foreign country where you do not speak the language know very well the limits of goodwill. Goodwill can contribute to understanding, but it cannot suffice for it. Imagine the obligations incumbent upon making a living, lacking the language. The daily fear. The daily strain. But from this fear and strain, there came to be fashioned in our family a story which was told, and re-told, over and over again. This story sits like a rock in the family stream, a rock with its own color and weight and solidity, its pleasing shape, unchanged by the cascade of daily life that rolls over it.

This story goes like this:

My grandparents first home in America was a tiny house out back of the home of my grandmother's sister and her husband, the Boyds. (They had Anglicized their name too--from Boyajian.) The Boyds had come to America in 1907. John Boyd ran a chain of cigar stands on the beach and in order that my grandfather could have work of some kind, they taught him just enough English that he could say, literally, cigar? cigarette? candy bar? Lucky Strike? Also, it helped if people would point. One day a young woman came by the cigar stand. She did not

want a cigar, cigarette or candy. She wanted him to make change. He could not understand her; what was she saying? Exasperated, she cried out, You Dumbbell! And of course, he could not understand this either. He said: cigar, cigarette, candy, Lucky Strike? When he came home, my grandmother's seminary English was not equal to Dumbbell either. It was left to John Boyd to tell them what Dumbbell meant. The story is always told with a ripple of laughter at the end, laughter from the storyteller, laughter from the listeners.

This story was so often repeated that when, having slid myself into the name Laura Kalpakian that I would wear for the rest of my life, as I was patiently teaching myself to write, I took this story and two others of the family liturgy, I took these stories and made of them fiction. Certainly this was a good way to begin. After all, I did not have to think up the stories. They were given to me. They had been given me all my life. I wrote these stories up. I wrote them down. I re-wrote and revised them. Eventually, I published them. I have never put them all three altogether, one following the other, as I'd originally intended, but I published them separately, this particular story appearing as THE LAND OF LUCKY STRIKE.

THE LAND OF LUCKY STRIKE, as fiction, does not conclude with the ripple of laughter assumed, demanded in the story. It is not funny on paper. It has its moments of humor--I cannot write without humor--but it is not a funny story and it does not conclude with the young lady calling my grandfather a dumbbell. It ends ruminating about what it means to be a foreigner forever. It wonders what it will cost to belong. It ends, in short, with the pain and the terror that the family story (smooth and rounded as it has become) would not allude to. It ends with the ambivalence, the resolve of refugees determined to assimilate.

So then too, imagine Harry and Helen, these ardent assimilationists struggling with their

English in Los Angeles, their home a sort of island of Armenian in a sea of English. Imagine the fear of failure rampant when their eldest daughter's kindergarten teacher comes to them and says their daughter is having trouble in school. Trouble with the language. (This story too is passed all through the family.) They are told by the teacher, that if they wish their daughter to succeed in school, they must speak only English at home.

I might add here as a postscript that this daughter grew up to be a language teacher, so perhaps the kindergarten teacher was not such an authority as my grandparents believed. Nonetheless, this visit struck terror in their breasts. Their one wish was to be American, to have their children be American, to embrace all things American, and if it meant that they had to rip the very tongues from their heads and refit new English-speaking tongues between their teeth, then so be it. Imagine the loss, the pain, as the sea of English grew bigger, the island of Armenian dwindled, no longer the house, but the bedroom, probably diminishing eventually to the bed alone.

In their ardor for assimilation, my grandparents did it. Indeed, as my grandparents purged the old country from every aspect of their lives, food alone was spared. Everything else was refitted to the American mold, including their religion.

They began going to Protestant churches. Both my grandparents were buried by Orthodox priests, but as we all stood by their graves, not a single person among the family understood a word those priests said. The Orthodox Church was not part of any of our lives, except for special occasions which stand out vividly in memory because they were special occasions: the incense, the gold, the heavy smell of flowers from the altars, the drip and scent of candles, the tiny threads of smoke floating over the votives, the shine and rustle of the priests' robes, the odd

un-Latinate language, the dim interior of the church, so very different from the bright Mormon churches where my siblings and I had been taken (at first taken, then merely dropped off) every Sunday since I was ten years old. I obediently went to the Mormon Church till I was 17 and then I refused ever to go again.

