

**Echoes of the Home I Lost Forever**

**By**

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# Echoes of the Home I Lost Forever

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an eternal quest for a new home—a new place of belonging. Kaline's project provided invaluable inspiration and guidance in shaping my own narrative.

## Abstract

Following the mass exodus of Nagorno-Karabakh's (NKR) entire population in September 2023, Azerbaijan initiated the erasure of state symbols once associated with the unrecognized republic where I was born. The city we knew as Stepanakert was renamed Khankendi, and Azerbaijan's coat of arms was hung on the Presidential building. The National Assembly and the House of Veterans of the First Nagorno-Karabakh War were dismantled. During his “triumphant” visit to the now-depopulated and emptied Stepanakert in October 2023, President Aliyev disdainfully dishonored the NKR flag. These drastic measures left former residents with a stark realization—the prospect of returning to their homeland seemed highly improbable, if not entirely impossible. The once-unrecognized oasis of democracy and free will has been transformed into an economic region within authoritarian Azerbaijan.

After losing my home, I consciously avoided recalling my past to shield myself from the poignant moments that left me powerless as they became relics of a life left behind. I feared that my memories would fade away over time. However, as I embarked on the journey of writing them down, I recognized the significance of self-reflection and examining past events from a different perspective. Through the lens of memory and self-study, my objective became immortalizing these memories and transforming them into a literary piece—an inspiration for other displaced individuals to share their stories and reclaim their voices.

**Keywords:** Artsakh, Nagorno-Karabakh, war, displacement, belonging, home, loss, identity, place attachment, trauma

## **Echoes of Home I Lost Forever**

On September 19, 2023, after successfully cutting Artsakh off from the external world through a 10-month blockade, Azerbaijan launched its lightning offensive. After a day of intense fighting, Azerbaijan claimed full control of Nagorno-Karabakh, forcing more than 100,000 Armenians to flee the territory. Within the next two weeks, the entire population packed their memories and belongings in a few bags, abandoning the place they once called home.

Why do I believe that I lost my home forever? While Azerbaijani authorities extend calls for the Armenian population to return, the reality is starkly different. 300 meters away from our family house, Azerbaijan demolished the National Assembly, the Veteran's House, and all other national symbols. If I looked from my balcony now, I would see the Azerbaijani flags hanging on the Presidential building. As I was monitoring the streets in Stepanakert through Google Maps, I spotted a black car stationed in front of our house, meaning that it already has new settlers.

The schools I attended for 12 years are emptied – they will most likely be turned into some municipal buildings, just as they became voting points during Aliyev's reelection in February 2024. Some residential buildings have been razed to the ground. My neighbors are now scattered around Armenia and beyond. The neighboring family we would visit without knocking on the door now seek asylum in France. Two others found residence in villages and different districts of Yerevan. The Garegin Nzhdeh neighborhood in Stepanakert does not exist anymore. The street where I played hide and seek as a child, chased butterflies and bees, and learned to ride a bicycle has been erased as such. It is now just another vacant street that will likely be

repopulated with Azerbaijanis in the coming months or years. The question lingers: where should I go back to, if there is a chance?

The echoes of a lost homeland spread in the uncertainty of returning to a place that, while physically relatively unchanged, has undergone a profound metamorphosis—a place that may never again feel like home.

When I visited my hometown for the last time in November 2022, I took my first and last picture of the infamous banner, “Free Artsakh is welcoming you,” on the road. I documented the whole journey, taking dozens of pictures and videos while driving through the Lachin corridor towards Stepanakert. Every passing mile held a sense of urgency, an unspoken acknowledgment that each frame captured might be a visual goodbye. Upon reaching Stepanakert, I embraced every instance as if it were a precious fragment of time slipping away, intuitively feeling the impending reality. Two weeks later, the heart-wrenching news arrived – Azerbaijan had blocked the Lachin corridor, cutting the lifeline that connected me and hundreds of other families to our homeland.

The relief of refinding my family alive after the exodus was accompanied by the sobering reality – over 400 lives were lost in the aftermath of Azerbaijan's military attack, compounded by the devastating fuel depot explosion on September 25, 2023.

This capstone project will be a recollection of different instances of my life, from moving to a new house in the city center in 2016 to the moment I reunited with my family in Goris after a year-long forced separation in 2023. Alongside this personal narration, I will look deeper into myself – how did my attachment to a place strengthen after the 2020 war? How did my perceptions of home and family modify over time? Do I fear losing my identity as I was cut off from my roots?

Armenian history, stained with many tragic cases of displacement and genocides, has often found its detailed examination in scholarly studies conducted in Armenian recent history. Delving into the wounds of displaced people in the immediate aftermath poses risks, potentially worsening the mental vulnerability of the affected population. Consequently, few studies have yet been undertaken so far on the psychological impacts of the displacement of Artsakh people. The ones already published include the *Shushi: Mental maps* (Amiryan, 2023) and some other ongoing projects conducted by the Cultural and Social Narratives Lab and the Institute of Archeology and Ethnography of the National Academy of Sciences.

In embarking on this project, I aim to lend a voice to my memoirs as a significant contribution to collective memory. While the memories remain fresh and untouched, I take the responsibility of carefully navigating through my past and present, providing a first-hand account of the events through the lens of a survivor. By sharing my story, I aim to lay the foundation for a broader exploration of the inner challenges faced by those who, like me, have weathered the storm of displacement and loss.

### **Strangers in our own homeland**

As I began drafting my literature review, guests arrived at our place. My colleagues were producing a radio documentary for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) on Artsakh refugees and requested to interview my family. After inviting them in for coffee, my father initiated the conversation.

"When my children walked through the streets of Stepanakert, everyone recognized them as Sergey and Liana's kids," he began. "But as they grew older, the dynamic shifted – people began to know Liana and me as their parents." I pondered the direction of the discussion,

knowing my father's tendency to introduce us, his children, in a flattering light whenever we had new visitors at home. Then he added, "Here in Yerevan, we're like strangers, devoid of history, of a past. We're strangers in our own homeland." He continued: "I fear we'll lose our identity here."

That same fear has haunted me since our displacement. I was questioned several times by journalists: "Do you worry about assimilating with the local population and losing your identity?" It always sparked anger within me because I believed that Armenians could not "assimilate" with other Armenians, as we share the same bloodline, traditions, history, and culture. At times, I vented my frustration at journalists, saying that they lacked understanding of the topic if they posed such a question to an Armenian.

It wasn't until I took a step back and reflected on my new self that I began to sense the disparity in my self-perception in Yerevan and Stepanakert. My father's words resonated deeply – I live in my bigger homeland, in the city where I spent my last four years, which shaped me as a person, as a student, and as a journalist. However, Yerevan cannot replace the feeling of belonging I embraced in Stepanakert.

The struggle with identity and belonging often involves a profound reevaluation of one's beliefs, values, and cultural identity. It's a journey of self-discovery that requires navigating through layers of trauma, loss, and adaptation. In a search for a new identity, refugees and displaced persons like me grapple with questions of belonging, acceptance, and integration into their new communities. We adapt to a new community while striving to preserve elements of our own heritage, leading to a mixture of identities. Ultimately, overcoming an identity crisis is not just about finding a new sense of self but also about forging connections with others and building a sense of belonging in a world that has been fundamentally altered.

