

Tunnel Echoes Toward Truth

In a World of Neurodiversity and Cultural Diversity

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Abstract

A childhood in the Netherlands, adolescence in Armenia, and an adult life... It is up to the reader to assume, or perhaps find out one day, what happens after. The given writings narrate and reflect upon how I moved to Armenia at the age of twelve after having been born and raised in the Netherlands in an Armenian household that had always dreamt of Armenia. The creative nonfiction piece tells you how it was to become diagnosed with attention deficit disorder at the age of eight and how it complicated my life, even more so after moving to Armenia.

Keywords

Neurodiversity, ADD, ADHD.

Tunnel Echoes Toward Truth

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When you can let the good and the bad coexist, *that* is true peace.

Life was not so easy; it still is not, but life and I have become closer friends now. I spent my childhood in confusion rather than joy; there were too many unanswered questions. Fundamentally, life is about connection; as humans, we need it to survive and thrive. However, the initial part of my life felt like a disconnection from my surroundings, and somehow, I was deeply in touch with myself, and still was not; probably because I kept wondering why I could not connect with people and the ways of society. I wanted to connect, but it was as if there was a signal with bad reception. Of course, it hurt and felt lonely, but I simply did not know any better. My brain did not know any better; it had ADHD.

I was diagnosed when I was eight. I lived in a little town in the Netherlands. My Dutch childhood provided the answer to my questions, which an Armenian childhood probably would not have given. However, ironically, I caught up with the answer ten years too late. And by the time those ten years had passed, more and more questions emerged as I went into a world of the unknown. By going through these pages, you will be reading pieces of me and pieces of you, as even with no clear connection, there is something holding everything and everyone together; there is a mutual signal. To relate and connect, sometimes, all we need is good reception. And whether you have ADHD or not, reception can always be improved. This capstone tells you about how I improved my reception, about ADHD, and about how I moved from Europe to West Asia during the formative period between childhood and adulthood, returning to the place I had never been for long but had always felt within me with longing but with resistance; with intensity and with confusion.

I was born in the Netherlands as a Western Armenian. My Armenian household demanded I speak Armenian, which I protested as a child. I wanted a clear identity, but instead, its only fixed aspect became that of dilemma. As a diasporan-born Armenian, there is a certain degree of dilemma within, feeling stuck between two cultures. There is a little bit of shame involved as well – feeling ashamed for not knowing Armenian well enough, indirect shame stemming from an identity crisis, even if at a micro level, or the shame, overall, of not being able to relate to your parents as much as someone else would, and not being as connected with your Armenianness as much as they are. At all times, there is something just missing. Sometimes, we know what it is, but oftentimes, there is an unexplainable feeling of incompleteness as we grieve the pieces of Armenianness slowly chipping away.

Still, the dilemma remains. Born and raised in another country, it is not so simple to shift toward the motherland as much as many truly wish to. With part of my immediate family, I moved to Armenia at the age of twelve. The event resulted in ten years of internal destruction and reconstruction, along with discovery and rediscovery, finding what I did not know had been missing.

Literature Review

The neurodiversity movement is a notion nowadays known to some and unknown to others, nevertheless growing exponentially. Elementally, the movement seeks cerebral pluralism in a world of misconceptions, stereotypes, stigmatization, dehumanization, and segregation with regard to mental disabilities, including ADHD, placing its focus predominantly on the more actively expressed autistic community. The movement was inspired by the emergence of the term neurodiversity, introduced in the 1990s, which sought to demonstrate how there is no “right” or “wrong” functioning of the brain and how it is relative and highly dependent on one’s environment. The notion of neurodiversity and the

rise in awareness thereof is shifting conventional approaches in communication and education studies and practices as well as political ones. The presence of the neurodiversity movement is a significant step toward global change in terms of social functions. Therefore, we must observe the neurodiversity movement and its implications for the future through various academic lenses, as these are interrelated, not only in theory but also in practice. Such research was done within the spheres of psychology, sociology, and anthropology using approaches such as historical research, ethnographic research, and case studies. These works observed how the neurodiversity movement came to be, what a neurodiverse view signifies, how a distinct neurodiverse culture is emerging, how it seems to be necessary for society to change in accordance with neurodivergent people, and how the neurodiversity movement goes beyond mental health rights.

What It Means to Be Neurodivergent

The term neurodiversity was introduced by Australian sociologist Judy Singer, describing “the idea that people experience and interact with the world around them in many different ways” (Baumer & Frueh, 2021, para. 1). One’s brain is considered neurodivergent with “conditions such as Autism, ADHD, ADD, Dyslexia, Dyscalculia, and Dyspraxia” because it operates differently than a “standard” or neurotypical brain (Oxford health, 2023). However, the notion of a standard brain is questioned as the number of neurodivergent people is exponentially rising. According to various studies, based on data available so far, 20 percent of the world’s population is neurodivergent (Sangare & Ambavane, 2024).

The Neurodiversity Movement and The Past

How the neurodiversity movement came to be is highly related to the history of autism and that of the disability rights movement. In the 1960s, the disability rights movement

began, and in the 1990s, the autistic community joined them, establishing the autism rights movement. It was in the 1960s that the deinstitutionalization of disabled and autistic people began to take place after a history of misconception, isolation, and ill-treatment. With the autism rights movement came the neurodiversity movement as the term had just been introduced, resulting in the strive for mental health rights in a broader sense (Jaswal, 2017).

Vikram K. Jaswal and Chloe Silverman, in their reviews on Steve Silberman's *NeuroTribes: The Legacy of Autism and the Future of Neurodiversity*, insightfully discuss the relevance of autism's tragic past in the 20th century. They refer to the second world war and how the Nazis treated autistic people. "They have been the subject of and subjected to some of the worst treatments (and science) imaginable, involving everything from chelation to electric shocks" (Jaswal, 2017, p. 243). Besides the Nazi regime, autistic people were institutionalized at the time, which only began to decrease starting from the 1950s. Since then, the number of autism diagnoses has risen. "Another key component of this increase in autism diagnoses was the delayed effect of deinstitutionalization, the mass closure of psychiatric institutions... people who would have been previously classified as "mentally retarded" or intellectually disabled were instead described as autistic," alongside the reason that previously, people with mild autism were not classified as autistic (Silverman, 2015, p. 1117). Silverman and Jaswal, by reviewing Silberman's work, aim to convey how we should "think more intelligently about people who think differently" and how "we should be working to create inclusive communities where autistics can flourish with (and perhaps because of) their autism, not trying to turn autistics into nonautistics" (Jaswal, 2017, p. 243) (Silverman, 2015, p. 1111).