Indeed, all three of my aunts are still active in their respective protestant churches. In 1944, my mother was a student at USC and teaching Sunday School at the Wilshire Methodist Church when she met my father, at a USO dance on a Saturday night. He asked for her address, which she would not give. No Armenian girl gives a Navy man her address. She said if he wanted to see her again, he would have to come to the Sunday School class the next day at the Wilshire Methodist Church.

I wonder if she knew he was a Mormon.

My father comes from a tribe of raw-grained, rural, backwoods, up-country Idaho Mormons, half of them truly, positively Latter Day Saints and the other half accomplished bullshit artists. My dad is the eldest of five and had, literally grown up in a log cabin at one time. When World War II broke out, he had just finished his degree at Utah State University and then he joined the Navy and was stationed at Long Beach, California--never again to return to Utah or Idaho to live. Until they moved up to Washington State to join me, my parents always lived in Southern California.

Los Angeles, my grandparents' house, was truly the center of our young lives. Every Sunday we would go there, driving from the San Fernando Valley over the Sepulveda Pass to Los Angeles. We had Sunday dinner at Grandma's. We sat all around the huge table and watched my grandfather lift his wineglass and say Welcome to Our House. (The very words I

still use with guests in my home.) We drove to Grandma's after having spent Sunday morning in the Mormon Church (kids, at least, were obliged to go to the Mormon Church) where we were told that drinking wine is a sin, absolutely forbidden, where we were given graphic, grisly descriptions of the hideous afterlife awaiting non-Mormons, including my mother, who in her steadfast, well-mannered way, refused ever to join their church.

My grandparents' house on Olympic Boulevard was qualitatively different from ours, from the homes of any of my aunts. Theirs and ours were all practical, efficient tract homes with the unvarnished ugliness that only California in the Fifties could muster and perfect. At my grandmother's house, the contrasts were always more intense: outside it was blindingly white stucco. Inside, the windows were curtained, it seemed dark and cool, the carpets were dark patterns, the floors creaked, the passageways were all rounded, and furniture all huge and dark, set about in rooms that seemed inexpressibly vast. To go to my grandmother's house was like going, not over the Sepulveda Pass into Los Angeles, but going over the present and into the past. My grandmother's white stucco house with its dim interior seemed snipped, cut away, apart from post-war LA, pasted there perhaps, as in a scrapbook, but not integral to the pages. It was like going to a foreign country.

And so it must have certainly seemed to my father, emigrating as he did from the backwoods of Idaho. Los Angeles must have been a wonder and a mystery. Here he met my mother, Peggy Kalpakian, daughter of a Los Angeles Armenian family, and here he met his best friend, best man at his wedding, Sid Finegold, the son of Los Angeles Jews. As my father is not given to story-telling, I can only imagine how vast and foreign and intriguing must have seemed his sweetheart's home, his best friend's home, to a man of his frontier background. I try to

imagine how strange must have seemed the Jewish and Armenian kitchens to a man brought up like my father, amongst the Mormons with their traditional hostility to anything foreign.

In retrospect though, my father may have had more in common with his best friend and his sweetheart than he knew. The Mormons have been called, correctly, a peculiar people. In my estimation they are very like the Jews in the sense that to be a good Mormon, like being a good Jew, is not simply a religion one practices on the Sabbath, but a pattern of daily living and thinking, a veritable garment, like their temple clothes, worn to identify and indemnify and protect. Like the Jews, and the Armenians, the Mormons have recognizable enemies and an embattled homeland. Now, of course, they are well known for their conservative politics, but there was a time the Mormons took on the United States Army. They were ready to fight to maintain control of land they had settled. The Golan Heights in the Wasatch Mountains.

As with the Jews and Armenians, there are, I think, identifiable Mormon faces, an audible Mormon accent. Every summer when our family made those dreadful station wagon journeys back to Utah to attend Johnson family picnics, I for one, stood there in the bevy of their pink, fair faces and heard their Mormon accents, felt a deep affection for them, but knew that I would be forever foreign here.

I felt much less foreign at the Armenian picnics, where my grandmother would take us once a year. This is odd, really, because at least the Mormons spoke English.

