

# Three Apples Fell from Heaven

Here is a novel of import and style, set in 1915-1917, the years of the Ottoman Turkish government's brutal campaign that resulted in the deaths of more than a million Armenians. Through a series of chapters that have the weight and economy of poetry, Micheline Aharonian Marcom introduces us to the stories of Anaguil, an Armenian girl taken in by Turkish neighbors after the death of her parents who now views the remains of her world through a Muslim veil; Sargis, a poet hidden away in his mother's attic, dressed in women's clothing, and steadily going mad; Lucine, a servant and lover of the American consul; Maritsa, a rage-filled Muslim wife who becomes a whore; and Dickran, an infant left behind under a tree on the long exodus from an Armenian village, who reaches with tiny hands to touch the stars and dies with his name unrecorded. Through these lives, we witness the vanishing of a people. *Three Apples Fell From Heaven* is an elegy to the final days of Orientalism and an elegant memorial to the victims of the twentieth century's first genocide. Together, the stories of these lives form a narrative mosaic—faceted, complex, richly textured, a devastating tableau.

## Reviews

"The fierce beauty of her prose both confronts readers with many breathtaking cruelties and carries us past them...But the novel is much more than a catalog of horrors, however brilliantly described. It is also about love and tenderness, the pleasures of custom and ritual, the moments of unexpected generosity and courage and, above all, the necessity of remembering—oneself, one's family, one's language, one's history."—***The New York Times***

"Micheline Aharonian Marcom has woven a heartrending tapestry from the lost time, lost places, and lost voices of the Armenian genocide. Spectacularly gifted, tender, wise, and terrible in rage, Marcom has produced a powerful novel that attempts to retrieve one of the most infamous crimes of the twentieth century from the event horizon of history."—***Junot Díaz***

"Powerful...Marcom's writing is intensely poetic."—***Washington Post***

"Chronicles the 20th century's first genocide with an unnervingly effective blend of imagination, artistry and grisly historical fact...these unsparingly visceral vignettes assume an almost unbearable potency."—***San Francisco Chronicle***

"Lyrical...from the start you feel as though you are in the presence of an authentic voice, in this case a voice that weeps and wails and growls and shouts and chants and moans and sings about the 20th Century's first—but least-known—ethnic massacre...Marcom is so talented... [*Three Apples Fell From Heaven* ] will stay with its readers a good long while."

**–Chicago Tribune**

“As a third-generation American-Armenian, Micheline Aharonian Marcom bears the weight of her own family history with extraordinary grace...moving...Marcom doesn’t resort to sentiment or shock tactics, but lovingly renders each scene with slow, languorous rhythms.”

**–The Guardian**

“Animated by a resolve that ancestral stories will not be forgotten, and that those who are dead will continue to be cherished.” **–The Daily Telegraph**

“Powerful.” **–Scotland on Sunday**

“This is an exquisite, vivid, heartbreaking book. It lushly restores one's soul while giving voice to the many silenced souls of the Armenian genocide. A breathtaking debut...”

**—Cristina Garcia**

## Excerpt

### *DICKRAN WHOSE NAME WENT UNRECORDED*

I was born in 1915 on the Anatolian plateau, beneath a ubiquitous sky whose iridescent blue was like a fine lace veil covering my eyes. I saw the world through the openings and around the edges of the scalloped filet. I remember seeing the reaching branches and green leaves of the oak tree like hands in prayer, the grooves in the brown-gray tree bark like empty rivers, and the drifting of woolly cloud shapes like prehistoric beasts. I didn't know what to call these blue-edged pictures before my eyes, but I saw them clearly in the hours before my death.