Their reviews of Silberman's book emphasize how far we have come in one century and how far we have yet to come in terms of unlearning past unjustified and inefficient approaches, with Silverman's focus being ethnography and Jaswal's psychology. Silverman included insights based on their ethnographic fieldwork at an autism community conference. Besides

Jaswal and Silverman, Nancy Bagatell and Kristin Bumiller referred to the former institutionalization emphasizing the significant harm it did. “Institutionalization – a tragic outcome for the children, their families, and society” mentions Bagatell (2010, p. 49). “With the end of the age of asylums in the mid-twentieth century (Rothman, 1980), the most powerful progressive movement supporting the interests of the formerly institutionalized was fashioned on a normalization model” explains Bumiller (2008, p. 975). Institutionalization resulted in a society that is still suffering from misconceptions in a problematic system consisting of diverse types of individuals. The normalization process is ongoing.

A Neurodiverse View

It is important to understand what a neurodiverse view signifies. Bagatell aimed to “explore how individuals with autism are challenging the widely accepted biomedical views of autism and forging an autistic community” (2010, p. 33). She reinforces the neurodiverse approach, as autism is a commonly brought example expressing how it is not necessarily a genetic illness or an illness in the first place. It can only be diagnosed through psychological testing and not be medically diagnosed. Therefore, as it does not necessarily make one suffer in the absence of a society functioning in a certain way, most views of autism are merely socially constructed. Bagatell conducted anthropological ethnographic fieldwork by observing and participating in group gatherings by autistic people. She discusses how autistic people wish to transform how autism and being neurodiverse are considered and approached (Bagatell, 2010).

Going Beyond Neurodiverse Rights

Bumiller’s work, with its focus on politics and social issues, views how “over the past thirty years the incident rate of autism worldwide may have increased three to fourfold”

(2008, p. 968). The author looks at how that interrelates with sex and gender identity and how the enormous demand for care and advocacy will be shouldered by women as the needs of autistic children far outstrip available resources, considering broader implications of grassroots autism rights activism for women and for the feminist movement (Bumiller, 2008). “Many typical citizens resist inclusion of people with autism to avoid exposure to uncomfortable interactions with people whom they perceive to be antisocial, gender inappropriate, or simply odd,” (Bumiller, 2008, p. 985) which is the exact reason that neurodiversity (including autism) normalization may contribute to improvement around issues related to gender and even race (Bumiller, 2008).

A Promising Hypothesis on ADHD

A recent study by Barack et al. offers the hypothesis that ADHD “may impact foraging decisions in the general population” (2024, p. 1). The study mentions that former studies claim that genetic mutations revealed in ADHD are linked to nomadic lifestyles involving exploration. Barack et al.’s work tested this initial hypothesis with participants through an online foraging task. Participants with ADHD explicitly performed better than non-ADHD participants. The study indicates how ADHD may have developed as part of the evolution process (Barack et al., 2024). By demonstrating the likelihood that ADHD offers foraging advantages, the study opens doors for further research to develop a better scientific understanding of ADHD, possibly shifting its connotation.

Implications of the Neurodiversity Movement and Expectations

The literature I analyzed and reviewed consisted of research that took a close look at the social, psychological, historical, and anthropological aspects of the neurodiversity movement. They provided insights regarding the backstory of the neurodivergent rights issue

and looked into the future it offers to society. The use of ethnographic fieldwork and research, historical research, political analysis, data analysis, and psychological research ensured a thorough picture of what the neurodiversity movement entails and what its implications are. It was especially applaudable how there was a clear focus in many of the works on the personal views and experiences of neurodivergent individuals and autistic community members, which correlates with the idea they conveyed of how the change requires the opportunity for active participation of neurodivergent people in social and scientific frameworks. However, in many of those research pieces, the role of social platforms could have been mentioned, especially as social media's role is becoming more and more prevalent and also considering how neurodiversity is becoming a "trend," shifting the paradigm both positively and negatively. The dominant focus on autism throughout this work was to provide extensive insight into the societal issues related to having a neurodivergent mind, as autism is regarded as a rather classic instance, and considering it is immensely applicable to the matter of ADHD with overlapping symptoms and outcomes. The subject of neurodiversity is evolving and remaining, if not becoming more, relevant, which is why plenty more updated research is believed to be published in the years to come. This is also why it is important to have personal cases demonstrating what neurodiversity, among which being ADHD, is about.

Research question

What children abruptly exposed to foreign cultures and individuals with mental conditions have in common is a metaphorical bubble of isolation. That bubble is why sources of information or records are not enough, not for those who can relate and not for those seeking to understand. Where there is a gap of difference and misconception –beyond acceptance and understanding– there can be a bridge of respect and appreciation. For those

living in a bubble, an external bridge is not enough; an internal bridge is vital for self-compassion. Therefore, beyond information, biographies, and fiction, we need works by those in underrepresented bubbles, not only descriptively but creatively, through a unique, unrestrained language, to create an internal and external bridge of appreciation and compassion. Research creation is a fitting and highly promising medium to explore this alternative language as a means to shift the given paradigm by cultivating empathy and connection.

