

# The Daydreaming Boy

Vahé Tcheubjian is an upstanding, unremarkable member of the Armenian community of Beirut in the 1960s. He and his wife attend concerts, dinners, partake of the sophisticated, continental culture that marked pre-civil war Beirut as a cosmopolitan capital on the Mediterranean, the "Paris of the Middle East." But inside, he is in turmoil-wracked by memories of the escape from the campaign of genocide, the years spent in an Armenian orphanage, the brutalities of his fellow orphans, ferocious and desperate and unloved. Vahé seeks refuge in an outrageous and graphic fantasy life that flirts dangerously with emotional catastrophe, just as the Beirut he has come to adopt as his home edges toward destruction.

## Reviews

"Beautiful and disturbing...dazzling and disquieting."—*Los Angeles Times*

"Beautiful, brutal and unsettling until the end...Marcom's seamless, ethereal prose is suffused with raw emotion; there is heart-break on every page, but also hope."—*San Francisco Chronicle*

"Early on in this elegant, penetrating novel, middle-aged Vahé asks 'How did I become this sort of man?' Marcom (author of the well-received *Three Apples Fell from Heaven*) supplies an answer with steely delicacy...[Marcom's] writing is mellifluous...poetically inflected...The shadow of impending violence troubles the calm, but it is the grim reality of what has already happened that is most harrowing—the evil that Vahé must confront each day, as much as he might try to make himself more comfortable in the world."—*Publishers Weekly*

"Marcom's much acclaimed debut novel, *Three Apples Fell from Heaven*, was praised for both its beautiful prose and the casual candor with which it depicted the horrors of the 1915-17 Armenian genocide. Her follow-up, dealing with the persistent emotional aftermath of the genocide, likewise deserves praise for its fluid prose and haunting imagery, which now simultaneously articulate painfully clear memory and blurred, often brutal fantasy. Evocative, unsettling, beautiful."—*Booklist (starred review)*

"In Marcom's novel, the past returns in intermittent blasts, like power surges traveling down the neural pathways."—*The Seattle Times*

"It's a stunning portrait of war's bleak inheritance. Despite the grueling subject matter, Micheline Aharonian Marcom's prose spans the full range of human emotion with spellbinding and

luminous beauty. The Daydreaming Boy is dreamlike - surreal, disturbing and stunningly beautiful by turn - but its final effect is one of awakening. As the pieces of the puzzle fall together, the picture that emerges is not just of one man but of the vast machine of conflict and war that has made (or unmade) him. Marcom's astonishing achievement is that this novel contains enough sadness to crush all hope but enough startling beauty and strength to ignite it all over again."—***Rocky Mountain News***

## Excerpt

–XVIII–

I walk around in my mind like a man walks across an open field. I am slow and deliberate and watching my boots disappear into the sedge appear and then lift my eyes because it is raining now and the trees in the distance are moving swiftly because it is windy and I am slowly lifting my boots, careful, deliberate and everything is green in my mind and still I lose my footing, the man stumbles into a concealed grass-hole and I see the sea as I first glimpsed her as a small boy: the train passing through the tunnel, the turn round the bend of the mountains and the vast blue belt that stretched out in front of us boys, out into infinity beyond the train windows and the city at the base of the mountains. We strained against the windows, we pressed our faces to the glass, one of the boys yells out ‘See the New Jerusalem!’ and the train makes its descent toward the blue expanse marked on all sides by lighted bonnets. (We at first thought these white apparitions were thousands of the dead come to meet us, the martyrs from the old place, and when we could see that the blue was water, one of the boys yells out ‘See they’re Fish’ and I imagined for many kilometers that the waters were filled to the brim like a closed barrel. As we made the final descent into the city the waves emerged from the sea, having been there always, my vision now making them into what they were.)

This picture of the sea, the sea when she was foreign to me, is the earliest picture I can find, I press into my mind but there is nothing before that descent into blue—I cannot remember the interior, the twin towns of Kharphert and Mezre in old Turkey, the train leaving the station in Eregli, the mule ride from Kharphert over land (for weeks) to Eregli; the boys’ first trip on the metal moving machine. During our years of schooling at the Nest we were told the stories of before, of the boys from Kharphert orphanage, the Danish House, arrived in this place (the desert exodus, extracted fingernails, our fathers in piles). As for records there are none: I am Vahé or I am not and it is of no matter, the fruit is on the vine and it ripens and eat it up, be a good boy. As for the histories (the desert exodus, extracted fingernails, our fathers in piles) they are as foreign to me as any foreign country: my life began with the sea’s panorama as the train wound its way down the mountains of the Lebanon into the city of Beirut. I press into my mind but there is nothing before that descent into blue, the rain abates, the wind is even now and the man walks on.