## Literature review

The exodus from Artsakh had a deep psychological effect on the displaced population, which differed individually but had collectively common patterns. This literature review will delve into the challenges surrounding identity, attachment, belonging, and other existential issues that displaced Artsakhites have yet to confront. Due to the absence of prior research on the reintegration of Artsakh refugees into Armenia, I will draw upon my personal experiences and emotions to provide an approximate depiction of the adaptation process in Armenia. This exploration will be guided by the themes of memory, survival guilt, belonging and place attachment, and identity construction as a refugee.

## Memory

In *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire*, Pierre Nora attempts to distinguish memory from history. “Memory, insofar as it is effective and magical, only accommodates those facts that suit it; it nourishes recollections that may be out of focus or telescopic, global or detached, particular or symbolic-responsive to each avenue of conveyance or phenomenal screen, to every censorship or projection,” he writes (Nora, 1989, p. 8). He further asserts that memory is a perpetual bond tying us to the eternal present, while history is a representation of the past (Nora, 1989). Now, are my memories about Artsakh and my previous life merely my personal reflections, or do they hold a broader significance in Artsakh's collective memory and history?

On a personal level, my memories are deeply subjective and influenced by my individual experiences, emotions, and perceptions. They represent my unique perspective and serve as a means of understanding and processing my past. However, these personal reflections also

intersect with broader collective memory and history. As the French philosopher Maurice Halbwachs put it, memory is simultaneously multiple and specific; “it’s collective, plural, and yet individual,” while “history belongs to everyone and to no one” (as cited in Nora, 1989, p. 9).

Within the collective memory of Artsakh, all individual experiences contribute to the mosaic of narratives that shape the global understanding of the past. Memories become part of the collective consciousness, adding significance beyond one’s own personal recollections, and become a testament to the resilience, struggles, and identity of the Artsakh people.

In "Breaking the Conspiracy of Silence": Testimony, Traumatic Memory, and Psychotherapy with Survivors of Political Violence, McKinney notes that trauma plays an important role in forming a particular type of identity, and “such an identity is constituted with what is considered the irreducibility or indelibility of the traumatic past.” (McKinney, 2007, p. 271) The narratives constructed through the realm of trauma serve as an "irrevocable master identity," hence, the new identity of the trauma survivor becomes centralized around memory, trauma, and the past (Kidron, 2003, p. 529).

“What we call memory today is already history” (Nora, 1989, p. 15). As only a handful of aged men remained in Stepanakert, the memories we created during the years of independence and following the 2020 war became history, and the quest for personal history, identity, and memory started off.

### **Survivor Guilt**

During the tumultuous times of the blockade, I would talk to my family several times a day. Once, during a video call with my 14-year-old brother, I savored a bite of a chocolate pie I was enjoying with tea. He noticed it immediately and exclaimed: “What are you eating? I want that too.” A surge of shame washed over me as I grappled with the guilt of enjoying a full-

fledged life while he faced food scarcity for months. I struggled to find the right words to respond to a 14-year-old kid deprived of the food abundance I was privileged to have in Yerevan. After that, I never dared to talk to my family while around the table as I felt extremely guilty before them. It wasn't until later that I discovered the emotions I experienced had a scientific explanation: survivor guilt.

The experience of survivor guilt is one of the symptoms branching out of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). In “A cognitive model of posttraumatic stress disorder. Behaviour Research and Therapy,” Ehlers and Clark (2000) found that PTSD arises from continuous exposure to traumatic events that bring about an ongoing feeling of threat and danger among individuals. Ehlers and Clark state that *fear* was previously recognized as the primary emotion underlying PTSD, but further research reveals that the sense of fear is often accompanied by other emotional experiences, such as *shame* and *guilt* during or following the traumatic experience (2000).

In "Survivor Guilt: A Cognitive Approach," Murray et al (2021) found that although survivor guilt and PTSD are often interconnected, not everyone experiencing survivor guilt necessarily fits the criteria for PTSD diagnosis. Therefore, survivor guilt is applicable to those with or without PTSD (Murray et al, 2021). The authors further discuss how survivor guilt often affects individuals who have witnessed or been exposed to death but have managed to survive, leading to emotional distress and self-doubt. This phenomenon is particularly prevalent among populations such as refugees, war veterans, and survivors of terrorist attacks, many of whom suffer from PTSD. The authors emphasize that guilt is a dominant emotion for survivors of morally injurious events, those who have either perpetrated or witnessed acts that conflict with their moral values (Murray et al, 2021).

Further research sheds light on the intricate relationship between PTSD symptoms and trauma-related guilt. In "The relationship of trauma-related guilt with PTSD symptoms in adult trauma survivors: A meta-analysis," Kip et al. (2022) delve into the cyclical nature of negative beliefs that emerge from traumatic experiences. The concept of Non-Adaptive Guilt and Shame (NAGS) delineates the spectrum of responses among trauma survivors, from those who do not experience guilt to others who navigate a cycle of guilt and shame, influencing their perception of personal wrongdoing. Moreover, PTSD and survivor guilt intertwine to hinder the emotional processing of traumatic events, as individuals become predisposed to interpreting their experiences through a lens of shame and guilt (Kip et al, 2022).

In the summer of 2022, while the blockade persisted, I embarked on a trip across Europe and visited several countries. Before departing Armenia, I had numerous conversations with my sister, Nina, to ensure she wouldn't resent my decision to travel. As she remained locked in Artsakh without the freedom to move, I had the entire world at my fingertips. The weight of guilt remained ever-present in my thoughts — guilt towards my sister, my brother, and all those besieged in their homes, surrounded by armed enemies, while I roamed the streets of Paris and Berlin, seemingly unaffected by their plight.

In "Survivor guilt: A cognitive approach," (2021) Muray et al. also analyze the effects of survivor's guilt from a collective perspective. They found that survivor guilt is seen as an evolutionary mechanism that evolved to foster group unity, deter antisocial competition, and encourage altruistic actions. Some research indicates that survivor guilt can prompt prosocial behaviors. For instance, Valent documented how guilt prompted survivors of significant bushfires in Australia to offer their homes to those who had been displaced (Muray et al, 2021). Similarly, Wang and his team discovered that survivor guilt in the aftermath of an earthquake

had a beneficial impact on social support, which in turn correlated with post-traumatic growth, suggesting that individuals experiencing guilt were more inclined toward altruistic actions (Muray et al, 2021).

Reflecting on past events, memories of the social dynamics in Armenia during the 2020 war and the exodus in September 2023 came to my mind. During both tragic periods, the people of Artsakh were met with open arms in Armenia, with many offering free housing to the displaced. I vividly recall phrases like, "What else can we do?" or "It's the least we can offer," heard everywhere around. These altruistic responses from the Armenians in Armenia may stem from a pang of guilt for living under a peaceful sky while thousands of homes were being destroyed by Azerbaijani missiles in Artsakh.