Methodology

Within a qualitative methodological framework, *Tunnel Echoes Toward Truth* is the central work of my research-creation, belonging to the genre of creative nonfiction. Thus, it is a creative nonfiction piece, a memoir consisting of essays, to be more precise, expressed through narration and reflection. It involves the element of journaling as an essential component, giving the work its rawness. It is divided into thematic chapters; however, the chronology of time is an essential existing aspect as well. The framework of written creative nonfiction was the ideal means to express my personal experiences as someone neurodivergent with ADHD, having moved into a different culture as an adolescent, demonstrating the nuances of such an event under the circumstances of living with such a disorder. Intense emotions, difficulty with adaptation, and daily struggles with executive functioning are experiences ADHD tends to cause. These experiences, combined with the adaptive years following the move to Armenia, made an especially complicated period. The thought of those formerly combined circumstances created a formula mentally, urging me to write creative nonfiction, expressing all the words formerly left unsaid with a voice of honesty and, hopefully, some direction. The intention is not to tell merely a story. Rather, it is to transform personal difficulties into something delightful and comforting, worth reading for

a general audience, however, especially to people who may relate to the included notions that might hinder our happiness at times, e.g., ADHD, culture shock, identity crisis, and depression. I consider the use of metaphors an essential component of the piece, as they seem to emerge only when one senses a truthful connection to the thoughts they express, meaning their work involves sincerity. To be concise, characteristics of foremost importance within the creative nonfiction piece are conveying truth, recalled experience, description, narration, reflection, and figurative language.

Nonfiction

Fundamentally, nonfiction is a literary genre similar to fiction but based on absolute truth. Lee Gutkind is commonly considered the “godfather” of nonfiction. He provided a space for nonfiction with the journal he founded in 1933, *Creative Nonfiction*. Gutkind defined creative nonfiction with its “five R’s” (Gutkind, as cited in Bishop & Starkley, 2019, p. 65), demonstrating its essential components: real life, reflection, research, reading, and writing. With regard to real life, he considered that good writing is accomplished by personal experience. With reflection, he indicated how a writer expresses their responses and feelings on subjects they are exposed to. By mentioning research, he emphasized the significance of intelligent questions in nonfictional work and how they indicate a foundation of knowledge. A writer of nonfiction should have an understanding of what they are writing about, as this is key to maintaining the trust and support of the readers who are immersing themselves into the writer’s experience. By including reading in his five R’s, Gutkind mentioned how writers read works of great writers in their field, being exposed to stylistic approaches and intellectual content, thus implying the importance of proper inspiration. Finally, with the R of writing, he expressed the significance of spontaneity and instant inspiration. He expressed how this applies to all art forms. He emphasized the importance of taking in moments and

witnessing muses (Gutkind, as cited in Bishop & Starkley, 2019). A work of nonfiction, also defined as a personal essay, is commonly regarded as conversational, possibly involving moments of irony, and is also regarded as honest with self-disclosure. It also involves a writer's observant nature as they reflect upon commonly ignored nuances of daily life, exposing their authentic look at life and revealing their particular style as they point out the unnoticed. A personal essay is commonly controversial, expressing genuine and raw views challenging popular beliefs. A personal essay is sincere and fundamentally opposes the expression of the ego, as the author reveals their true self. It portrays the author's learning process as they distance themselves from scholarly literature and delve into their own pure reflections. A personal essay is, essentially, a way of thinking and being (Bishop & Starkley, 2019). It is an honest form of self-expression with an unpredictable outcome, holding the possibility of unforeseen brilliance.

Modes

The genre of nonfiction consists of various subgenres – “autobiography, biography, diaries, letters, history, philosophy, social and political commentary, the literature of travel and place, nature writing, science writing...” (Bloom, 1998, p. 88). Modes in creative nonfiction can be writing about people, places, points of view, and controversy. Essential stylistic features may be defined by a nonfiction work's scenery, symbolic details, figurative language, dialogue, personas, tone, characterizations, and linguistic stylistic features (Bloom, 1998).

The methods used in nonfiction create a space for an immersive experience for its readers, as it introduces nearly the same aspects of fiction, with the addition of rawness through truth. Stien & Beed (2004) have shown this to be true. With their attempt to introduce children to nonfiction alongside fiction, they found that the children were as

engaged with nonfiction as they were with fiction. The children had specified how their awareness of the real existence of the nonfiction work's central character was significant and intriguing to them (Stien & Beed, 2004).

Inspiration

Not only do I consider nonfiction an ideal means to express my creativity, but I also have and do consider nonfiction works an outstanding means to inspire, having become my source of harmony in life and of motivation for externally and internally directed empathy and self-expression. Fictional works hinting at nonfiction that inspired me were Khalil Gibran's *The Prophet*, R.J. Palacio's *Wonder*, and Mark Haddon's *The Curious Case of the Dog in the Nighttime*. Another great source of inspiration has been Vahan Teryan with his emotional poetry, his real feelings, expressed through written art. Regardless of a writing's structure, I consider the most important component of expressive literature to be passion through sincere feelings. I feel a closeness to the melancholic nature of Teryan's writings and consider it essential that one embraces their way of being, as, in this instance, melancholy, despite subjectively being subject to rejection or approval by the audience, is what seems to bring me closer to my truth, and thus, to my artistic expressiveness.

Works of nonfiction that have inspired me are Franz Kafka's *Letters to Milena*, which were real letters to his love interest; Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, which were personal reflections of wisdom based on the emperor's experiences; and Alain de Botton's *The School of Life*, as a reflective work of philosophy, holding its foundation in rich literary research. Lastly, I wish to mention Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Nature*, which may be considered a nonfiction essay. This work was the first to spark a special sense of affection in me toward reflective essays. Additionally, it not only inspired me to dedicate more time to reading, but it also marked the beginning of my exploration of my inner voice and literary style. Therefore,

reading about real individuals from real individuals became the reason I expanded my interest in literature and became determined to commit to offering contributions of my own.

Artist Statement

A moment we all experience – When, at times, we are entirely alone, far away from outer voices, directly facing a space of silence, hearing nothing but ourselves, our true selves. That moment is when we have no choice but to be honest, no choice but to feel what we feel, and so, it passes on an intensity of comfort or excruciation, but we always return seeking that moment. With my work, I wish to pass on the feeling of such moments. I wish to open a space for vulnerability, but in this instance, you are not alone in that space; we are in it together. That is what I wish for, to express my experiences and reflections, hoping it might relate to some or at least evoke certain feelings, any feelings, for that matter, as my words imply an inclination for intensity over numbness. My work has four chapters, signifying the four major phases I experienced within the context of mental health and repatriation. I wish you an immersive experience where any mutual path becomes one with company.