[You wanted one of your seven children to live; you loved them. Baba was killed already, they took him with the other men of Kharphert and burned him in the konak and bludgeoned him to death who cared to spend a bullet on an Armenian dog. You were acquainted with the Danish lady Miss Peterson at the orphanage and you gave over your boy and you did walk on. He cried when he was given over to the stranger and your scent and skin and your teat between his lips (your breast which made the world) were missing to him and he made a ruckus. You walked

on with your clan toward the Der-el-Zor (you walked away from him and so the world). I don't imagine the instance of your death, Mother, and I don't oblige you, even in my imagination, to lament your seventh son. I am schooled in the dark hunger and I know it leaves the heart a dark and open field; in that place bargains are made, calculations of children are made, and you walk on, as I do, goodbye Vosto: here bread is more than blood.]

I am on a train moving down the desiccated mountainside to the city where I now live. My memory begins here, I can pinpoint the beginning of what I remember. A blue wall becomes the sea and then we are bathing in the seawater. Thousands of orphan boys are unloaded from the boxcars and running to the sea. It is so hot in the transport and it has been weeks since we've bathed properly. They unload us and yalla! they say, herding us down to the waters, hurry, remove your clothes, and without modesty there are thousands of us stripping to our bare skin, the newly bared skin is fair relief against the black and soot on our arms and feet and faces. We are thirsty from our days' journey and thousands of us running down the slope of warm sand into the welcome belly of the Mediterranean and drinking; we never knew the sea until this moment, and I remember that bitter surprise: the beautiful warm salt waters that made us spit and vomit.

I am floating naked in the seawater and then Vostanig is here, this way and that. I am in the first class at the orphanage in the Lebanon. The sea lies one hundred meters from our dormitory but we are barred from bathing or even walking along her shores; there is a high fence to keep us from the water. We are never given reason for the fence, we are given the rules and we transgress or obey them. I can see the sea through the high chain fence and the sea breezes cool us or make us cold in the winter. I am in the first class and Vosto arrives at this place. It is nineteen and twenty-three and it is raining terribly. The boy was left outside the walls of the orphanage, in front of the administration building. He was deposited there in the middle of the night, by whom we were never to know, Vosto, as I have said, did not speak a word for many months and the first word, 'Mama', was spoken involuntarily during his sleep. I see Vosto, he is wet from the night spent in the rains. One of the mairigs is leading him into the compound, holding him gently (she was a nice one) and he allows himself to be led, you can see he is used to being led from here to there, something that would never change over the years. He is, of course, the ugliest boy. His hair is sparse and grows in patches, his body is covered in open sores. His ears loom large on a large head: all appears large on his head because his body is, by comparison, a bag of tied-up bones: his knees bigger than his legs, his arms hang at an awkward angle, you can count each rib, see each vertebrae in his back, the collarbones and chestbones rise clear and high above the tight skin of his chest as if some horrible creature is trapped there and trying to push free. He comes to us shirtless, shoeless, head uncovered. All of this is perhaps unremarkable to the boys or to me in particular. Who didn't arrive shoeless, hatless, with hunger etched in the skin stretched tightly over the bones? His teeth so large in a looming face, his nose, teeth, ears seemingly larger than the whole of his child's body. What then is unusual about the picture of this boy Vostanig? The boy we soon enough called Kooskoos because he looked like a landed bird. Why do I remember the sea and then him looming in front of the orphanage walls? Him I hated, wanted to break apart. He

came to us and was it the look of pity? Was it the look of sorrow and despair? Vosto never learned in all of his years with us to eradicate this look from his face and body. Even later when there was food enough for all of us and all of us filled out and went to bed satiated rather than to the accompaniment of our constant hunger. We beat him over and over, we punished him mercilessly, he lost his vision in the left eye, his arm was broken on one occasion, the Mairig took special pleasure in using him to demonstrate a broken rule. All of us tried, I think, to unmake his look of sorrow: the Mairig herself could not bear it. He was weak and he cried and I would have killed him then, he was fucked for this weakness, yet to his credit that boy in front of the red brick walls of the orphanage never gave it up and loved it in that place. I have said weakness, but perhaps it was his strange fortitude, because no matter the beatings and no matter the tauntings, Vostanig remained unchanged. The stranger: he was all of us, the damned exiled race in its puny and starved and pathetic scabbed body. How we longed to kill him.

It is said by some that the dead are ever returning to us in an unending cycle of vengeance and despair. I press into my mind as if to find them there. It is green then blue then rains. And they do come back to me, each one in his time.