During another conversation with my colleagues from Artsakh, I heard someone say, "We just look at the person next to us, who is in a far worse condition (over 450 lives were lost during the last week), and we do not complain about ours."

### **Belonging and place attachment**

In "Home is where the heart is: The effect of place of residence on place attachment and community participation," Charis Anton and Carmen Lawrence (2014) examine the connection between residing in a threatened area and one's attachment to that place. This particular research focuses on place identity and place dependence of Western Australians who faced bushfire risks in their living environment; however, the findings can be applied to broader contexts of place attachment in endangered areas.

Anton and Lawrence assert that the broad definition of "place attachment" as the link between people and their environment is imprecise and immeasurable (2014). However, other researchers applied a multidimensional construct to its definition, breaking down the place

attachment into several categories: place dependence, place identity, social bonding, community attachment, rootedness, and others. This variation of dimensions sheds light on the multilayer essence of attachment, as each category can be distinguished as a separate field of study (as cited by Anton and Lawrence, 2014).

To simplify the concept, Clara Trentelman (2009) suggests applying it solely to physical connections to a place, separating it from bonds with people, which links better to community attachment. Elaborating on place dependence, Anton and Lawrence suggested that it stems from a favorable assessment of a location that meets individuals' needs and allows them to fulfill their goals and plans (2014). In other words, we get attached to a place that makes our life objectives feasible and meets our standards of decent living. However, the extent of dependence on place is likely to change under certain circumstances (Anton and Lawrence, 2014).

Anton and Lawrence found that in times of loss and hardship, people's emotional connections and associations with their homes become stronger, suggesting that "threats" might strengthen these ties. Threats to one's sense of place identity can make this connection more pronounced and people often become aware of their sense of place only when it is endangered (Anton & Lawrence, 2014).

I was born to a patriotic family, and the love for my homeland was enrooted in me since my very childhood. I specifically owe this connection to my father, who never spared an effort to show us not only all the centuries-old churches and palaces but also the hidden cultural heritage in Artsakh unknown to the majority. I can certainly assert that I explored every nook and cranny of my homeland before I lost it.

The significance of Stepanakert as my home, its very existence threatened, only became apparent to me during and after the 2020 war. Prior to that, I believed that my hometown was

inherently mine; I was born and raised there, my parents, grandparents and great-grandparents lived there, so I had all the rights to claim that it's my home in the broadest sense. However, the conflict was a stark awakening. I realized that what I once assumed to be inherently mine could easily be seized by others. The war shattered my sense of security and revealed that my home was vulnerable, constantly under the watchful gaze of neighboring forces. For the first time in my life, I grappled with the fear that one day, I might lose my home and that its ownership might slip from my grasp.

With each subsequent ceasefire violation, my acknowledgment grew, but so did my appreciation for the value of home. The sense of attachment to Stepanakert deepened an inner dread of its potential loss. Life in Stepanakert became divided into before and after the 2020 war: following the conflict, I lived every day as though it might be the last in my beloved hometown.

### **Identity construction as a refugee**

“As displaced bodies move, the identities they inhabit also move,” Katrina Powell writes in her “Rhetorics of Displacement: Constructing Identities in Forced Relocations” (2012, p.300). Focusing primarily on the displaced survivors of Hurricane Katrina, the text explores the dynamics of identity and displacement, emphasizing that identities are always in flux, particularly for those experiencing displacement, leading to the creation of hybrid identities.

According to international law, a refugee is a person who "owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of [their] nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail [themselves] of the protection of that country" (UN Refugee Convention, 1951). However, being identified as a refugee goes far beyond the official definition as it incorporates several identities simultaneously. One key concept introduced by Powell is that

of "moving identities," which suggests that identities are not static but rather perpetually in motion, shaped by the ongoing experiences of displacement. This perspective underscores the dynamic nature of identity construction and highlights the ways in which individuals adapt to their changing circumstances.

She further introduces the idea of a hybrid identity, which emerges out of the moving identity. "Once one has moved physically from one place to another, the act of displacement, the act of reconceptualizing the hybrid identity, continues in an active way and does not end," Powell states (2012, p. 301). While a person can physically relocate from one place to another, their constructed identity—shaped by the narratives surrounding them—remains ingrained within them. Yet, even as they transition to a new physical space and adopt a new identity, such as that of a refugee or an internally displaced person, their previous identity persists. "Displacement is not an overtaking... it is a meandering path, a combination of many paths, paths not predetermined by place, person, or nation," Powell argues (2012, p. 301).

Another important point Powell touches upon is the rhetoric surrounding displaced persons, including refugees, that often involves othering and dehumanization, perpetuated by media portrayals and societal biases.

Powell uses the survivors of Hurricane Katrina as an example of how displaced persons resist labeling themselves as "refugees." From the several people interviewed, most didn't associate themselves with refugees as such, and pointed at their US citizenship. Some had a perception that a "refugee" in the US should have no state, should not belong anywhere, and should be stereotypically black. The interviewees in this study highlighted their desire to stay a part of the national narrative and construct themselves as citizens belonging to the same

narrative. They also criticized the US government for making mistakes in arranging the consequences of Katrina (Powell, 2014).

As different as the cases of Hurricane Katrina and Artsakh are, the experiences of displaced people share a common line. In October, 2023, the Armenian government issued a “temporary protection status” to all the displaced Artsakhtsis, which equals to the refugee status. It was announced that the passports Artsakhtsis held were merely “travel documents,” and did not certify Armenian citizenship (Shahverdyan, 2023). Many of us have already adjusted to being identified as “forcibly displaced” or “refugees” by international media or human rights NGOs. Moreover, authorities of both Armenia and Artsakh admit that recognizing us as refugees is a reasonable politically-driven decision. Still, some people resist such classifications and place themselves equal to Armenian citizens, as classification as refugees carries deep implications beyond just a legal or political status. It touches upon one's sense of identity, pride, and dignity. For many people, being labeled as a refugee can evoke feelings of shame, vulnerability, and a loss of agency. It's not just about legal recognition but about how people perceive themselves and how they want to be perceived by others.

The term "refugee" often carries connotations of being helpless, dependent, and in need of charity or pity. This can be a source of discomfort and even resistance for people who see themselves as capable, resilient, and deserving of respect, which is exactly the case with Artsakhtsis. Being labeled as a refugee can feel like a reduction of one's identity to a single aspect of their experience, overlooking their individuality, talents, and contributions. In essence, the resistance to being labeled as a refugee stems from a desire to reclaim one's sense of dignity, autonomy, and belonging. It's about asserting one's identity on their own terms and rejecting any narrative that undermines their humanity and resilience.

“When I heard them call us refugees, I couldn't do nothing but drop my head because you see I'm a United States citizen of America. Call me a refugee?!” (Powell, 2012, p. 304). This is how one of the interviewees in Powell's study reacted to his new legal status, which is similar to the reaction of many displaced Artsakhtsis considering themselves full-fledged Armenian citizens.

“When displaced persons are forced out of their homes because of natural disaster or war, we expect their stories to fulfill certain narrative expectations of otheredness, victimization, and dependence on the state,” concludes Powell (2012, p. 308). Whether in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina or the Artsakh conflict, the refusal to be defined solely by the label of refugee reflects a universal longing for dignity, autonomy, and belonging.