Reflections on Process

Tunnel Echoes Toward Truth was my attempt to create something that people would be able to connect with; something that would authentically make them feel seen and heard; something that would validate their feelings and experiences in a way that gives them faith in the notion that in every struggle and any conditions holding you back from the evolving world lies an exceptional seed waiting for its cue to grow and bring into existence a garden of life and color serving an incomparable function. However, with that attempt, I did not expect to face the obstacles that I did. I wanted to share my story, and I wanted to do so with immense openness. However, halfway there, something in me began to resist my openness, which made the process much more difficult, as I wished to write naturally, in a raw manner,

with no mental limitations. During my work, I came to realize how much of a challenge it is to express your truth because of the vulnerability it requires. I felt ready to be vulnerable at the beginning, being aware of the given requirement to reach the intense piece I envisioned, but writing page after page, caring deeply about each sentence and word I put on paper was something that made me feel as if I, ironically, were both blissfully flying through the sky and walking on thorns. I presume that that is what it means to dive into vulnerability; I believe it is worth it, and absolutely a necessity, but I now understand that it can become very frightening and overwhelming when you express it in ways that you are not entirely used to; and yet, the beauty in that vulnerability not only remains, but it expands within a space for boundless introspection and promising imagination, which, as an author, made my heart flutter in joy as the words lined up.

Throughout the writing process, my ADHD has both helped me and hindered me. It helped me think associatively to write as creatively as I could, but it often held me back from actually organizing my unfocused thoughts to be able to express the chaotic pile of ideas in my head waiting to be let out in a comprehensible manner. I had many days when I would sit on the couch thinking and thinking, but feeling unable to put anything on paper, not knowing where exactly to begin. And that could take either hours or several days in a row.

Nevertheless, I did do the work; it exists right in front of my eyes and yours, just like anything that people with conditions making things more difficult can do. It may take a bit longer, and it may require a lot of frustration and conflicting emotions, but it is possible and absolutely worth it if it comes from the heart. That which comes entirely from the heart cannot and should not involve regret, as it illustrates our greatest desires and passions, and those are always valid, irreplaceable, pure, and powerful; they serve a purpose in one way or another. Therefore, I want nobody to give up on whatever makes their heart flutter, because obstacles are there so that you can learn to act on your passions in their presence. Acting on

your passions is what teaches you to live your life with your own manual, and not that of others. Others' manuals are what make it seem as if we are not working, whereas human "defects" are relative and subjective. If the world attempts to scam us, we can do our best not to pursue that scam and to live our lives knowing the truths that count for *us*, as the rest do not seem to know better what works for us *for* us.

Initially, with this work, I intended to eventually publish it as a small contribution to the promotion of intercultural and mental awareness, but instead, for now, it has become a purely personal encouraging first step towards ADHD awareness along with cultural awareness in educational institutions, which I want to publicly fight for in my homeland. There might be someone just like me right now, sitting in a classroom, wondering why they do not fit into the kind of world involving the institutions that humanity created. There are so many people in my homeland unaware of their potential, unaware of the help they can receive, unaware that they are good enough, and that the world was simply not made to be convenient for them. I wish to actively work on ADHD awareness in Armenia, and this piece has been my first relatively extensive creation that will serve as a reminder for me to continue to tangibly strive for this cause. I know that when little Biaini was at her lowest points, she would have yearned for the understanding that my current self can provide for misunderstood individuals, including not only ones with certain conditions but also children experiencing culture shock in powerlessness when there is, in fact, no right or wrong culture; they are merely different. I want them to know that it's not their fault, and I want them to learn to love themselves. Ultimately, I want my fellow space watchers to embrace their magnificent uniqueness, no matter their environment, and to love their lives because life is worth living when you bring along your own set of markers to color it with, bearing in mind that just as colors are boundless, so are you.

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Tunnel Echoes Toward Truth

1

Remembered Like a Faraway Dream

We pedaled faster and faster as we descended into the tunnel. And during those few seconds below, we yelled our lungs out as the echoes went around. Giving full power, we cycled up again, my mother and I. She motivated me, and the echoes motivated us. On the road, we would pass by fellow cyclists and greet them. We would see cars driving orderly, houses made of brick, retirement homes, high green forests, peaceful reservoirs, and determined geese walking around. We would wonder what the elderly were doing in their retirement homes. We would look at the geese, and I would ask my mother what animals are intelligent; that conversation would reach faraway places until we became silent for a while. During such silence, we would reflect on our own until something was worth discussing out loud again. My mother has always been my reflection companion. I could always be honest with her. We would express the maddest ideas; no words could be bizarre enough in our eyes to perplex one of us. After a while, at a red stoplight, my mum would tell me to blow at the stoplight as hard as I could so that it would become green, and after a while, when it did, it would feel as if we had been part of the process, as if we had interacted with the stoplight, bringing our journey to life.

Such bicycle rides would spark a lot of curiosity, and whether it was during those rides or in other settings, my mother would always express how she noticed me using one word most – “why.” I find that curiosity can be a blessing and a curse. Ideally, it should always be a blessing, but we do not live in such a world. Especially after moving to Armenia, my

curiosity was taken for madness. It was as if there was an invisible box, and everyone knew to remain within the safety of that box because otherwise, they would become a threat to others or to themselves, of course, in their perception. That box suffocated me; the more I adapted to its limited size, the more it shrunk. There seemed not to be any sustainable solution but to break the box. But that is a matter to discuss after a while, as now, we look back upon times when the end of any tunnel was always in sight.

