



*How excruciating can nothingness be?*

—Jack Kevorkian

*O death, where is thy sting? O grave where  
is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and  
the strength of sin is the law.*

— Handel's Messiah III.3.50

The elderly woman behind the reception desk of the Armenian Library and Museum of America stabs her finger onto a copy of *Yerevan: Magazine with an Accent* and slowly traces a diagonal across the glossy cover. She's showing me the route of the 500-mile death march her father took in 1915, from his village in Central Anatolia through mountains and deserts to seek refuge outside the city of Mardin. An unblinking Andre Agassi, *Yerevan's* cover model, smiles back next to the headline "CONFESSION: Over 30,000 Turks Apologize to Armenians." I soon find myself confessing too — that I'm not Armenian — and a puzzled look clouds the old woman's face. She thrusts a pamphlet at me. It's titled "We Share Our Pain," and includes a list of genocides, from the Assyrian and Greek Anatolians to the Jews and Tibetans, Burundians, East Timorese, Kurds, and Rwandans — the list goes on. "Armenians were first," she informs me. "I don't know why."

The Armenian Library and Museum of America, or ALMA, is the biggest repository of Armenian artifacts outside of Armenia, with over 20,000 objects and 27,000 books in a collection that is steadily growing. In its Brutalist building on the corner of Main Street in Watertown, Massachusetts, a little outside of Boston, less than five percent of the collection is ever on display. The aged receptionist is nowhere near the end of her story — her mother, having escaped the Turks, has just arrived at a French convent school in 1920s Beirut — but I thank her and walk

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into the main gallery, where I am greeted by rare Bibles from the 17th century, elaborate wedding costumes on headless mannequins, and silver gelatin prints by Yousuf Karsh. An ancient fly-swatter faces off with a baptismal dove, a warrior’s belt from 700 BC gives way to a spiked human dog-collar from the genocide years. There’s even a “Dental Oriental Rug” featuring a giant molar, woven by Armenian children in Lebanon in 1925 to encourage better oral hygiene in the orphanages.

But the paintings I’ve come to see have been locked away in the vault.

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A man in a coma lies on his back, his bare, wrinkly feet sticking out of the bedcovers as he slides head first into the dark, gaping mouth of a blindingly white skeleton. On another canvas, a man reduced to raw sinews and bones is engulfed by flames, his eyes turned heavenward like Jesus on the cross. In a third, a kneeling man has had his brain and his spinal chord removed; they hang suspended by chains near him. Half his body has turned to limestone: his healthy right hand holds his shattered, dismembered left. His face — like the viewer’s — wears a shocked grimace.

The paintings are the work of none other than Jack Kevorkian, the late Armenian-American pathologist, philosopher, assisted-suicide advocate, and convicted felon otherwise known as Dr. Death. They are strikingly well executed. Unlike the works of other improbable painters — Adolf Hitler’s multicolored bouquets and elegant nudes or Winston Churchill’s pastoral sceneries — Kevorkian’s canvases are markedly obvious and gruesomely, almost risibly, literal. And the man in the coma, the man on fire, and the man with the brains by his side look a lot like the auteur himself.

“They will not be orphaned,” ALMA’s former director Mariam Stepanyan announced at the opening of a Kevorkian exhibition in 2008. Those same sixteen paintings had appeared in ‘The Doctor Is In,’ an ALMA show in 1999, which Kevorkian himself had to miss, having just been confined to the Thumb Correctional Facility in Lapeer, Michigan. After serving eight years on a second-degree murder conviction for euthanizing a patient on national television, Kevorkian was released for good behavior. ALMA restaged the exhibition in celebration, this time as ‘The Doctor Is Out.’ When I visited the museum for the first time, in February 2011, the show was still up. It’s difficult to imagine how anyone could bear to look at Kevorkian’s macabre portraiture for so long. Yet not only was the show still going strong after three years; a few of the canvases had cloned themselves. (Replicas produced for the Al Pacino Kevorkian biopic, *You Don’t Know Jack*, now hung alongside the originals.) Kevorkian was a difficult figure — never married, without children or many friends, his health compromised by the hepatitis C he contracted while performing blood-transfusion experiments on himself in the late 1960s — but in the Watertown Armenian community, the Doctor had found an unlikely caretaker for his checkered legacy.

