

What is the past tense for? Who speaks that way? I remember it as if it is happening. I can feel the cut in my bare foot, cauterized with mud. My foot is in a little quilted bootie, and I am here with you. Am I confusing you? English has so many peculiar tenses. Let us just speak in the present.

Do not deviate from the official instructions.

Cleave them in two: the men with men, woman with her kind.

Tell the men this is a deportation. Tell the women nothing.

With the division of the sexes, let the procession begin.

Dikran is paired with the village barber, an old man. They are bound at the hands and feet. The paired men are attached by a crude harness. The soldiers are lashing the men together, as you would yoke a team of horses. I am hiding the gold spoon in the waistband of my skirt. I am rocking Dikran. If he wails, I will stuff a rag in his mouth.

The men begin marching. I watch them go. Two by two. My husband is at the rear of the miserable parade. This means he will be the last to drown.

We march toward Ararat.

Bind the men or they will break away. Make lame their hands and feet. Lashed together, they cannot flee and they cannot swim. Take them to the lake. The Euphrates is dammed with the dead. Like drowning a bag of cats, why tire your hand strangling each? Save the ammunition.

Do not waste your rope on the women. They will not break away.

Ararat is following us. Sometimes it is at our backs. Sometimes it feels like we are walking uphill, ascending it. The cords in my calves burn. They are walking us in circles around Ararat. I am beginning to believe that Ararat is circling us.

The soldiers are sweating in their wool uniforms. They drink from leather bladders. They guzzle sloppy, droolingly. I watch a diamond of drool trickle off the young soldier's chin. I would drink it. We've had nothing to drink for days. Before the sun comes up, I suck the grass. I suck the ends of my skirt that is moist from the dew.

There is a hard white crust around baby Dikran's lips. I wipe it and pick it, but it returns by afternoon. Poor baby. He does not cry, but he moans like a dove.

If we are marching to the top of Ararat, we can eat the snow. The snow will cool us and slake our thirst. Although it is summer, there is always cool white snow there.

But when I look for the peak, I see that Ararat has retreated. It is crouching behind the trees, only the points of its ears visible, timid as a cat.

Take their clothes. Take their shoes. Take their utensils, take their sacks of rice and bulgur. Their rings. Make them unraid their hair and loosen their kerchiefs. Coins will fall out of their hair.

Search the cavities and orifices of their bodies, check under each floppy breast—they will try to hide their treasures.

Sell it all in the nearest town. Buy rations for yourselves. There will be little to eat when you cross the desert.

We march naked.

They collected our clothes and shoes, shawls and rags. One rat-face soldier tore the cloth that I'd tied into a sling to carry Dikran. Now he is in my arms, heavy as a sack of stones. He is heavy as a stone even as he grows lighter every day. How can this be?

The soldiers root through the pile. The bearded one found my golden spoon. They sold my spoon and used the profit to feed themselves.

My mother gave me four spoons for a wedding gift. One we sold, when the war began, to send money to my parents in Mezre. One we traded for a bushel of wheat, when food was scarce. When word spread the soldiers were coming to our village, I sewed one spoon into the inseam of my husband's trousers, one into the waistband of my skirt.

One golden spoon lies at the bottom of Lake Van. If a fisherman cast his line into the lake, he might pull out the spoon. Or he might reel in a yellow ear. A hank of scalp. If he snagged a wrist, or a foot, he might haul up the whole harness of skeletons.

My spoon is in the mouth of a soldier, and my skirt is mushroomed at his feet.

In a million years, if you told me on my wedding night, that this is how the story ends, I would not have believed you.

Faster. If they are slow, leave them behind. If they are limping. If they are old, if they are young.

The men are walking us in circles, away from water. Even the water spoiled with animal excrement in puddles on the ground is not permitted. The horses they ride are lavished with water. I begin to loathe the spoiled horses. The pomp of their livery.

We are blistering, plum-dark. The soldier sweat in their wool uniforms but they don't burn like the naked.

We come to a village. As always, the curtains are drawn in the windows of the houses. They would prefer not to watch us go by. Sometimes a child will peep over a gate. There is a water pump in the middle of the village, and the procession breaks the tempo of two by two. We swarm the water pump, clawing and jabbing for a taste.

The soldiers break up the swarm with their bayonets. I see a breast sliced clean off, and fall into the dirt. A girl beside me holds her face where her eye has been stuck with the tip of a bayonet. To torture us, the soldiers run the pump until all the water is gone. The soil swallows the water, savoring it. The selfish dirt, the hateful horses. I would eat the soaked dirt, if they would let me.

I would rather die than watch a spectacle of squandered water like that again.

In all the ruckus and gunfire, Dikran is unmoving in my arms, mewling softly. The white spittle around his parched mouth is filling with pus. His long black lashes are alive with lice. If I had been lucky enough to steal a mouthful of water, I would have drunk half, and given the rest to him with my lips.

At night, one sentry will do. If a woman tries to steal away into the night, shoot her. If you miss, she will soon die anyway.

At night we sleep in pile. I am trying to remember the story of the ark. I am trying to tell Dikran a story as he falls asleep in the crook of my arm. I can't remember how it goes. There is a deluge, the wrath of god. Easy as drowning cats in a bag, for the almighty. In the end, the ark runs aground on Ararat. How did it go?

The soldiers creep around the pile of sleeping women. Yank a woman by her hair, drag her to their tents. I've seen girls turned into toothless old crones in a matter of minutes.

There are no beautiful women left, or young girls. Everyone who marches becomes the same skeleton, which does not report elegance or ugliness. Only that it is a body of a human. They don't come for me. The bearded one calls me banana-pepper nose. Or maybe they do. I can't remember.

Women lay down in the warm pile, and by morning, half remain there, stiff and purple.

One night, I see a hand. It is attached to nothing, dragging itself away from the pile of sleepers. It crosses the desert, little by little, like a horny crab. Dragging itself, crumpling and reaching. I was frightened by the phantom limb scuttling in the dark. I realized later that the hand was not enchanted. In the darkness, I couldn't make out the rats carrying it away.

Yours is a good and proper duty. You will tell the story of the Armenian campaign to your grandchildren at bedtime, and they will love and fear you.

The bearded soldier tells me to lay Dikran on the ground. I am lagging behind the parade. I am trying to coax Dikran into opening his eyes. His eyes are blistered shut. There are maggots in the sores of his mouth. I am trying to pick them out.

Banana-pepper nose! Too slow. Leave it.

Maybe he is dead already. He feels lighter, somehow. I cannot tell if I am leaving Dikran under a tree to die or if I am leaving the body of my son in the shade of a tree. The boy flows from my hands into the shade under the tree. He is like water poured.

It is not a tree that provides Dikran a cool circle of shade. It is a long shadow cast by Ararat. We will meet at the top, where we will eat the snow. Delicious cold.

Once you've crossed the border, sell the women at market. Bring the profit to us. You will get your fair share.

What makes us walk? Why don't I lie down in the grass? Two hundred walk in the harness of five, six men.
Only two men carry guns.

We walk because we all walk together. And those of us still walking have lived too long.