The grass was always green. Everything was simpler. It was the time of childhood. After moving to Armenia, the grass was not always green, but surprisingly, after a certain period of time, the grass was no longer always green in the Netherlands either. Temperatures are rising due to global warming, and this is in part due to humans' ignorance. Human ignorance was what damaged me. Children are not just simple and soft; they are simple and soft like sponges; they are sensitive, and they take in whatever other humans demonstrate, including humans of ignorance. If only children were heard more. I was heard once; I was heard by my family, but there comes a time when you have to begin making yourself heard in the world. Otherwise, it all ceases to matter. I was a sponge. I took in everything I heard and saw. I took in wisdom from nature and knowledge from my surroundings. I loved observing every new thing that was exposed to me. I loved learning. My biggest wish was to learn to read and write; then my biggest wish was to learn to play the piano, and then my biggest wish was to attend university one day. When the day finally came at six years old to have my very first test at school, I sat somewhere in the middle of symmetrical rows of tables with a pencil and eraser on each. Sitting in that structured space, I felt important; I was ready to perform. I had been longing for so long to sit there in silence and be expected to write. It was the beginning of educational growth. I can still see the well-sharpened pencil on that table before me, and I can still remember how exciting it felt to fill the paper, knowing my use of the pencil mattered for the first time. We were learning letters, and then words, and then

sentences; we were learning spelling and grammar. Each letter had its unique character – its unique shape and its unique pronunciation. I liked to immerse myself in the learning process. Sitting in class was something I enjoyed, where I could be entertained with knowledge. The in-class assignments were fun challenges for me. However, when I began to notice that I was continuously late with my final results, it began making me self-conscious. Why could I not be as fast as everyone else? On the other hand, because this would happen frequently, I was used to it, and it did not consciously bother me. But one day, my parents took me to a psychologist on my teacher's advice. I had not been concentrating during the classes. I vividly remember that day, despite it having been when I was 8 years old. We walked into the clinic, and a psychologist welcomed us. She introduced herself, my parents left, and we went through narrow maze-like corridors toward the door of the room where we would be spending the upcoming hour. She made me do various tests and asked me questions in between them. When she asked me whether I had a lot of friends I responded that I did not but that it did not matter because, on the school's playground, I had music and movies playing in my head all the time; that that was a nice way I spent my time. I assumed it was normal. Looking back, I understand that, ironically, that response was nearly synonymous with saying one has attention deficit disorder. The psychologist had a cold and she would aggressively blow her stuffy nose, and somehow, I still remember how I thought it was part of the testing. I was so immensely distracted and disgusted by it that I almost could not hide it. I thought it could perhaps be a way to see whether I would become affected by her actions, indicating something about my psychological state. Everything felt like a test, even the way she asked me which chocolate I wished to choose from the ones she was offering me during the break. I had difficulty choosing, and she was watching me so carefully; it made me feel incredibly nervous. And in the present, I am aware that extreme indecisiveness is an ADHD symptom. Since that psychological diagnostic process, I began to see nearly everything as a

test. Living like that would make me feel like I was going mad at certain points, even quite recently, unfortunately, despite my progress in avoiding such thinking patterns. Eventually, a while after the tests at the psychologist, I was told that I have attention deficit disorder. At the time, it was not a well-known condition. It was considered separate from attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. They told me the condition was the reason I would always daydream and finish my schoolwork late. I would receive more time from my teacher to finish my schoolwork after everyone else would have finished it. I would be told to sit outside of the classroom at the table in the hall and work on it there, alone. Despite my surroundings adapting to my condition, I did not feel supported. I felt lonely. I felt humiliated. I was isolated from my class, from the thing that was most of my life at the time; I was isolated from the world I knew. I felt deprived of a collective life. Sitting outside the classroom like that felt like a punishment for something I had no control over; for something I was not receiving help with, merely toleration. I preferred the times I would sit next to the window during class, how I would look out the window, and simply paint my inner world with color without feeling guilty for it. Instead, my post-diagnosis life became grey and prickly. There was a little book with a song about ADD. It was the only piece of information they gave me about the condition they labeled me with. It went as follows: “Am I ready to start? No, I am confused. I take a deep breath and put my pen to paper. I am doing my best, just like the rest. I am going along with it even though I have ADD,” and so on. This song was intended to make me feel seen and understood, but instead, it made me feel disconnected from the other “normal” kids. The song was not human; it did not support me, and neither did anyone else. Moreover, the song did not make me feel understood; it made me feel misunderstood. I had never felt confused before; I had been in my own world, and I was not aware that I was missing out as much as I had been. I was dealing with everything in my own way, with my own perception, but the song popped that bubble; it ruined my perception and turned it into

something toxic. My self-esteem declined ever since that diagnosis and that song. “I take a deep breath and put my pen on paper,” was not helpful either. This was not the motivation someone with ADD needed. It was toxic positivity, and it made me feel more impotent than I ever felt before. That line sounded as if it was written by someone who was not properly aware of what ADD indicated. And “I am doing my best, just like the rest. I am going along with it even though I have ADD,” hurt the most. It made me begin to see myself as different from the rest to an excessive degree, whereas, I never used to have a reason to explicitly consider myself an outsider priorly. The song made me begin to question my abilities and strengths, and it made me consider the typical norms the standard. I had to do my best to do everything the way everyone else did because *I* was the one with a diagnosis, not *them*. “I am going along with it even though I have ADD.” “*Even though* I have ADD.” I was labeled as flawed. That was it. They decided for me. I might have been a child; I might have had ADD, but I was not unintelligent - I understood what that song implied. I seemed to understand it better than the ones writing it. However, that is logical, as I was the one with the condition. They were probably not walking in my shoes; they probably did not have ADD. And, so, I ultimately became “lesser.”

In the following years, I made myself forget about the ADD and no one mentioned it any longer. My parents assumed the diagnosis could have been false considering my young age. I began to make friends, I did very well in school, and I felt energized by my regular piano and dance classes until my parents made a decision that turned out worse than the expectations they had envisioned - with one of them, I was to move to Armenia.

2

Into the Depth

We are getting deep into the tunnel. Before that, there is a bright light high above, with clouds below, as we fly toward the motherland. But the clouds become grey as we descend, and the perspective changes. After landing, the only thing in sight becomes a tunnel. Everything becomes dark, and the only way to find our way out is to use our voices, as tunnel echoes reflect at us what we let out, continuing their direction toward that point of light, toward an opening, toward something exposing all things to be seen. We must use our voices, we must keep walking, and we must learn about ourselves first. In the darkness, we must follow tunnel echoes toward truth...