Quite at home in the museum, the severed head of a young woman dangles by her hair a few feet from the reception desk. Two hands are holding her aloft: one bears a cuff with an Ottoman crescent and the date “1915,” the other a Nazi swastika and

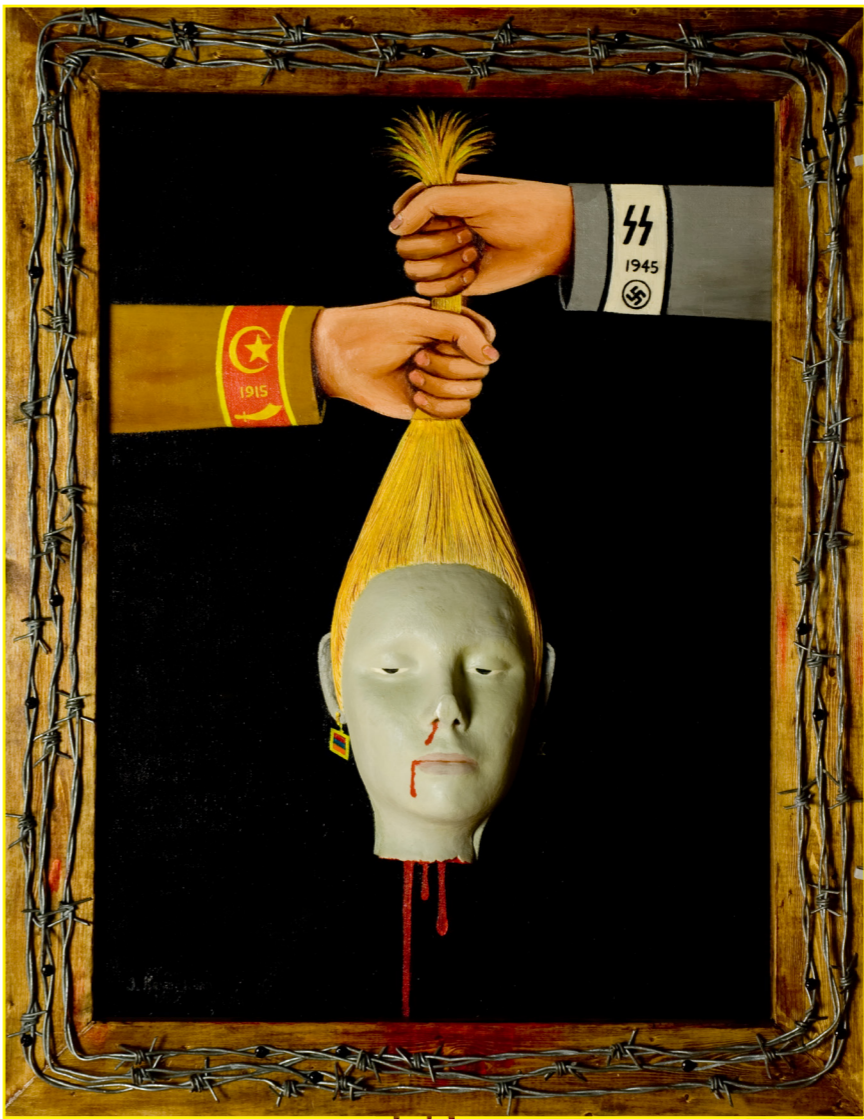
“1945.” Kevorkian’s own blood drips from the head and spills onto the painting’s frame, which is ringed by barbed wire. In my pamphlet I read a section on “Lessons of Genocide,” and it’s as if it were written as an exegesis of the painting itself: “German military leaders were present in Turkey and saw the extermination of the Armenians take place without interceding. Hitler referred to the Armenian Genocide and said, ‘After all, who today remembers the Armenians?’ One could cynically conclude that Hitler was the only western governmental leader to learn a lesson from the Armenian Genocide.” Kevorkian in turn had titled the painting *1915 Genocide 1945*, and on a plaque that hangs nearby writes of the need to commemorate the two catastrophes: “To fail to take but token interest in the whole ugly affair, to avoid making it almost hereditary memory, would be abdicating decent human responsibility and thereby assuring recurrence is happening at this very moment.”

It’s the fight against forgetting that both Kevorkian and the museum have taken up, with a slight penchant for one-upmanship. Kevorkian once told a reporter, “I wish my forefathers went through what the Jews did. The Jews were gassed. Armenians were killed in every conceivable way. Pregnant women were split open with bayonets and babies taken out. They were drowned, burned, heads were smashed in vices. They were chopped in half.” The Jews, according to Kevorkian, “had a lot of publicity, but they didn’t suffer as much.”