I had been taught one Armenian word for courtesy's sake: inch-bess-ess and my grandmother would lead me about, talking to old people (they all seemed old to me) who would smile, pinch my cheek, and talk above my head, their foreign words falling over me, their laughter rippling like the smoke from the shish kebab fires, wafting like the steam off the coffee,

the music, floating, notes twanging from the strings of strange instruments, the music, even the spirited pieces, aching with some ineffable sadness conveyed in the singing, if not in the song. All this compounded with the heat and the dust, the smell of dry grass crushed underfoot, the eucalyptus, caught, brewed somehow with the scent of my grandmother's Coty facepowder and her Emeraud cologne, the peppery smell of my grandfather's Old Spice. Marquees were set up to protect against the baking sunshine. The children all wore shorts. The men all wore vests. The women all wore dresses that buttoned down the front and I can still feel their buttons punching my cheeks as they caught me in their embrace and pulled me up against their bosoms. In memory, all these scenes play out against the sound of a fountain dripping somewhere and are stippled about with red geraniums, those twisted, scraggly unlovely red geraniums whose scent is so pervasive in the California summer and the relentless sunlight.

But is it memory?

I believe that memory and imagination are not separate countries, like America and Turkey, but neighboring provinces, provinces who share more than a border, who share the same coastline. I believe that the same currents, the flotsam and jetsam that lap at imagination's shore are borne on the tides of memory. And vice versa--those wrecks that land on memory's coast drift in on currents of imagination. I wish there were a word for this brackish brew of imagination and memory, but there isn't. In terms of the English language they remain unfairly distinct. Memory draws about itself the veil of respectability, propriety. Memory suggests the verifiable, wears the assumption of truth. Imagination, as the Hawthorne quote implies--imagination reeks of the frivolous, the frippery of pretense and fiction. Mere entertaining lies.

What this really means is that words fail me. Words will fail all of us finally. We cannot



rely wholly on words to convey these indelible impressions.

In some ways I have come to understand all this better since I have become a mother. When my sons were babies, I began finally to understand the depth, the why and wherefore of my attachment to my grandmother with whom we lived throughout my infancy and had daily contact till I was about three years old. I believe that these pre-verbal commitments, the ones we make with our hands and our senses, constitute the love beyond words. The love beyond words is more binding than the vows we've spoken with the men we've married. These are the connections that pass from the hands of mothers and grandmothers to the sons and daughters. Manual labor, if you will, the manual labor of love. Look at your hands and think of the manual labor of love they have done. This manual labor of love defies words.

In defying words, then, is memory lost? Must we accede to such loss? Accept it? Perhaps.

I wanted to share with my sons, who are one-quarter Armenian, some ribbon of their heritage beyond those family stories, beyond the family pictures. I wanted that ribbon of connection to be able to flutter recognizably across their hands when they grow to be men. Living as we do, as I have said, in a town where there are only three other Armenians, I took my sons to the Greek Church picnics. There was certainly no dust, no geraniums, no eucalyptus. These picnics are held in the church parking lot and the marquees are up to protect against the expectation of rain, rather than against the heat, and no one wears Coty or Emereaud anymore. But--the faces are there. The smells are there. The music is there. The smoke from the shish kebab fires floats over and wafts around with Greek, a language we don't understand. For me, the Greek picnics are like sitting in a dream where you are not expected to know people and

don't care if you do or not.

On the strength of those associations, I took my sons one Sunday to the Greek church. It was not dark like St. James in Los Angeles, but the votives and incense smells were there, and the voices. The people were uniformly warm and pleasant, but finally the language defeated us. We understood almost nothing of what was going on. We have no Greek. We have no Armenian. The language defeated me in this attempt to convey to my boys something of the content and texture of my own childhood.

But if memory is thus imprisoned in the fortress of language--for me, the English language--I yet may be able to convey something of memory through food--the content, texture, shape and smell of food. Food is, after all, a manual labor of love as well. And if memory is chained to language, then, perhaps then, the stories can serve where memory fails. Stories rely on language, yes, but they are not shackled.

A true story does not have to be a memory.

Stories have their own content, but they accrete texture over time. Words get ground up, rounded, polished into stories until they lie, smooth as stones, polished stones at the bottom of consciousness. Daily life ripples over these stone-stories like water. The cascade of daily life moves swiftly--indeed, accelerates with time, as you grow older--but these stone-stories, once they have achieved their shape, they hardly move at all. Anyone in my family could tell you the dumbbell story. The exact same story.

This dumbbell story may eventually find a larger venue than my family, or the page. My agent recently offered THE LAND OF LUCKY STRIKE story, with its companion pieces to producers who were impressed, intrigued with the notion of a Christmas special woven from

them. They asked, however, if the nationality could be changed. I said no.