When I was on vacation in Armenia at the age of 5, it was an unforgettable summer that made me impatient to visit Armenia again. But eventually, years later, my mother's intent to move there took away my pleasure in desiring that sunny wonderland. Her intent came to steal the sun that 5-year-old Biaini had grabbed in Armenia and had held in her hands dearly, with joy and in warmth, during the years she had been waiting for her next visit. She had not been expecting more than simply a pleasant visit, and sometimes, under improper circumstances, more can be too much, and at times, more can do more harm than good.

One might not understand the sorrow that that child felt; I can see how so, considering misfortunes are relative to what one has been exposed to and becomes exposed to. To move to that culture from the Dutch culture, to have a shift in experience, to change schools, to leave family behind, to be deprived of all the things dear to one for no reason other than a

parent's decision, it could sound like a mild experience; nothing like the other tragedies. Well, I do not wish to compare it to other tragedies, but somehow, that child became depressed, and when one is depressed, no matter the circumstances, somehow, that dark void is enough to see nothing but misery, hopelessness, and to live an intense fear that life will never contain colors, wherever you'll be and however you'll live. The depression was what made the sorrowful nature of that past experience presently proven real.

In Armenia, I had my old piano book with me and a new electric piano, but I no longer had piano classes. It was frozen in time; I had brought a frozen object with me; the book was there physically, but there was no one to bring it to life, no teacher to follow. The class remained interrupted and my passion remained buried inside. Moreover, that perfectly-pitched electric piano could never make me feel what the heavy keys of the wooden antique piano in my hometown with its problematic tone and incorrect octaves would provide; it was not the same, and I wished that it were. In that loneliness, I would compose pieces on the piano from time to time. When nothing was given to me, all I could think of doing was to create; it was a way to relieve my sadness. I could be taken anywhere, and I would not need to leave behind the melodies I made for myself. They belonged to me and they could never be taken away from me.

I liked meteorites and visited a museum with one in Yerevan; it was a moment of pure delight. Space was something beyond cultural borders; it was something that brought me joy in an environment that felt empty at the time. And so, all I could do was reminisce. My new life demanded learning Armenian properly and catching up with the school subjects. No other aspect could fit into that lifestyle. My days were stuffed with new knowledge, and yet, in the

middle of my soul, a void grew deeper and deeper, urging me to reject the things I was expected to acquire.

At school, I was called “smart but lazy” by the principal, without any suggestions or advice. I felt incompetent. My days at that half-international school were grey, and I had no other place to be and barely other people in my life. At times, I could not even speak, as my throat seemed to be holding me back; I physically could not. It was one of the several symptoms of depression I began to experience. Most of the time, I needed to isolate myself from my classmates to receive individual classes due to my poor Armenian, and even when I was with my classmates, they would seem highly critical, and I would remain mostly silent, knowing I would be misunderstood one way or another and make embarrassing linguistic mistakes. The cultural barrier was strong as well. Their humor was different, their communication was different, their style was different, their habits were different, and so much more was different and difficult to adapt to or understand. I could neither enjoy learning, nor social interactions. In no way did I fit in. Eventually, I ended up at another school as a consequence of my “lack of hard work” at the former one, as my grades had been declining, whereas I had desperately been applying all the energy I had to learning. I had even gone to the school psychologist on my own to explain that I felt unable to focus to be able to read in a language that was difficult for me due to my repatriation; that it required too much effort, and that it felt nearly impossible at times. The school psychologist called me wise, told me to motivate myself with some chocolate, and sent me away wishing me luck. My Armenian History teacher told me I was lazy and that I could have read the history book if I wanted to because “the girl from Syria in the classroom next door always did read the assigned chapters.” What she failed to understand was that as someone from the Netherlands,

I had never gone to an Armenian school in contrast to the girl from Syria, who had received an Armenian education her entire life. It was as if the school blamed me for not knowing Armenian well enough instead of helping me learn efficiently. I failed in that school despite its demanding environment. Most days, I would hold in my tears and anxiously compulsively scratch my head until small dried wounds would fall off my scalp onto my notebook, both during class and at home, when doing homework. I felt nothing but emptiness and anxiousness. I just wanted to have a purpose and dignity, that was all I wanted.

The new school I ended up at was effortless and empty, figuratively speaking. At least I no longer felt squeezed by judgment as the former school did. I barely received an education at that high school. My next important stepping stone would be university. But how was I to become admitted into a Dutch university with a degree from that frankly incompetent school? The school was truly ironic. I would receive an extremely low final grade for English, but then they would send me to participate in an English olympiad, which I would do successfully. Sometimes I would take a moment to process how I was in a country that seemed to be the complete opposite of the place I grew up in. I did not know how to express disapproval of an entire state properly, so, feeling unable to function well within that country's established system, I would just feel that disapproval and a certain kind of hatred towards myself instead. I used to complain a lot in the beginning when I had just moved, but there came a time when I simply felt powerless, and instead of pushing out those negative feelings from being in a place where I could not find comfort, I would pull them inside, and they would distort my self-image, resulting in confusion and an irrational way of life. Nothing made sense any longer. I did not know what to strive for.

I did not know what to strive for until the time came to prepare to apply for university. I finally had something to look forward to and I wanted the chance to study at that university with my entire heart. That university would be my portal into the world I had been yearning for ever since I moved to Armenia; at last, possibilities and freedom.

Despite finding it hard to focus, I made it; I was admitted.

3

A New Beginning

It was that time I looked in the mirror, saying the words “I can do it,” and crying afterward, that I realized that an entirety of identity and perception was to change very soon. I realized that I had, in fact, not believed that “I could do it.” Not ever. I shook all over. My heart trembled from the awareness that I had been fooling myself forever. It became time to face what was lurking behind my dysfunction.