This I know: I was born Dickran, second child and first son to Mariam and Hovsep, the son of Boghos, in the Armenian village of Bozmashen. I was conceived six months before my father's conscription into the armed forces, when he left our home at night with his wrists bound behind his back, secured by a tether to his brother, my Amo Vahram. In the light of the kerosene lamp, my father noticed that the ropes the gendarmes used to tie them with were already stained with blood. He asked the gendarmes politely as they pulled his arms high behind his back, Effendi, is it necessary to tie the arms of men who will serve in the Great Ottoman Army and defend the Empire? Shut your mouth! they said, as if they had answered the question before and then pushed my father and uncle through the front door and into the night. We did not hear from or see them again (actually, I never saw them at all). But like all the families in our village we heard the rumors about the lake, and in the weeks after all of the men between the ages of sixteen and forty-five had been conscripted, we thought the feral dogs looked fatter. The birds of prey stayed out on the plains and let the mice in the village run freely.

I was conceived months earlier, in December, when the snow had piled up past the mud brick walls to our tiled roof tops. It was the season when the neighbors did their visiting by walking from roof to roof and coming in through a trap door in the ceiling. Eyaa, Brothers! the visitor would exclaim, and my father would open the hatch in the ceiling to admit him.

The men would then sit on the cushions and smoke from the water pipe while my mother, my little-mama, our Mairig, heated the water with coffee and sugar and served it in delicate demitasses.

There is no news about the Dardanelles, Gaspar reported that winter morning. The fighting continues. Garo Hoogasian says he has heard that the soldiers have no shoes.

Basturmajee-Gaspar, meat-curer-Gaspar as he was affectionately called, then lifted his head and exhaled a blue smoke. Have you any suggestions Digin Hampartzoum, he asked my Nene, for a very bad chest cold? Arpine is sick again.

A bit of hollyhock flower boiled into a tea, my Nene responded and rose from her seated position to go to the storeroom. When she returned she offered our visitor a small bundle of dried flower and her best wishes for his wife.

Tell her five cups a day, Nene said, to be sipped slowly.

On this day of my conception, the family stayed indoors all day because of the terrible cold outside. By five o'clock, Mairig had already unearthed a head of cabbage from the storeroom floor and made dolma which she served with pilaf. My old Nene yelled out after she had tasted her portion: As usual, this requires more salt, Daughter-by-marriage. Mairig said nothing, as is our custom.

After the meal, the men began their card games; Mairig continued the weaving of that winter's kilim, and my Nene spun wool at the spinning wheel. Everyone was gathered in a circle around the tonnir, some with their feet tucked tightly under the red and black and cream woolen blankets to keep warm. My sister Arsinee dozed lightly next to Mairig. Soon Nene began to tell stories of the djinn and then of the heroic feats of Dickran-the-Great-King-of-Kings, and Mairig brought out the dried golden raisins and spread them atop the blanket.

Eat hokees, Nene said to Arsinee, you can still taste summer in these fruits.

At nine o'clock the family retired to their sleeping pallets. Mairig slept facing the wall in the far corner of our two-room house (in the other room the sheep, goats and chickens slept). Just as Mairig was falling into sleep, picturing the house where she had been raised, and just as she was beginning to run towards the cool brook with her girlhood friends, my father began lifting her shift from behind. He lifted it quietly. And then, over the light snoring of Nene across the room, he did what was accepted and expected and Mairig did the same. As Mairig stared at the wall before her which she could barely make out in the late night darkness of the house, she felt a bead of sweat from her husband's brow fall onto her exposed nape.

I came to my brief consciousness with the rhythm of walking—it awakened me. Mairig walked for weeks and I could feel the rhythm of our days like a constant pull of tides, although I never knew the tides; the walking was boundless and finally it pulled me from Mairig's womb. I turned and I was pressed into the noise and light and streams of cold air at dawn in the open plains. And I discovered skin, mouth, teat, and the blue veil of this earth, and eventually urine and bowels.

The sky lay lightly and heavily upon all of us, it altered its shades with the course of the sun as we walked toward the Der Zor: I saw blue like an iris from light to dark. After my delivery, my mother strapped me to her breast with a long swath of undyed wool turned dark brown from the constant dust of the caravans, and she continued walking. She walked with the other women and children and old men of our village. Bozmashen and twenty other Armenian villages were included in that particular caravan. We had been temporarily deported from our homes and relocated into the Der Zor desert. We would return, assured the Turkish towncrier who had gone from village to village in the month of June announcing our departure dates. Take only what you will need, he yelled on each street corner, the rest you can leave in your dwellings until your homecoming. We are doing this for your safety, he affirmed.