While delving into my research on identity formation and place attachment among refugees and displaced persons, I studied various historical cases, such as the displacement of Ukrainians after the invasion of Crimea in 2014 (Pikulicka-Wilczewska & Uehling, 2017), the occupational assimilation of Vietnamese refugees (Finnan, 1981), and several others. What struck me the most was the abundance of common patterns between the individual and collective experiences of nations miles away from mine. Despite coming from completely different backgrounds and being exposed to different historical and political circumstances, I felt as though the articles I read were studying my personal story, my feelings, and the social and internal processes I've been undergoing since my displacement. This realization highlighted that, regardless of background, vulnerable populations share a common language. When we lose a home, the milestone upon which we've built our identities for years fades away, thrusting us onto a journey of redefining ourselves in a new environment.

## Research Question

The central question guiding my investigation is: *"How does my individual experience of displacement from Artsakh intersect with broader themes of identity, memory, and societal categorization as a refugee, and what strategies do I employ to navigate these challenges while seeking a sense of belonging in Armenia?"*

While I draw parallels between my personal journey and broader patterns of displacement, I explore the nuances of identity reconstruction, sense of belonging and place attachment, as well as the influence of memories on rebuilding our lives in new environments.

## Methodology

In August 2023, I attended an international peacebuilding summer camp in Germany alongside youth from the South Caucasus. Among them was Ramin, a 40-year-old Azerbaijani participant whose family had been displaced from the Lachin region of Soviet Azerbaijan during the first Nagorno-Karabakh War. Whenever he introduced himself, Ramin would immediately mention his family's displacement, emphasizing that Lachin had been occupied by Armenians for thirty years before Azerbaijan took it back.

Throughout the sessions, discussions often revolved around the blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh, which was at its most acute phase during that time, causing severe shortages of essential supplies like food, medicine, gas, and electricity. As someone whose family was directly affected by the blockade, I found it difficult to accept Ramin's denial of its existence. He seemed entrenched in state propaganda, repeating narratives from Ilham Aliyev and Azerbaijani media, insisting that the blockade was fabricated and that the Lachin corridor remained open.

Frustrated, I confronted him, telling him not to view the world solely through the lens of past conflicts and to refrain from constantly referring to his connection to "occupied Lachin." "It's been thirty years since the First War," I once told him bluntly. "You shouldn't define yourself solely by your past."

Little did I know then that just a month later, I would find myself in the same position as Ramin's family had thirty years prior — grappling with displacement and struggling to redefine my own identity as a displaced person.

### **Self-study and memory**

Embarking on my capstone project, I anticipated the challenges that lay ahead. Before diving into the writing process, I realized that I needed to confront aspects of myself that I neglected since my displacement. As a journalist, I've always found solace in storytelling, but memory work was different. This was about delving into my own narrative, exploring the depths of memory work and self-study.

I approached myself and my past with an open mind and a willingness to introspect myself. It meant peeling back layers of my identity, examining the scars left by war and displacement, and acknowledging the transformations I had undergone in recent years. Anastasia Kamanos-Gamelin's exploration of personal change in "The Sand Diaries: Vision, vulnerability and self-study " resonated with me deeply. In her work, she navigated the different layers of being a female artist in academia, using self-study as a methodology for understanding and embracing personal evolution (Kamanos-Gamelin, 2004). It's this critical perspective, this willingness to confront the self with honesty and vulnerability, that I aimed to embody in my own journey of self-discovery through writing.

Kamanos-Gamelin writes that searching for meaning often causes discomfort and vulnerability, but “vulnerability can be strength rather than a weakness” (Kamanos-Gamelin, 2004, p. 188). However, seven months into being displaced, I couldn’t find a way to turn my vulnerability into a strength, and I’m not trying to at this point. Recalling my home and the years I was blessed to spend in my homeland, I can’t help but feel weak and defeated. Seeing every other monument or building in Stepanakert being dismantled, I realize how impossible and unnecessary it is to pretend that your vulnerability gives you strength. In reality, it brings disappointment, discouragement and hatred. However, I believe that my feelings will change over the years.

Kamanos-Gamelin also states in her autobiographical book *The Female Artist in Academia: Home & Away* that self-study and transformation often implies “looking backward in order to move ahead” (Kamanos, 2019, p. 10) It means confronting the pain and loss that are shaping me, and finding a way to reconcile with the past in order to embrace the future. At this point, addressing the effects of post-war and post-displacement trauma feels like trying to scale mountains that loom unseen in the distance. And my new personality is being redefined while I’m processing the loss of home.

As hard and emotionally draining as it is, I found my testimony an essential contribution to the scholarship on the ethnic cleansing of Nagorno-Karabakh from the perspective of oral history. As High, Little and Duong wrote in *Remembering Mass Violence: Oral History, New Media and Performance*, personal testimony often stems from the belief that sharing life stories can catalyze personal and societal transformation (High, Little & Duong, 2014, p. 4). The authors also regard survivors of mass violence as “human witnesses to a dehumanizing situation” (High, Little & Duong, 2014, p. 4), which is more than accurate in respect to the witnesses of the

blockade and the mass exodus from Artsakh. Among the wide variety of topics I could choose for my capstone project, I chose the hardest one – retelling my story of having and losing a home, with a firm belief and hope to help future researchers navigate the experiences and feelings of the displaced Armenians of Artsakh.

High, Little and Duong raise a key question formulated by an Italian oral historian, Alessandro Portelli: “What is our place in history, and what is the place of history in our lives?” (High, Little & Duong, 2014, p. 4) Like my peer Kaline Tchamitchian asked in her capstone, I kept asking myself: “Is MY story worth telling?” (Tchamitchian, 2022). I did not witness the most horrifying periods of the conflict: the blockade, September 19 and the mass exodus. My family and beloved ones did not suffer physically and I have a roof above my head. However, I acknowledged that tragedies should not and cannot be measured, and every person has a unique narrative and perspective to offer.

Lorne Shirinian, a second-generation Armenian genocide survivor based in Canada, tried, through narration, to move his father’s memories “from private domain to public memory and finally into history” (Shirinian, 2014, p. 52). After reading the accounts of different trauma survivors, I decided to take the courage to start looking back at my memories – traumatic, painful and horrific, and pave their way into history.

In discussing traumatic experiences, Shirinian touches upon a crucial aspect: the influence of upbringing on our perception of the past (Shirinian, 2014, p. 51). Born in 2002, I came into the world during a post-war era, surrounded by narratives of our triumph in the first war. From my earliest days, the seeds of national pride were sown within me, shaping my identity and worldview. Now, as I struggle with the weighty question of what to impart to my own children, I find myself reflecting on the homeland I once knew and lost. How will I convey

its essence to them? How will they experience the land that holds such significance in our family's history?

The answer, I've realized, lies not only in my own recollections but also in the collective memories of the 150,000 souls for whom Artsakh was more than just a place—it was home. As Shirinian advocates, our aim should be to cultivate a community that transcends the shadows of mass graves, focusing instead on shaping a future that honors the past while responding to the demands of the present (Shirinian, 2014, p. 53).