It was fall. The weather was gloomy. I loved gloomy weather; It would give me closeness to myself. At the time, I was in the Netherlands, following my study in Armenia from afar. I would sit at my table in my attic bedroom and do my assignments on my laptop while lively rain would drip onto the ceiling windows. I absolutely loved studying; it felt natural to me and gave me comfort. Unfortunately, the thing I desired most seemed to be rejecting me. If I loved studying so much, why was it so difficult to execute those tasks; why did studying not return the same affection? Why the roughness? It felt as if I was riding a bicycle with stones stuck beside its chain, and as much as I would push, the wheels would go forward neither faster, nor smoothly enough. And so, I would continue pushing and pushing the paddles with sweat dripping down my forehead and muscles in despair, as the bicycle would in no way seem to cooperate. The bicycle was my executive dysfunction. It felt humiliating. The frustration was unbearable for the reason that there was nothing that seemed to offer me another way. It was the same experience over and over again. This time around, I loved the education I was receiving; I truly wanted to engage efficiently, and I simply could not, which led me to the time my mother walked into my room and ended up having a heart-to-heart conversation with me, resulting in the situation involving the mirror. I shared my

frustrations and poured my heart out to her. She said that I had to believe in myself; that I could do it. She told me “Look into the mirror and tell yourself ‘I can do it.’ Do it right away; just do it,” but I couldn’t. At first, I giggled awkwardly, with an expression of pain on my face, telling her that it was silly. I felt so scared to go through with it, even though it sounded so simple; “why not,” right? The idea of facing myself in my mother’s presence, telling myself that I could do it felt incredibly intimidating. My mother convinced me, and I ended up doing it. I stood there with my back straight, looking right at my reflection. My mother was sitting on my bed, watching me from the side. I said, “I can do it,” but with hesitancy. She said, “Say it again, ‘I can do it,’” and I did my best to do so, but after a few tries, I burst into tears. It was too much. I could not lie to myself. I no longer believed in my powers. I had been holding myself together with difficulty for too long. Struggle after struggle, failure after failure, it was no longer believable that things could be easier than they seemed. I felt willing to admit to my brokenness, as that was exactly how I saw myself: broken. How else could I explain how difficult I remained to be? It had always been me staying behind, me not going through with things, me struggling, me being inactive on the outside and unexplainable on the inside. I had no excuses. I reached a moment of defeat. And as a matter of fact, I needed that defeat. If it were not for that defeat, I would not have fought in the following round, and that next round was a lengthy one; one that no one expected, including myself. That gloomy fall became as transparent as its raindrops, as it exposed a whole world of truth. I spent most of my days in solitude in that attic, trying to study and curiously going through *Tedx* talks, until one day, I stumbled upon one named “Failing at Normal: An ADHD Success Story.” It described what it is like to live with ADHD. The speaker spoke about her success story as someone with inattentive ADHD. She expressed how all the hardships were not something people with ADHD should be considered guilty for, and she presented how ADHD works. The speech was very personal, emotional, and sincere. As I listened to her describing what

her life felt like having ADHD, my heart beat faster and faster and my head felt something clicking more and more, until I burst into tears. In an instant, everything fell into place. Ten years post-diagnosis, I realized I had ADHD. I had not heard or read about it until that Ted Talk. The next morning, I went downstairs and let my family know that I wanted to become re-diagnosed. I rediscovered my ADHD, but this time around, I was willing to accept it. When visiting a psychiatrist, I found out that, according to the system, I still had a formal diagnosis, and the psychiatrist had no doubts about my condition. I began my regular appointments with her. She asked me whether I kept a calendar, reminders, and whether I was organized in general. I told her that I was, and that my organized room did not help me with my unfocused state or forgetfulness. I told her that my life was not chaotic on the outside, but merely on the inside; that I did not do or perform well in many ways, but that I always appeared well-organized and put-together. She considered it a suitable decision to prescribe medication. She offered me a classic option that was generally the most effective but also relatively intense. We would begin with a small dose and increase it until we would reach the ideal dosage, which would take us months. I was confused about the way the medication worked and the side effects and could not understand whether I was actually concentrating efficiently, and month after month, we increased the dosage. I still hardly focused well enough on my university assignments. Then, I did, but I still did not feel in control of my focus, so we increased the dosage a few times again.

I began to change and I was not entirely aware of it. Then, at some point, I had a wake-up call when I got my first few panic attacks. By then, I had lost ten to fifteen kilos within several months. I had no appetite for food and no appetite for life. Everything became too much. I felt numb; and sometimes, I would experience moments of emotional explosions, and those were immensely relieving. I became more anxious and felt unable to leave the house. I became more talkative and focused. I could socialize well, and I could read for long

periods, but being on the medication felt physically and mentally unbearable. Often, I would be in my room, unable to move. I would sit in a fetus position as that would give me a little bit of comfort. Once, in my room, I felt paralyzed, unable to stand up. I would feel so intensely focused and overwhelmed that I could not hear my mother calling my name standing by the closed door. I was obsessively picking the imperfections on the skin of my legs. I felt possessed. A voice in me kept telling me to stop, to get up, but I could not. At some point, it ended, but I had little wounds all over my legs.

After my scariest panic attack, I told my psychiatrist that I was convinced that my dosage was extremely high. We discussed it, and only after that lengthy discussion, did we decide on a definitive dosage that would be okay. Instead of taking responsibility for her lack of attentiveness to the side effects I was experiencing due to the immensely high dosage, she told me I seemed to be too sensitive to the medication, and that, in order to feel better while on them, I should reach out to a psychologist. With that conversation we put an end to our appointments, as the final dosage was decided, and she considered that she could not help me any further. I was left in a state in which I had never been in my life. I felt numb but highly sensitive, depressed, and extremely anxious. On the other hand, my grades began to improve significantly; they went up an entire gpa point. Thanks to the medication, I was finally able to study consistently. I worked hard, as I always had, but ever since taking the medication, I received either nearly or entirely ideal grades. I had nearly lost all of my friends due to the period I began taking my medication, as I had become extremely shut-off from the world by isolating myself, but I no longer felt like having fun after that period anyway. I merely wanted to perform well in my education because I finally could. I became even more perfectionistic than I was before. I did not make many friends but I was friendly. Most of the time, my serious attitude would intimidate people, as some told me afterward. I did not do it on purpose; I had become extremely serious; moreover, I felt depressed, I only cared about

