

# IF I FORGET THEE, O JERUSALEM

*(to Garo on the 40th anniversary of his writing career)*

The grass there is never so green;  
birds do not sing. Only lean sparrows  
twitter endlessly under ancient eaves.  
Alley cats sit brooding on rooftops, dreaming fierce dreams.  
Dogs do not bark there, for there are none:  
the *masters* have not enough to eat.

But the potbellied bells peal ponderously and loud  
from belfry and tower, on holidays, sundays,  
saints' days, sinners' days and every day  
of the week; their booming baritones  
mingling with the tintinnabulation  
of the slender tinkling bells, now in counterpoint  
now in joyful cacophony.

In the Cathedral  
where rests the sainted head of James beloved of Christ  
it's never morning or night: the oil lamps  
(vying with Jacob's robe in delicate hues)  
etch rainbow-tinted haloes in the twilight,  
and candles, immaculately white, lick  
the sculpted shadows with golden tongues  
as sterneyed prophets and saints stare down from the walls,  
painted by rude artists in perishing oil.

Here stoops sad Abraham with drawn knife  
preparing to make his porpotual sacrificio  
to a jealous and demanding God  
and the angel tarries with the sacrificial ram;

there Jesus, tall against a semicircular sky  
with arms outstretched and uplifted eyes  
communes with the Holy Spirit incarnate as a Dove.  
The soaring pillars half-float in the pungent dusk  
of incense, half-melt in their clouds;  
the priestly voice rises and falls in waves  
through the diaphanous air but the few  
kneeling figures swathed in black  
are too deaf with age to hear the word of God.  
His mansions are many, but God is far,  
having moved on to some happier land,  
and men's hearts are empty like the empty streets  
echoing strangely the sound of weary feet.

The men sit, waiting, idly playing cards  
as if they thought some miracle might still transpire  
some savior ride in triumph through their streets,  
might feed five thousand with a few fishes, a little bread.

They do not realize  
that miracles are not the order of the day.  
The poor in body have very long to wait,  
the crippled, for the healing touch.  
Poor, battered love, poor beggar, ruined town!  
But the birds there do not scream so loud!

*HAIG KHACHADOURIAN*