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ALMA has a favorite quote, which it juxtaposes with majestic vistas of snowy Mount Ararat in its informational brochures: “Go ahead, destroy this race! Destroy Armenia; see if you can do it. Send them from their homes into the desert. Let them have neither bread nor water. Burn their homes and churches. Then see if they will not laugh again; see if they will not sing and pray again. For when two of them meet anywhere in the world, see if they will not create a new Armenia.” The words belong to the bard of Fresno and apostle of Armenian-American letters, William Saroyan.

In the 1620s, the first two Armenians came to America. They were silkworm-breeding experts, invited by the governor of Virginia to join the Jamestown Colony. Yet it’s unknown to history whether they created more than just worms. It wasn’t until the mid-1890s, following a series of persecutions ordered by the Red Sultan, Abdülhamid II, that the first wave of immigration began, with around 25,000 Armenians settling in the United States. The agriculturally-inclined made their way to the fertile fields of Fresno, California, while others went to work in the industrial mills outside Boston, Buffalo, and Detroit, opened shoe repair shops and groceries, and ran coffee houses that soon became the centers of Armenian community life. While the Sick Man of Europe, as the Ottoman Empire was known, lay dying, many thousands more made their way to America in the early 1910s. As those travelers crossed the map, they might have been buoyed by the words of the seventh-century Armenian geographer Anania Shirakatsi, who, presaging Saroyan, wrote, “The origin of anything is at the same time the beginning of its disintegration; the disintegration of anything is in its turn the cause of a new beginning.



All images courtesy the Armenian Library and Museum of America

And from this harmless contradiction, the universe obtains its continuance.”

In 1912, twenty-one-year-old Levon Kevorkian migrated to Pontiac, Michigan, to work in the auto factories and send money back to his impoverished family in their village in north-east Anatolia. Three years later his family stopped writing back. That same year, Satenig Keshigian watched most of her family die before her eyes when the entire population of her village was uprooted and marched into the Syrian desert. Eventually she and a brother made it to Pontiac, where she met Levon.

Jacob “Jack” Kevorkian was born to Levon and Satenig one snowy day in May 1928. (The couple also called him Murad, after an Armenian guerilla fighter.) A precocious child, Jack loved to play war games, donning paper-maché helmets and wielding potato mashers as hand grenades. An empty lot across from the local hospital became his Belleau Woods, Vimy Ridge, and Verdun — battlefields of the Great War. And the newspapers his parents read religiously were his Armenia. As he would later remember, “Growing up, I saw the *Hyrenik Amsagir* (*Fatherland Monthly*) — that was home for me.” Levon and Satenig raised Jack and his two

sisters to have everything that they had lost, and in their nightly stories they kept the old ghosts alive. When not in the trenches or on the death march, Jack memorized baseball statistics, drew cartoons, invented limericks, and taught himself German and then Japanese. He stripped wood from abandoned houses to build bonfires, where he roasted potatoes until hot, black peels of charcoal flaked off of them. It was a taste that would never leave him: in later years, when Kevorkian had no fixed address, friends who put him up would notice that he would often use their fireplaces to make his dinner. He was never happy until his food had acquired a burnt carbon shell.

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The child of the genocide was to become the patron saint of assisted suicide. As he went about his tasks as a young pathology intern at Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit, Jack caught sight of a woman ravaged by cancer, her jaundiced skin hanging off her bones, her face frozen by pain into a sardonic smile. As he would later write in *Prescription: Medicide*, “It seemed as if she was

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pleading for help and death at the same time. Out of sheer empathy alone I could have helped her die with satisfaction.” Instead he shipped out to Seoul, where he served as an army medic in the Korean War. When not attending to injured combatants, Kevorkian would pass the time practicing Bach on his flute and teaching himself Latin and Greek.

Back in the States after the war, he found work as an autopsist at the University of Michigan Medical Center and began to pursue unorthodox research in his free time. Dr. Kevorkian would sit for hours staring into the eyes of the dead. When an electrocardiogram in the hospital ward signaled that a patient’s heart was about to stop, Kevorkian would tape open his or her eyes and snap photographs. With an almost painterly eye, the doctor captured the retina’s color over time as it shifted to a pale orange-red, then yellow, and finally gray. His findings — invaluable for medical examiners looking to determine time of death, after the fact — were published in a scholarly article in the *American Journal of Pathology* whose tone betrays an unnerving enthusiasm: “Let me emphasize one point: *a drop or two of water or saline must be put on the exposed cornea before postmortem ophthalmoscopy is ever attempted!*... If this is done, one may observe leisurely and continuously for hours.”