But it occurred to me, with some sadness, that if the producers wished to make the story more current, that could certainly be done--and done without damage to the hard kernel of truth at the story's interior. THE LAND OF LUCKY STRIKE takes place, Christmas 1923, the historical moment when my grandparents first arrived in Los Angeles. But does it not say something of the spewing, messy, sprawling chaos of history that nearly 75 years later this same story could be re-enacted in the present. Updated easily: An Armenian immigrant with scarcely any English, working, in a 7-11, is asked to make change. He cannot understand and so, gets called dumbbell--or in 1994, worse. Perhaps in 1994, he gets robbed.

This character could be in Los Angeles in 1994, having fled the conflict that rages--even as we speak here--the terrible, the ongoing anguish inflicted, the suffering of millions affected by the Armenian-Azerbaijan war. The family the character stays with in Los Angeles could have been there since 1989, having left Armenia after the devastating earthquake of 1988. Make no mistake, the whole dumbbell story could be replayed out today, or tomorrow, or the day after that.

And, there is even the chance that my immigrant character, this mythical 1994 character, might be someone known to me. Such is the nature of the diaspora. Indeed, such is the strength of the diaspora: in being Armenian, we are, in fact, citizens of the world, citizens, you might say, of somewhere else.

That was the phrase Nathaniel Hawthorne used when he returned to his native Massachusetts after many years living abroad, in England and Italy. He said, with some sadness: I have become a citizen of somewhere else.

The phrase has always appealed to me and, given the odd stew of my background, my travels, the swath of my friendship and interests, I've taken comfort from Hawthorne in that phrase. I too am a citizen of somewhere else. And today, like Hawthorne, I am here as a storyteller, perhaps no better than a fiddler. We storytellers think anecdotally and metaphorically and so perhaps I can best illustrate my notion of the strength of the diaspora, my sense of what Armenians have to give the world besides the wail of genocide, my convictions of history, my hopes for the future, with a story. Another story.

In 1981 I was living with my husband in Honolulu. I had only the one son at the time and he was two. My husband was an oceanographer. He was doing research with a group of scientists at the University of Hawaii and one afternoon in August he called home and behind his voice I could hear all kinds of laughter and roistering. It turned out that the Soviet Union's research vessel had come into the Port of Honolulu. The Soviet scientists had called University of Hawaii and invited their oceanographers to come on board the research vessel. Remember, that in 1981 the Soviets, were still fighting the Afghans and indeed, America had refused to participate in the 1980 Moscow Olympics to punish the Soviet Union for fighting the Afghans, in a bit of political judgment I've never understood. In short, the cold war--which we, in this room, have all grown up with--was in its usual fine fettle and so the invitation to come on board the Soviets' ship was an unusual one.

The American scientists had to come on board their ship because the Soviet scientists and crew were not allowed off their boat. My husband said he and the other oceanographers had been there all afternoon, drinking vodka, talking science. The party was just warming up. I was to get a babysitter for the boy and come down to the harbor--and to bring lots of women.

Obligingly I made a few phone calls and found a babysitter for my son and then with some girlfriends, drove down to the wharf. I'd asked my husband how I would know the ship and he said, oh, you'll know it; it's berthed next to the Kanekheoke, which was the University of Hawaii's research ship. Indeed I did know it. The Kanakehoke looked like a plug-ugly tugboat next to this gleaming Queen Mary of a research vessel. My girlfriends and I just wandered on; no one said a word to us (I guess no sailors under any flag ever threw a bunch of women off a ship), and finally we found my husband and the men from the lab--and they were all of course having a wonderful time, and indeed the party was revving up--with music and laughter, many of the crew and scientists on the ship were performing, singing, dancing or playing something. Lots of them had brought instruments.

My husband introduced us to Sergei, who spoke English, the only one who spoke fluent English. Sergei served happily as translator for everyone. These men were generous, courteous, downright courtly; they asked us to dance in an old-fashioned way. They showed pictures of their families and gave away cigarettes and candy and liquor--and to this day I still have little pins and mementoes of the Moscow Olympics, which I doubt few Americans have. These were given me, given all of us, by the Soviet scientists. As the various performers came on, Sergei told us a bit of their backgrounds, what they did on the ship, and so on.