my university classes and assignments. People no longer interested me. I became very interested in books as well, as I was finally able to focus when reading, and thanks to those books, I discovered my preferences in literature and my general love towards it. I was highly anxious most of the time, and I was in contact with a psychologist. She advised journaling, which I did, nearly every day. I would journal during class when I felt bad, and I would journal during my breaks. I isolated myself from others. I did not feel like eating or talking; all I craved was writing. And so, I wrote several pages a day in my large notebook with my favorite pen. Writing grounded me; it helped me focus without feeling anxious. I went through a lot on the inside, but I was calm and put-together on the outside. I performed well in my new life but I somehow lost the liveliness. It became so bad that I would think about death at times. My psychologist helped me a lot. She also made me understand my ADHD better. Eventually, through therapy, I brought back the joy in life. Little by little, I became happy again, and I remained focused. I had become a mindful version of myself thanks to the phases I had gone through. I became an immensely improved version of myself in one year ever since I began my ADHD journey. I knew myself better after a year of isolation and self-discovery. I finally brought new friends into my life, and they fit perfectly. I found out that to know oneself is to attract all the right things for oneself. I behaved healthy, I ate healthy, I had a healthy circle, and I communicated in a healthy way. I began to like physical exercises and meditation. I transitioned into a very different kind of person in one year, which was not easy; it was extremely difficult, but it was a thousand times worth it. It set a foundation for a high-quality life.

Of course, it had been very hard to process that I actually had ADHD, to learn to accept that I had to adapt to it, and to tie it to my identity. It was immensely painful to realize that I had missed so many years of a potential better life. All the times I felt misunderstood and was labeled lazy, all the times my self-esteem suffered, all the times I was told I had

potential and just had to try harder, all the times I lost friends because I was not able to be consistent in my friendships, all the times I could not socialize because I could not focus, and all the times I felt so lonely without understanding why - they all could have been very different, had I received help earlier. But in the end, there I was; I was happy, and I was thriving, and I was in good company. I still am. And I am so incredibly grateful. I was alright; and whatever happened, wherever I would live in the future, I knew I would do it well. I believed in myself, and I had the freedom to choose whatever I would wish to do. I promised myself never to limit myself, as I learned that, under the right circumstances within, anyone could truly do whatever they wished for in the depths of their soul. The extent to which I changed was entirely unexpected, and it happened incredibly rapidly, but I went along with it in faith, and so, ultimately, life taught me that we should never stop hoping and believing in a better life because it could be right around the corner when we need it the most.

4

Home

One day, I was on my way for a casual visit to an acquaintance. As the car drove, I observed the places my taxi passed by and instantly visualized the most recent instances of my walking past those spots, the experiences. I was to move away soon to return to the Netherlands after my 10-year absence. It would be a return from the foreign place I persistently had to become used to. I continued to process the images of my past presence on those streets. Something happened; right before I could leave, Yerevan became mine.

It was like a bird becoming mature and its home knowing the bird would return, as it would be by choice, deliberately, in independence. It reminded me of those moments in movies when two people who used to despise one another and had gone on a long and challenging journey together had to say goodbye to each other. In the end, those people would turn to each other from a distance, their eyes would meet, and in that moment, facing each other, their eyes would be full of meaning. The eyes would say it all – they would tell those two beings, “Whatever happens from now on, we are inseparable.” That would be the interaction between Armenia and me. We established mature love, grounded love, one that is stable, with no extreme approval or disapproval, no judgment; merely two energies deeply knowing one another as what they are. This is because we truly went a long road together, discovering the worst feelings toward each other and seeing one another to the core. And so, at some point, the notion of my being in Armenia became similar to the notion of home. When we say “make yourself at home,” we imply sitting in not-so-formal, less appealing positions and anything that brings comfort. I saw Armenia’s less appealing positions; I saw it in various positions. I saw Armenia like people see chaotic households. The final component

of Armenia possibly becoming a home seemed to be its willingness to let me go, but merely for now. It was that last thing that demonstrated an expression of true care and love. I was set free to spread my wings. Once you spread your wings, you recognize where your home is, the place you truly know, the place where warmth has built up. It is only after you become vulnerable before someone and expose beauty and ugliness that you become close in a way that the bond lasts, in a way that you naturally wish to remain committed for long. Therefore, the path I walked in Armenia has been important because my love for the motherland would never have been this way if I had remained a diasporan.

I consider myself to have discovered a treasure that diasporans will never truly see despite their love and patriotism toward our motherland, including myself if I had not involuntarily moved to Armenia. I gained something I did not want to take initially. It was a gift I had not asked for. It feels as if I found a gold mine that they never knew and never will know because they have never experienced that closeness to find out what they are missing. They never saw the mine lying underneath the ground; not that I, standing in that mine, initially saw value in it. Out of survival instinct, I had been digging and digging in the dark until I found gold at that one last moment of digging, right when I thought there would be nothing; that is how it goes because you keep feeling that heaviness until, at some point, your heart suddenly opens up – as if to experience an instance of attraction, when your heart suddenly increases its rate, and you fall in love. You are the same person, and you are in the same situations, but it happens in an instant, and you can never explain it; you just accept it. You take in the emerging feelings of love and affection. Many diasporans see Armenia's nice aspects and love it. I used to, but I have seen the beauty and the ugliness for a persistent amount of time, and that was key for me because I truly connected with Armenia to a further degree than I used to. In the same sense, you do not find a soulmate by merely admiring their beautiful parts. You fight about the ugly, you struggle, you become upset, you reject, you

reconcile, and you accept, but you also do not tolerate – you wish for growth as you consider them someone close to your heart. Therefore, ultimately, following a rocky, mountainous journey together, we connected, and Armenia became the place I would always return to; Armenia became home.