In narrating my story, I aim to capture the essence of Artsakh—the taste of its fruits, the scent of its soil, the breathtaking beauty that once surrounded me. I aim to paint a vivid portrait of a land that was more than just a "disputed territory" relegated to headlines but rather a vibrant tapestry of life, history, and human resilience. Through my words, I seek to breathe life into the memories that define my identity and continue to resonate within me, as “we cannot allow victimhood to organize and determine our future” (Shirinian, 2014, p. 53).

Self-study holds significant importance for displaced persons due to the transformative potential they offer in understanding personal troubles within the broader context of public issues and history, as elucidated by C. Wright Mills in “Guidelines for Quality in Autobiographical Forms of Self-Study Research” (Bullough and Pinnegar, 2001, p. 21). Mills contends that individual challenges cannot be adequately addressed without considering their societal implications. Additionally, self-study serves as avenues for self-realization and personal growth, as emphasized by Mooney's assertion that research is a means of engaging with life to extract its deepest significance (as cited in Bullough and Pinnegar, 2001, p. 21).

Furthermore, the narrative approach to understanding, advocated by Clandinin and Connelly, underscores the importance of storytelling in making sense of one's experiences (as

cited in Bullough and Pinnegar, 2001, p. 14). By exploring a narrative through research, we not only gain insights into our own journeys but also contribute to a collective understanding of an experience, in my case - displacement. Self-study, for me, was a means of empowerment, self-discovery, and contributing to broader social discourse.

Reflecting on my past journey through the lens of self-study allowed me to confront a question that has lingered in my mind for months: *What lies at the core of my identity?* Is it my Armenianness or my connection to a specific part of my broader homeland, Armenia? Or do I perceive myself through the prism of my refugee status? These questions have no easy answers, but after months of studying myself and scrutinizing my emotions, I have unearthed the essence of my identity: I am an Artsakhtsi. It has been seven months since I lost my home. Regardless of where I may find myself in the future, being forcefully expelled from my ancestral land and the emotional turmoil I've experienced will remain an essential aspect of my being. Wherever I go, I carry within me the essence of my home and the tapestry of memories it holds. Only now can I empathize with individuals like Ramin, who, decades ago, shared a fate similar to mine and continues to carry the indelible imprint of his homeland. As I go through life where the prospect of returning to the land of my warmest memories grows increasingly distant, I realize that the perennial question, "Who am I?" will persistently haunt me. And the answer is: I am Lilit, a child of Artsakh, a sacred land unjustly torn from me but destined to reside eternally within my soul.

### **Artist Statement**

As a journalist, I often share short blog posts reflecting on ongoing situations and my feelings on social media. I've written about peacebuilding, memories of my grandmother, and the ache of missing home during the blockade, among other topics. At the time, I didn't fully realize

the importance of sharing these thoughts as part of my memory work, but I was aware of the emotional toll my writing took on me.

While working on my capstone project, I found myself crying many times. The emotional weight was so heavy at times that I had to shut down my laptop without completing paragraphs. Other times, I'd get lost in Google Maps, wandering through the streets of Stepanakert, imagining myself there instead of trying to capture the smell of our garden and the beauty of our house in words.

During these tough moments, I found solace in envisioning my future and the person I aspire to become. I'd often block out memories, forcing myself to focus on moving forward rather than dwelling on the past. The decision to write a capstone that required me to revisit painful memories and reopen old wounds was difficult. However, I knew that in the long run, it would aid in my healing process and provide a written record for my children to understand my family's experiences.

For this project, I've chosen to recount only a few of the most impactful moments from my life. I've opted to begin by describing the various houses I've lived in Stepanakert since childhood. To me, the essence of home is not just physical structures; it's about the communities I've been a part of. Despite residing in different neighborhoods, each house has been intertwined with the people and memories that define my sense of belonging.

My home is my neighbors, local shops, and the streets where countless memories were created, school friends and relatives now scattered across Armenia and beyond. These memories found their place in family albums, school CDs, and the photos on my phone gallery, and I found these stories important to retell.

The most emotional and personal memory, among all, is my reunion with my family after nearly a year of forced separation. On that day in Goris, I met thousands of broken and desperate people sharing the same destiny, including my family members, teachers, neighbors, and just regular acquaintances. For months after the September events, I refrained from reminiscing about that day because it reminded me of how helpless, broken and vulnerable I felt for a long time afterward. However, the time came to look back and put my memories and feelings into words.

Finally, I've contemplated my return to Stepanakert. Where would I go first if I had a chance to go back? Would I have the courage to knock on the door of our house, now settled by new residents? These questions now compel me to reflect on the resilience and pain embedded within my story. Through these narratives, I aim to convey how despair can transform into strength over time, while the yearning for home persists forever.

### **To the Home I Lost Forever**

"Breakaway enclave, "disputed territory," "contested land," "unrecognized republic," "separatist entity"... The list of the definitions and names international headlines give for the land I call home is abundant. But what truly constitutes a home?

Is it the four walls where I grew up, my neighborhood, my school, my relatives? Perhaps home encompasses all the people, places, objects, and memories that have imbued us with feelings of safety, protection, and belonging.

In my 21 years of life, I lived in four different homes: the one where I was born, a temporary stopgap while we constructed another home, the new house we built from scratch, and an apartment we relocated to upon displacement.

The first house and its neighborhood hold the essence of my childhood. It was a wooden house in the center of Stepanakert which did not stand out with its appearance. It is where my silly, naughty, and hyperenergetic personality was formed. In this house, my paternal grandparents' presence illuminated every family gathering. That is the neighborhood where I learned to ride a bicycle by falling off every other time and where forged my earliest friendships.

Passing through the gates of this house, I embarked on my journey to school. The fragrance and charm of the snowdrops my father planted in our garden, immortalized in our old photographs, have resided in my memory for years. What I cherish most are the sprawling grapevines that adorned our garden, their luscious fruit occasionally littering the terrace below. Despite the mess, those grapes always symbolized summer bliss in that home.

As a child, I shared a room with both my sisters. The walls of my rooms were painted a soothing baby-blue, adorned with delicate motifs of stars and moons. My parents also hung celestial figures of moons, stars, and suns throughout the room. Thus, whether it was day or night, our bedroom was a serene ode to the skies. When the lights were turned off, these figures would softly illuminate the space with a warm, yellow glow.

Far from being perfectly conditioned, that first house was always brimming with the laughter of my sisters and me, and it held dear the memories of our beloved grandparents, who passed away within its walls.

We temporarily moved to an apartment as we started building a new house. I acquired a new home. During my three years in the "Artsakh quarter," I encountered peculiar memories. I formed friendships most of which ended as we moved out. Playing card and board games with older neighbors seemed thrilling then; I felt cool and trendy. I still vividly remember the sunflower seed shells littering the ground as the guys did not bother to throw them away. I took

to gathering mulberries from nearby abandoned spaces with my friends, which we then sold to local stores, marking my first and, to date, only business venture. As I drove through the poorly constructed streets on rollerblades, I got facial scars.