Then there came up to sing, a swarthy man of my own generation; he had a full beard, dark eyes, thick brows and high nose. He stood and sang the saddest song I have ever heard. Everyone who had been cheering and clapping time for the other singers and dancers and musicians, quieted and Sergei whispered to me the man was singing about the sadness of his people, the losses, the heartbreaking separations. Sergei said he was a surgeon, fulfilling state

service on his vessel. He was an Armenian.

Really? I said, I am Armenian. And I told him my name. The name not that I was born with or married to, but the name I had chosen.

When this man finished singing, nothing would do but that Sergei should introduce us. He did so, of course, in Russian and when Sergei finished his explanation, this man's face lit. Never in my life has a stranger looked at me with such affection, with such warmth, and happiness. And from the depth of all those church picnics, from the smoke and the Old Spice and the dust, the heat, the geraniums, from the smell of the coffee and old women pulling me up against the buttons on their dresses, from all of that I drew the one word my grandmother had taught me to use on these ceremonial occasions, and I said.

INCH-bess-es.

He pulled me into his embrace, called me his sister. This man sailing under the hammer and sickle of the Soviet Union embraced me, my husband, my friends. And it was from that moment that the party, the camaraderie, the connections across political boundaries truly began.

It turned out that the following night the sailors were allowed off the ship and this Armenian surgeon insisted that he should cook us dinner. He must cook Armenian food for me, my husband, my son and the other scientists. Through the translator I wrote down everything he asked me to buy at the store--he would pay us back. No, we would not hear of it. He would do the cooking and we would all contribute something. The party was to be in our friend Joel's apartment. Joel himself is French and we were all living that summer in faculty housing at the University of Hawaii, which, if you have ever been there, you know it is really sort of international intellectual slum. But that following night, the children of the faculty housing had

got up a play, Cinderella, to be presented in the dry field beside the garage.

I asked the Soviet scientists to come in time for the play, and they did. We all stood in the parking lot and watched, this weed-strewn theater, where the children played out the story of Cinderella, a story so well worn, so well known that the words were not necessary at all--especially when everyone in the play is under the age of nine. After the play, we all went to Joel's flat, borrowed tables, which we lined up end to end and everyone brought something. The Armenian surgeon cooked the meal, the Soviet scientists brought fruit and vodka and wine and musical instruments. It was a summer night in August, in Honolulu, the beer was cold, we had music and laughter, the two universal languages. (There is another universal language, math--but math, mercifully, got banished for the night!) The less universal languages collided oddly. I put my faltering schoolgirl French up against the Soviet French. French is Joel's native language and he would translate. Some of the Soviets had halting English and we were all eager to learn a few words of Russian.

Fifteen of us sat around those tables. The Russians stood, one by one and offered toasts. I stood too, raised my glass, and echoing my old grandfather, dead nearly twenty years, I said: Welcome to my country. We all stood up and offered toasts, more than once as the evening wore on. Uniformly we raised our glasses in salute to the hope that the peace and camaraderie and the affection created there tonight, in the middle of the Pacific, would be a harbinger for the future, for the possibilities of the future, for the hope that our children could one day meet as friends, as comrades across political boundaries.

We were so moved in the course of these toasts to peace and possibility, that we wept. We believed it might be possible, but we did not--children of the cold war, all of us--believe it

was likely. And would we have believed, had someone said, whispered there amongst the plumeria, in a mere nine years Karl Marx's prophecy will come to pass--the Soviet State will wither away--though not at all in the way Marx predicted. The Soviet Union would be dissolved. These men would not be Soviet citizens. They would be, once again, Russians and Armenians and Ukrainians and whatever else they were. All of us there that night would have been incredulous. How, in 1981, could you foresee those events of 1989 and 1990. How could anyone have guessed 1989 would come to be like 1789: not perhaps, the turn-of-the-century, but the end of the era.

There is but one continued, ever-proven and reliable truth in history: the end of one era is the beginning of another. The people living through it can only see or feel or respond to the end, to the notion of loss, to the sprawl and mess and chaos of history. And so, given the sprawl and mess and chaos, the bloody and brutal events in the former Soviet Union, the former Yugoslavia, in Armenia and Azerbaijan, I wonder--where is that Armenian surgeon now? The man who, on the strength of my single Armenian word, embraced me and mine. Where is he? Where is his wife whose picture he showed? Where are the sons he had so hoped would meet my boy?

It is not impossible that this surgeon might have fled, become a refugee, that lacking English, he could conceivably be behind the counter of a 7-11 selling slurpees in L.A.