Kevorkian’s colleagues soon took to calling him Dr. Death, though they largely ignored his bizarre if pioneering experiments. Yet if “autopsy,” from the Greek, means literally “to see for oneself,” Kevorkian was a true autopsist, obsessed with seeing Thanatos with his own eyes, and observing closely what happened in the liminal space between death and life. His research took him deep into the University of Michigan’s library, where he was thrilled to discover that thirteenth-century Armenian physicians had performed medical experiments on criminals condemned to execution. For Kevorkian, vivisection was no breach of medical ethics — on the contrary, the revelatory investigation of those condemned bodies furthered the development of medicines that would save lives in the future. In this way the convicts themselves had contributed enormously to the store of human knowledge; their deaths had not been meaningless.

Why shouldn’t criminals on death row be given the opportunity to give back to society? It wasn’t just the Armenians; Alexandrian doctors in the days of Ptolemy had performed similar experiments on condemned criminals. Kevorkian became obsessed with the idea of adapting this ancient practice to the modern American penal system. He insisted that he was personally opposed to the death penalty, but that if the state was going to be in the business of taking human lives, costing taxpayers millions of dollars every year, those deaths ought to be in the service of life. Instead of the electric chair, the gas chamber, or the firing squad, a consenting convict on the day of execution would be put under. His body, particularly his brain, would be experimented upon; then his organs would be carefully harvested for transplant surgeries. Finally, he would be put to death by a lethal dose of anesthesia. Kevorkian invoked Ptolemaic doctors in support of the practice, but the notion carried other, less remote echoes — whispers that Turkish doctors had performed medical experiments on live Armenians, just as Nazi doctors had done to Jews.

Ever the empiricist, Kevorkian visited the Ohio Penitentiary to canvass a group of prisoners for their thoughts on his proposal. (Michigan had a moratorium on capital punishment.) Most

inmates were appalled, but a few saw in his idea the possibility of atoning for the unforgivable mistakes they made. As the first man he interviewed later articulated in a letter, “It would help me think that I didn’t succeed in making a total mess of my life, that I may have helped someone, somewhere, sometime.” In 1958, Kevorkian presented his findings at a conference in Washington, DC, and was promptly fired by the University of Michigan.

The Doctor took a new job at his hometown hospital, Pontiac General, and soon resumed his quest to find ways to snatch life from death. His dreams were haunted by scenes of soldiers bleeding to death on his watch — an all-too-common event in Korea when military blood supplies ran short. Blood-bank donations were often unable to meet medical demands, at war and at home. And yet there was an alternative, especially on the battlefield: Soviet doctors, liberated from churchly taboos and inhibitions, had shown that blood from cadavers was perfectly safe for use in transfusions. Kevorkian and his friend Neal Nicol — a lab technician who would remain his lifelong sidekick and madcap medical collaborator — built upon Soviet experiments to develop a one-step process for transferring blood directly from a dead body to a patient. When the perfect test subject, a thirty-year old heart attack victim, turned up at the hospital, Neal volunteered to be Kevorkian’s guinea pig. He lay down on the floor next to the deceased while Kevorkian connected a syringe pump and a tube from the dead man’s jugular vein directly into Neal’s arm. After receiving 400cc of blood, Neal felt fine. Their next attempt went slightly awry, however. A female volunteer who received a transfusion directly from the heart of a mangled fourteen-year-old hit-and-run victim became dizzy and nauseous. It turned out the volunteer had effectively ingested a Jägerbomb — the teenager had been out drinking. On another occasion, Jack and Neal petitioned the hospital for funding to perform the first in-vitro fertilization of a man — by implanting a fetus in Neal’s belly.