Those three years in the Artsakh quarter didn't embed deeply in my memory or contribute significantly to my sense of home. But seeing my facial scars transports me back to my early teenage years spent there. I realized that my sense of home was rooted in memories. Despite not truly fitting in, the memories I retained imbued the place with a sense of belonging. It wasn't about the people, the apartment itself, or objects, but rather the experiences I shared with people who have since faded from my life. So, that was a house of memories.

We moved back. Now, I connect the concept of “home” to our new house. Constructed in an old Armenian architectural style, our house always stood out with its distinctive beauty. From my second-floor window, I often observed tourists and passersby pausing to photograph the house. We adorned the front of our home with lavender, oleander trees, and an array of other flowers and plants.

Although we demolished my childhood house, we preserved the decades-old trees in our garden. We expanded upon this greenery, transforming the space into a lawn. Our garden became a sanctuary for more than five cats, some permanent residents, while others transiently came and went.

In this haven of tranquility, enveloped by overarching beauty and peace, I spent my late teenage years. After years of sharing a room with my two sisters, I finally acquired my own personal space, my refuge from the world.

This home embodied comfort and familiarity in the same neighborhood where I was born. Within its walls resided my childhood clothes, photo albums, books, and memory boxes – encapsulating my entire life. Yet, beyond mere objects, it offered me eternal peace.

I would often lose myself in the serenity of the garden, lying on the grass for hours, sharing meaningful and meaningless conversations with my cats, as I found solace in their company. I would put on my favorite music and do physical exercises. In those moments, the world appeared eternally green, calm, and peaceful. It was a sanctuary I never wanted to leave.

Embarking on my university journey, I relocated to Yerevan. Three years later, my family followed suit. We bid farewell to the heavenly house my father had poured so much energy and love into, locking its doors behind us. When our lives were threatened during the Azeri attacks, we prioritized life over the house. Today it has new Azeri owners.

For the past four years, Yerevan has been my permanent residence. We live here in close quarters, originally never intended to accommodate our entire family. Within its confines, I've endured some of the most challenging periods of my life, and I associate it mostly with negative experiences.

I am now far from my hometown, with slim prospects of returning. The city I live in holds no childhood memories for me, and this student house has never been a place of peace. Yet, despite it all, Yerevan feels like home. And the feeling comes from the people here.

My closest friends and colleagues live in this city, and my university memories are intertwined with its streets. Much of my professional growth has also taken place in Yerevan. The people I've crossed paths with here have influenced who I've become. The people I turn to first when trouble arises are in Yerevan, and these people give me resilience.

Yerevan is not where I was born, nor do my family ties belong, but it has become a place where I feel deeply rooted. As Ruben Hakhverdyan sings, Yerevan is a collective embodiment of its people (“Yerevan is not a home and place, Yerevan is us”). For me, Yerevan is its people who have provided me with a sense of home when I needed it most.

After moving through four different residences, I've begun to unravel the essence of home. Home is a family and childhood, the memories we build, the physical space, and the people that make you belong.

### **Tribute to cats**

In 2016, we relocated to a new home with a vast yard. Our neighborhood traditionally enjoyed an abundance of stray cats, and several made themselves at home in our garden. We adopted a few of them, offering food, shelter, and affection. My mother, younger brother, and I embraced these feline visitors as family, but other family members remained somewhat indifferent.

As time passed, our furry friends multiplied, and I lost track of their numbers. Their coats displayed a variety of colors—ginger, gray, white, and black—adding vibrancy to our ever-green garden.

Each cat had a personality, just like us, humans, and had their preferred method of communication. Some shied away from human touch, others boldly attempted to integrate themselves into our household. We'd often discover them lounging on the second floor, especially in my parents' bedroom. I always pondered: why not my or my brother's bedroom? Did my mother's nurturing role extend to the cats as well?

As they kept multiplying, our love for them also grew. Witnessing these tiny, hand-sized kittens meowing on our terrace stirred within us a deep sense of responsibility to provide them with the care and attention they needed. We ensured that every single cat was well-fed and felt safe under our roof. Tiny, adorable, and irresistibly charming, they even managed to win over the hearts of my sisters, once indifferent towards animals.

At one point, their numbers swelled to 8, making it difficult to distinguish one from another. Consequently, we gave names only to the eldest members of our feline family: Slivka, Pushok, and Snezhok. The rest we affectionately referred to as "piso," a name that always elicited an immediate response from everyone.

As I prepared to depart for Yerevan for my studies, the images of my cats occupied half of my phone's storage. With my visits home becoming less frequent, my affection and longing for my furry companions only intensified. Upon returning home, my first thing to do was always to check on my cats—had their numbers grown? Were they all in place?

My first surprise came when I entered home after the war in November, 2020. Back then I wrote in my journal: "...Then I went to the terrace to meet my cats who suspiciously didn't welcome us in the entrance, and I heard no reaction to my "meow-meow" in the garden. They are gone, they definitely ran away, I thought, and a sudden feeling of emptiness and loss replaced the joy of being home. I started mourning for my cats as they disappeared in my dead hometown" (Shahverdyan, 2021).

They soon reappeared in our garden as we kept the lights and heating on, to signal the revival of a city swallowed by war.

While I was studying in Yerevan, we welcomed more kittens that I didn't even manage to meet. During the blockade, I got glimpses of the newcomers only through a video call. As the

older cats passed away and new ones constantly entered the world, I couldn't follow their growth. In my mind, both the older and younger generations, despite their differing sizes, remain tiny. I still picture them fitting in the palm of my hand, and I can hear their soft cries when I briefly separated them from their mothers.

In September 2023, our furry family expanded once again. Pushok gave birth just days before Azerbaijan launched a large-scale military assault on my home city. Our cats were as frightened as my family, if not more so. The newborns came into a world rocked by heavy shelling for over 24 hours, and some of them couldn't survive the chaos.

The exodus began suddenly. With only one car to transport five people and our most essential belongings, my family embarked on the harrowing 30-hour journey through what felt like the road of death. They left the cats behind to save their own lives amid the unfolding apocalypse, just as most people did with their animals.

Since September, grief has become my constant companion. Initially mourning the loss of our homeland, I forced myself to adapt to a new reality. But as time passed, memories of our house, my sanctuary of peace and tranquility, resurfaced. Now, I'm thinking about our cats – an inseparable part of our home.

Stepanakert has now transformed into an uninhabited desert. I've seen packs of exhausted and undernourished pedigree dogs on photos roaming the city, a stark reminder of what my own cats might be enduring. The mere thought of them in such distress overwhelms me with sorrow.

Every memory of them brings tears to my eyes. They are now probably feeling more vulnerable than I ever did in my entire life. The city is empty, we abandoned our home leaving our cats to the whim of fate. I don't know whether they are alive. But if they are, I hope they forgive us.

## **Aghavno**

I first stepped into Aghavno in May 2022.

Aghavno was not a typical Armenian village. It was contemporary and too neat for a traditional Armenian settlement. Its famous red roofs led everyone to think of it as a picturesque scenario from a book or a cartoon. The village, once bustling with over 300 Armenian inhabitants, does not exist anymore — quite literally.