Most residents of Bozmashen had never in their lives traveled more than twenty miles beyond the perimeter of the village. As the women packed the bundles and filled the knapsacks, as they prepared the families to leave the places where the clans had formed—during the time when history was still coupled in verse and was a troubadour's bread and butter—they comforted one another with small hopes: Perhaps we will find our men in Arabia, they said. When the wagons were loaded and the bundles secured, the small children jumped up and down with delight, thinking that this thing called 'exile' would be a great adventure.

Later on the open plains, the road stretched out in front of us with the walking herds of villagers—the hundreds of Anatolian Armenian clans—and it stretched behind us in ribbons of littered and broken bodies, mostly the old, the infirm and the very young. As the days passed the piles behind us seemed larger than the dusty figures in front of us. Our Nene stayed back in one of those body-mounds. The abandoned voices followed us as we climbed up and down the mountains, skirting the local towns and the sources of running water at the gendarmes' insistence.

Ma-Ma, the voices said, do you have a cup of water and some bread?

With each subsequent day Mairig found it harder and harder to hold herself upright. And when her milk finally dried up, it is true that I cried for days. Sometimes Mairig passed me to Arsinee who held me close and cuddled me for a little while.

Baby Dickran, you will be strong like Hayrig, she'd say. And we will play together under the night sky. We will count the stars together. And we'll never again eat grass for our dinner.

In the third week after my birth, a group of Kurdish villagers descended upon us and stole the last of our possessions so that there was no cloth left to swaddle me and I, like Mairig and Arsinee, was naked beneath the sun. Soon all of our skin changed from pink to darkest brown and then finally to the olive green that came off in sheaves.

Keep moving! our guards yelled. The constant sound of their whips slapping the hot air and bodies was like the sound of unbaked bread when it smacks against the cooking stone.

In the open plains there are few trees. When Mairig finally stumbled upon one, she stopped and she kissed me on my neck. And there underneath the oak tree I lay quietly, like a good boy, where my Mairig left me. I did not scream and carry on like the other babies and young children lying next to me. My thirst for life was quieted by the majestic oak and the cloud shapes I could make out through the veil of blue lace which covered me.

A Turkish soldier saw the rows of babies settled around the tree and thought of his wife who wanted another child. He miraculously took pity upon me and picked me up and carried me to his village and named me Ali. I became a good Muslim boy and I honored my father and I recited passages from the Qur'an better than any boy in the village. I grew to be quite tall and I loved the taste of dried raisins on my tongue. At night I was sometimes disturbed by dreams of a greenblack face covered in tears. In the morning I said my prayers fervently.

No, it was not like that. It was a Kurdish woman whose own son had died from the infections that the miles of dead bodies brought to her village. And she took pity on the little Armenian boy, Dickran, whose name she never would have known. And she wrapped me in colorful wool swaddling clothes and bounced me on her knobby knees. And although I never learned to read or write, I became an expert tanner and I made beautiful skins for twenty villages. When my wife bore our first son, I was the proudest man in the vilayet.

But if I tell you another story, you will understand: there were too many of us to safeguard beneath the few and bedraggled trees. The trees in the plains were full of babies and old fathers and old ladies whose mothers and daughters and nieces and wives and four-year-old sons had left them there. We stretched for miles across the deserted plains. If aeroplanes had flown above us they would have marveled at the

human sculpture we made with our thousands of bones and bodies becoming bones, with our skin and the fat underneath which melted in the midday sun like soft clay. The vultures swooping in among us and the wolves feeding themselves and their sucklings from us, added their hungry delight to the tableau.

There were no thoughts in my mind, no language then to think it out, and no paper or fountain pen to write it down. The holy books and the holy houses had been burned. So I looked at the stars and I reached for them through the night blue coverlet with my small hands until I could touch the stars and then the heavenly bodies. That was how I was miracled into heaven.