Levon and Satenig loved to hear their son talk about his research, which they regarded as heroic. As Neal recalled of Levon, “He felt God saved him from the massacre to beget Jack. He escaped death to sire the death fighter.” And yet death retained its sting. Jack’s father died of a heart attack in 1960, and in the mid-sixties his mother was diagnosed with advanced abdominal cancer. Kevorkian watched as doctors simultaneously restricted the amount of morphine she received even as they fought to prolong her life. The pain, she protested, was inconceivable; her treatment amounted to torture. “It was as if she had never escaped the Turks in Armenia,” Neal would later say. Jack was overcome by grief at the loss of his parents, who often came to him in dreams. As a way of mourning, Kevorkian turned to oil painting, and enrolled in adult education classes at night. Ignoring the moldy still lifes set up for the other students, Jack painted Death itself. He listened to Handel’s *Messiah* as he worked.

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A greenish head sits on a dinner plate, a red apple in its mouth. A man’s headless torso holds a knife and fork at the ready, eager to consume his severed head. Also on the table are a pair of missile-shaped salt and pepper shakers, along with an overturned helmet that brims with metal crosses and Jewish stars. Peering excitedly



over the cadaverous diner’s shoulder is the god Mars, dressed for battle in a cape and a golden shield. He too looks a lot like the young Jack Kevorkian.

During his prison years, Kevorkian published an anthology called *glimmerIQs: A Florilegium*, which compiled his serial limericks, philosophical manifestos and scientific treaties, reproductions of his paintings, and even handwriting samples and a natal chart, in case anyone wished to analyze him astrologically. In a chapter called “On Art,” Kevorkian rhymes:

*The subjects of art should be more  
Than the aspects of life we adore;  
Because dark sides abound,  
Surreal paintings profound  
May help change a few things we abhor.*



Of the painting with the gruesome dinner scene, *The Gourmet (On War)*, Kevorkian writes, “War is the bizarre perpetually periodic metamorphosis of human nature into absolute evil resulting in mind-boggling mass suicide with human kind devouring or trying to devour itself, all orchestrated by humanity’s only true and beloved pagan God, Mars. We will not settle for less than the ‘flower of evolution’ as the main course in this insane autophagy embellished by bountiful side dishes and fanciful shakers filled with the ‘fruits’ of our marvelous hands and big starving brains.” Yet painting *The Gourmet* — which bears an uneasy relationship to Kevorkian’s ideas on suicide and organ harvesting — seems a curious way to press for change.

Like many of the paintings featured in ‘The Doctor Is Out,’ *The Gourmet* is actually a re-creation of a canvas from the late 1960s; all of the paintings he did in the first decade after his parents’ death were lost by a moving company when Kevorkian moved to



California in 1976. Frustrated by the hospital bureaucracy that shunned and restricted his research, Kevorkian quit medicine, broke up with his first and last girlfriend, Jane, packed up his VW van, and drove to Los Angeles, where he put his life savings into making a film of Handel's *Messiah*. Inspired by Christ's perseverance in the face of martyrdom, Kevorkian saw his *Messiah* as his chance at redemption. Yet lacking any experience, producers, or distributors, and with a severely limited budget, his *An Abridged Screen Adaptation of the Oratorio Messiah by George Frederic Handel* ended up a disaster of stock footage and badly re-enacted biblical scenes. In a reel that is now lost, surrealistic images of elated shepherds juxtapose with close-ups of blinking eyes and a young boy on crutches. Kevorkian had hoped that audiences, overwhelmed by Handel's score, might not notice the terrible quality of the film's visuals.

Broke, the Doctor slept out of his van and picked up the odd job as a substitute pathologist. He wrote a book of poems about

dieting called *Slimmericks*, which advocated a "demi-diet" of always leaving half the food on your plate. Otherwise, "How your masses consumed/Maybe be fitly entombed/Will weigh heavily upon the mortician." For the contemplation of loftier matters, Kevorkian had a show on Berkeley public access cable. In an early 1980s program called *The Door*, he played a professorial tour guide of the mind, complete with black turtleneck. Floating visions of his head flash across trippy neon patterns amid crashing thunder, as the Doctor on the green screen promised the viewer a trip into some "very hazy realms of human existence." One episode ended with Kevorkian discussing multiple universes and asking solemnly, "For what forms of existence are we the amoebas?"

As the death penalty crept back into fashion in America, he fantasized once more about dissecting convicts for the greater good, envisioning the struggle as a kind of civil-disobedience campaign: "The pressure [would have] to well up from the cellar of society: from a lone doctor at the bottom rung of his calling, without



authority, influence, or organizational support (and ultimately even without a job) combined with the absolute lowest of the low, the condemned criminals themselves..." The only venue that would publish his musings was an Israeli journal called *Medicine and Law*.