It is, equally, not impossible, indeed, it is more likely that those hands that clutched mine, that made the Armenian dinner, manual labor of love that August night in Honolulu, that those hands are now cutting flesh and dressing wounds, that this surgeon is working amongst the dying, the victims, the soldiers, the maimed, the wounded of the Armenian-Azerbaijan war. I pray that



he is not one of the wounded. I pray that his wife and sons are not amongst the victims. I wonder--does he ever think back to an evening, now twelve years ago, when a single word of Armenian united Soviet citizens with the French and the Americans, when we stood around a table, with trade winds blowing through the open windows, and raised our glasses to the wish for peace.

We have not got the wish for peace. The world has changed, but peace has not come with that change. The end of one era is the beginning of another and we here in this room--adults all, values shaped and formed--we are probably only conscious of what has been lost, or changed, or left behind. We are, in that regard, time's refugees. Our children are time's assimilationists. They will be assimilated into the future. We will be stranded eventually in the past.

As a mother, I am curious about the world in which my sons will be men. In the year 2000, my eldest boy will be 21. My youngest will be 17. Seventeen years old at the century's dawn! They will be adults in 2015 when the genocide will commemorate its centenary.

For me, it is crucial that my sons greet the year 2015, one hundred years after the Armenian genocide, with something besides the wail. The wail is important. I do not dispute that. But the wail is a sort of single note in a world that will be symphonic with complexity. I have to give them more than that, a fiddler's tune at least. Something more than a one-note anguished cry.

I have given them, already, the manual-labor-of-love, those pre-verbal commitments when they were babies. I have given them the smooth round polished stone-stories current in our family, and in doing so, though they may not know it, I have given them tools. Awareness of

their Armenian heritage--beyond the genocide--will be a most useful tool for the world in which they will be men.

Why? Remember it was the single Armenian word of greeting, INCH-BESS-ESS, the only word I had, that united those Soviet citizens with the Americans and the French. The single word united that surgeon and me, not in a community, but in the diaspora. As a citizen of the diaspora, one becomes a citizen of somewhere else, and in doing so, of necessity, one creates community.

As we move toward the next hundred years--years, we in this room, will not live to see--history will mandate that very nearly everyone will become a citizen of somewhere else. History will see to it that the importance of one's country will wane and correspondingly, the importance of one's community will strengthen. I believe countries with homogenous population will succumb to mass migrations made possible by technology, made imperative by politics. History will require these homogenous populations to change irrevocably, with the influx of new diasporas. These new diasporas have already altered the complexion of cities like London and Paris and Vancouver and Los Angeles. Two blocks from my grandmother's Olympic Boulevard address, all the signs are now written in English--and Vietnamese. At their old address, the signs are in English and Korean.

In the world in which my sons are men, I expect diasporas will fan out all across the globe, not merely those traditional diasporas, those peoples persecuted, punished, starved, beaten, denied, reviled, maimed and finally exiled: the Jews, the Armenians, the Irish, the Chinese, the Indians, the Africans and so on; indeed, we and these other peoples will be at a tremendous advantage in the world that is to come. We are educated for this brave new world. We are

experienced. For two thousand years Armenians have been experienced in the diaspora. Our sons and daughters, young as they are, have 2000 years of experienced education in how to be citizens of somewhere else--which is to say, citizens of the future. This experience will be priceless to them in the next hundred years.

The diaspora endows Armenians with a complex identity, complex knowledge and a complex tradition. These are the very tools essential for the future. Not tidy homogeneity, but the ability to lead, to understand, to educate others, how to live in the diaspora, how to be a nation, but not a country, how to be a citizen of somewhere else. How to help others navigate through the seas we have charted--hugging the shores of memory and imagination. If we do not endow our children with this complex knowledge, we have done them--and the world they will live in--a disservice. If we give them only the single note, the wail of genocide, we condemn them to do nothing but cry, and remember. I want more for my sons.

I say, let us give these children--and their children--what Armenian women have always known: how to preserve their identity when they have lost their country. How to preserve their families when they have lost their men. How to preserve their integrity when they have lost their dignity. We have all been refugees, citizens of somewhere else; we have all endured the wreck of memory, and washed up on the shores of imagination. Armenian women have always used their hands in the manual labor of love and we have learned--and our children must learn and teach others--how to preserve, to connect, to mortar memory with imagination, to form those smooth rounded stories, hard as stones, light as breath, that travel with us always, undeclared at any border.