Rumors about Aghavno being transferred to Azerbaijan began circulating in early summer 2022. With Armenia and Azerbaijan agreeing to reroute the Lachin corridor, where the village was located, many speculated that Aghavno would fall under Azerbaijani authority. I visited it in June for the first time as a journalist to document the mood of the people amidst the rumors of being expelled soon.

On August 5, 2022, local authorities declared that the village would be surrendered within two weeks, and the residents had to pack up and evacuate hastily. I revisited the village the day after the distressing news came. Aghavno, once a charming town reminiscent of a fairy tale had transformed into a dystopian nightmare. It was marred by hatred, rage and violence. From a distance, it still retained its crystalline allure – but now, it has been emptied and its residents were full of despair. So was I.

I stayed at the village throughout the whole period where anger and despair reigned over the land. I was living in a house alongside around ten other people I never met before: young politicians, journalists, regular people coming to say goodbye, photographers and the local

population. This unusual setting itself reflected the chaos that grasped the village that resembled a sinking ship with people adrift without lifebuoys.

I could hardly convince people to talk to me. One aged man told me after spotting my camera: “What are you documenting, girl? The poverty I’m living in?” Others politely or bluntly asked to go away. People were burning down their belongings and slaughtering their animals while journalists walked with cameras, begging them for an interview.

For the first time in my life, I asked myself: “What would I do, if I were packing my bags to leave my home and saw journalists photographing my misery?” At that moment, I had no answers, only a deep empathy for those who treated me with disdain—imagining I might do the same.

I wrote a blog post on my Instagram back then, which ended with “This war will go on for too long.”

As soon as it came under Azerbaijani control, Aghavno was razed to the ground. And 11 months later, the war knocked on the door of my house. This time, there were no journalists to tell our story from inside — only the silent cries of people torn apart.

### **To the person I miss the most**

During the past nineteen months, I’ve seen my grandmother only twice.

On November 26, 2022, a date that marked my very last day in my hometown, I spent a whole evening at her old cramped apartment. Every time I returned to Stepanakert, my grandmother was the first to celebrate my arrival and embraced it as a feast.

“I’m starting to collect the herbs to prepare *jengyalov hats* for you,” she would say before my imminent arrival. “Your grandpa brought another bottle of homemade wine.”

True to tradition, my last visit in November mirrored this warmth. She welcomed me with a warm serving of *jengyalov hats*, a savory dough stuffed with herbs, and a bottle of semi-sweet wine fermented locally by my grandpa. Even the grapes were crushed and stomped nearby. I devoured the *jengyalov hats* heartily, hugged my grandmother and hopped into my uncle's runty car. Speeding through the city in his decades-old Moskvich, we drove all the way to Tatik-Papik, the iconic sculpture of Grandma and Grandpa at the outskirts of Stepanakert made from a hulk of volcanic red *tufa*, and back to my place.

I served him coffee, “bitter as life,” as my uncle would say, and then I started packing my bags to return to Yerevan. Little did I realize on this precarious day that I wouldn't see my grandmother and my family for a whole year. Yet the circumstances proved far more excruciating than our year-long separation forced by the Azerbaijani regime.

In September, 2023, the unrecognized republic I was born in endured heavy shelling across its borders. On January 1, 2024, it officially ceased to exist.

Days after Azerbaijan's lightning offensive on the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, which it blockaded from the external world for ten months before the attack, the chaotic migration to Armenia via the Lachin corridor commenced. Under the looming threat of slaughter, thousands of cars queued up along the sole road connecting the defeated region to Armenia. Among them were my family and relatives, who left their homes forever and lined up in an endless traffic jam.

The journey was draining. What was once a four-hour journey, took more than 28 hours to complete, and the road of death as we came to call it, took 64 lives. Still, I was content that my family had safely crossed over into Armenia. My sister and I were waiting for them in Goris, a

border town between Armenia and Karabakh that sheltered tens of thousands of displaced people.

Rushing into a hospital, I found my grandmother – exhausted, underweight, and pale as a ghost. We were lucky that my grandfather was still alive.

The grim reality of the death road they traversed hit me hard when I saw my grandpa, gaunt, in a hospital cot. He was in a semi-conscious state. If the emergency vehicle were not there, he would have passed away on the road.

After a few days in the hospital, my grandparents resettled in Bagratashen, a village bordering Georgia, where my grandma's sister resides. I haven't seen them ever since.

In my previous life, before the great exodus, my grandparents and I lived within a 15-minute walk from each other. Now, we live in different regions of Armenia, and it takes no less than three hours in a car to reach them.

Fortunately, she's not alone in her new home – my grandfather, uncle, and other relatives have her back. But she pines for her grandchildren, especially me. I am no longer 15 minutes away from her; I'm a full-time student and an employee in Yerevan, and I have little time to dedicate to my loved ones. She calls me occasionally to hear my voice. She has become reticent and quiet; her youth, her native village, and its crystalline spring with the cleanest water on earth have disappeared. The vivid stories she loved to recount about life in Khanlar now linger in the liminal silence between us. Will she ever retell them again? I fear that she may not, at least not for a while.

Perhaps she longs for Khanlar as desperately as I do for my hometown. She was displaced from this small village in Soviet Azerbaijan during the turbulent times of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the early '90s. After losing a home for the second time, she doesn't want to hear a word about Karabakh anymore.

“I don't want to look back; I'm done with it,” she says.

My mother proudly recounts the legacy of her grandfather, my great-grandfather. He was a respected prosecutor in Soviet times. He received an apartment in Stepanakert for his dedicated service, where my grandparents settled after their marriage. It was a typical Soviet flat – with dull walls, a cramped kitchen and a bathroom, and modest pieces of furniture. The only piece of furniture that had some prominence in this staid apartment was a wooden sideboard stretching across the wall with crystal glassware inside. This cherished sideboard, a symbol of my great-grandfather's position and legacy, was guarded meticulously, and my grandma would not allow us to lay a hand on it. It was like a Malevich painting hanging from a museum wall.

The flat was never repaired, and over time, its walls started to decay, much like the other rundown houses in the building. Living in such an apartment was not a pleasure anymore, and after fleeing in September, my grandparents never looked back. Now, they own a new house in Bagratashen, a village renowned for its delicious persimmons and olives. The residents cull the groves and sell them in Armenia and Georgia.

“My neighbors make their living harvesting,” she says. “I should do the same.” But she has adopted a sedentary lifestyle since her second displacement.

Till today, she has always called me first to ask about me and rarely talked about herself. I lost count of how many times I promised to visit her new village but failed in my promises. Sometimes I just feel like I do not deserve her love and attention that I struggle to give back.

A year has passed since our separation. I'm still trying to carry the weight of being an adult. I am the only employed person in our refugee family. Now, I only yearn to escape Yerevan and move far away from all these responsibilities placed on my shoulders by unknown forces I cannot shape or control.

There's no better place for it than in Bagratashen, where I would savor the persimmons from my grandma's garden and hear her stories. Maybe she will weave new ones about Bagratashen. I wish she knew about my heartfelt wish to wrap my hands around her, to embrace, and forget about this new world I am now in, and I wish I had the courage to confess this to her. I miss her, dearly.

### **The departure**

September 2023. I found myself back in Yerevan, joining the throngs of protesters in the streets while my compatriots in Artsakh lingered in uncertainty. The connection to Artsakh was poor, with my calls frequently dropping. "When are you leaving?" I repeatedly asked in our family chat. At first, my dad's replies were vague. The Lachin corridor remained blocked, and the city reeled from the shock and chaos of the military assault. The hotels overflowed—not with tourists or visitors, but with displaced families from the regions surrounding Stepanakert. The capital, an unlikely oasis, was bustling—not with schoolchildren heading home from classes, but with refugees clutching handbags full of documents. "We will stay as long as it's possible," my

father would bravely say. Yet, nobody knew how long the “possible” would last: a week, a day, an hour?

Some of my other messages remained unnoticed: “Someone please call me,” “Please pack all the photo albums.” Others had brief answers from my dad: “No electricity, no connection. City full of refugees.”

After Azerbaijan unblocked the road, cars lined up in two directions. One led to the Lachin corridor, offering escape from the apocalyptic zone, and the other led to a gasoline storage outside Stepanakert, where hundreds of vehicles queued up to refuel. On September 25, the storage exploded, taking 218 lives and leaving around 120 severely injured. Panic and fear further gripped Stepanakert.

My father notified in the chat: “Our departure is postponed. Hundreds of dead and injured.” The injured people had to be transported first.

I kept an eye on the official news. On September 27, around 50 thousand people – half of the besieged population, were reported fleeing through the Lachin corridor. “We are moving at 16:00,” my dad shortly texted me. I immediately began searching for a car to meet them in Kornidzor, the first settlement in Armenia to welcome the unending wave of refugees.

In the meantime, calls from foreign journalists flooded in. As I was packing up for my journey to Syunik, I agreed to a short interview with BBC Radio. I felt excited and relieved to share that I was finally reconnecting with my family after 10 months of forced separation. The interviewer asked what I would do upon seeing them after their excruciating crossing through the Lachin corridor, under Azeris’ gaze.

“I would hug them tightly and cry,” I answered.

### **La retrouvaille**

My sister Ani and I reached Goris in the afternoon of September 29, expecting our family to arrive within the next hour or two. As their arrival was delayed, we took a stroll through the town. Goris had come to resemble the last days in Stepanakert—the streets were crowded with refugees unsure of where to go next or where to find shelter. Among them, I recognized familiar faces. My history teacher stood in line to register as a refugee. When I approached her, she seemed unwilling to communicate with me. For a moment, I felt like a stranger among my own people. They had barely escaped death, traveling the road of death, while I had come from Yerevan. I also met Vito dyadya (uncle), the owner of a grocery store on our street, who had known me since birth. We embraced, exchanged a few and then parted ways.

Hours ticked by. My grandparents, uncles, and cousins arrived first. We welcomed them at the hospital and continued to wait for my immediate family. Knowing Azerbaijan intended to detain Artsakh officials at the Lachin checkpoint, I was trembling with fear that my father would be arrested due to his political activity. After hours of no contact, he finally messaged me: “We crossed the checkpoint.” We breathed a sigh of relief.

As a white pajero pulled up next to the hospital, my sister and I rushed outside. We embraced each other and burst into tears, and stood petrified for a few minutes. In that moment, the sheer blessing of seeing my family alive overshadowed all thoughts of losing our home.

Eight former officials were ultimately arrested and indefinitely imprisoned in Baku, among them my godfather – my dad’s life-long friend.

Savoring the joy of refinding each other, we gathered for a long-awaited family dinner. True to tradition, my father raised the first toast. Delightful to have all his four children around one table, he said: “We would endure the separation for many more months, only if our reunion did not come at the expense of leaving a homeland behind.”

### **If I go back**

Eight months have elapsed since our displacement. We currently reside in a modest flat in Yerevan, in tight quarters. After years of living in a spacious two-story home, the adjustment remains unfamiliar. Yet, I interpret it as destiny's prompting for us to spend more time together, since my eldest sister, Nina, and I will soon depart Armenia to pursue our graduate studies. I've come to accept my new reality and harbor no hope to return to Stepanakert under Azerbaijani authority. Nonetheless, I often ponder: what would I do, if I had a chance to go back?

I saw images of elderly Azerbaijani refugees rediscovering their destroyed homes around Karabakh. Having endured a similar fate, I would do just what they did in those photos: I would embrace the walls of our house and let my tears flow. I would cry, and cry, and cry...

### **Epilogue**

On September 19, 2023, as Azerbaijani rockets relentlessly shelled my home for the final time, I was in Spain, surrounded by 70 young people from various countries around the world. Despite the empathy and support that flowed from some of them, I never felt more isolated and lonely ever before. That evening, amidst our gathering for a movie screening, we paused to honor the tragedy with a minute of silence, then continued watching films. The day my life

crashed into pieces, along with 150,000 other lives, was worth only one minute of silence in the bustling world around me.

It was the moment when my world came to a halt, and the moment I realized that even if my life stopped, the life around me continued to move forward. While my personal tragedy was a mere drop in the ocean of countless broken destinies the world witnesses and forgets, for those of us experiencing it firsthand, the pain never dissipates. It lingers, becoming an inseparable part of our daily lives, a constant companion in our routines.

I lost my home without the chance to say goodbye or pack my dearest memories in a bag. I lost it while being hundreds of miles away from it. With little hope for a return and the pain resurfacing as tears while writing this epilogue, I conclude my journey of self-discovery with a song I dedicate to the place I'm blessed to call home.

### **Måneskin – THE LONELIEST**

You'll be the saddest part of me

A part of me that will never be mine

It's obvious

Tonight is gonna be the loneliest

You're still the oxygen I breathe

I see your face when I close my eyes

It's torturous

Tonight is gonna be the loneliest

There's a few lines that I have wrote

In case of death, that's what I want, that's what I want

So don't be sad when I'll be gone  
There's just one thing I hope you know, I loved you so  
'Cause I don't even care about the time I've got left here  
The only thing I know now is that I wanna spend it  
With you, with you nobody else here  
Tonight is gonna be the loneliest  
**You'll be the saddest part of me**  
**A part of me that will never be mine...**

### **Reflection on process**

Working on my capstone project was an emotionally intense journey, but ultimately a fulfilling one. Throughout the process, I had the opportunity to deeply reflect on my life, my past experiences, and my journey so far. This project was something I had wanted to do for a long time—I finally had the chance to write down my memories and document my story.

The emotional toll was significant. Revisiting and writing about my memories was challenging and often overwhelming. I cried a lot while working on it, confronting the highs and lows of my past. Despite this, the process was incredibly valuable, and it allowed me to delve into my identity and better understand who I am and what my story is.

Although I wish I had more time to incorporate a section on memory studies in my methodology, I also encountered the limits of my emotional capacity. Balancing the academic rigor of the project with the personal emotional strain was difficult. However, this journey of self-study and reflection was worth every moment of struggle. Through this capstone project, I

not only completed an important academic endeavor but also achieved a deeper self-awareness and appreciation for my personal history.

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