In the summer of 1987, the Doctor took a trip that would change his life, and his ideas about death. Kevorkian decamped for Amsterdam, having heard rumors of rogue doctors practicing euthanasia on thousands of terminally ill patients a year in the Netherlands. He was curious about the practicalities — his death-penalty project would end in the killing of the condemned men, after all, and he was interested in studying the most humane techniques. In the Netherlands he met Dr. Pieter Admiraal, a leading anesthesiologist whose underground work would later lead to the legalization of voluntary euthanasia in the Netherlands in 2000. Dr. Admiraal told Kevorkian flatly that experimenting on convicts was insane. Yet he also convinced him that the best way to cheat death was to help people take control of their own endings. Not long after, advertisements for death counseling services began appearing in Detroit newspapers.

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The greenish corpse of a man in a crucified position is draped with red and green tinsel. This human Christmas tree stands amid a mound of presents beside a fireplace hung with stockings. There is an infant in a manger in the fireplace, but Santa has come crashing down the chimney and crushed the baby with his big, black boot. Kevorkian titled it *Fa La La La La La, — La La, — La, — LA!* The scene might have given the Grinch himself nightmares. Yet in the winter of 1992, Hugh Gale, a seventy-year-old man suffering from emphysema, told his wife that all he wanted for Christmas was a visit from Dr. Death.

A few years earlier, Kevorkian had come out of a Salvation Army depot with \$30 of random parts. From a discarded Erector Set, various old toys, and bits of jewelry, he jury-rigged a machine he called the Thanatron. (Later he renamed it the Mercitron.) Three bottles were suspended from a rickety beam, one filled with a saline solution to open a patient's veins, another with barbiturates for sedation, and a third with potassium chloride to stop the heart. After the Doctor connected the patient to an IV, he or she would pull a chain on the device to start the lethal medications flowing. He called it his "Rube Goldberg suicide device." In an article published in the *American Journal of Forensic Psychiatry*, Kevorkian outlined guidelines for assisted suicide — eligibility limited to those who are mentally sound and unwavering, incurably ill and unbearably suffering — using placeholder names like "Wanda Endittal" and "Will B. Reddy." In June 1990, in the back of his VW van, the Doctor assisted his first patient, Janet Adkins, a fifty-four-year-old woman with Alzheimer's who decided not to allow the disease that was robbing her of her mind to progress any farther.

Soon there were others. Kevorkian began receiving hundreds of inquiries from people desperate to end their lives. He had finally found his calling — a cause that people were not only willing to engage with but desperate to embrace. At first it was a Kevorkian family affair: his sisters, Flora and Margo, assisted him with the logistics. Until her own death in 1994, Margo acted as

secretary, videographer, advocate, chauffeur, and nurse, often holding a patient's hand through the procedure. Between 1990 and 1998, Kevorkian led over 130 terminally ill patients into the great beyond, often in state parks or vacant apartments. For each client, he tried to orchestrate a poignant, graceful passing. In the summer of 1993, Kevorkian assisted Thomas Hyde, a thirty-year-old man with advanced Lou Gehrig's disease, in a particularly beautiful spot on Belle Isle, a wooded haven on the Detroit River. Hyde, who loved to hunt, wanted to die in the open air.

When Michigan revoked his medical license and he could no longer obtain barbiturates, he devised a second machine that used carbon monoxide. Arrested dozens of times, Kevorkian was tried repeatedly for murder. Yet he was always acquitted; his hawkish lawyer Geoffrey Fieger would play videotapes the Doctor had recorded of his consultations with desperate patients. Juries wept.

As he pressed on in his fight to legalize assisted suicide, Kevorkian again turned to art as a means to communicate his message, as a solace, and as a way to fund his crusade. He played smooth, spooky jazz on the flute with a group called the Morpheus Quintet, and produced an album called *A Very Still Life*. He hand-painted hundreds of novelty sun visors with the logos of major sports teams to sell at games. And he recreated his old paintings from memory, sometimes giving them new titles. (*The Gourmet (On War)* was a reworking of a late-60s work called *Genocide*.) In perhaps his most harrowing canvas, a terrified, sickly man is sliding down a long, dark tunnel, scratching at the stone walls in a vain effort to slow his fall — his fingers worn down to ripped flesh and exposed bone. Below him, skeletal faces peer up out of the abyss. He titled it *Nearer My God to Thee*.

"It really isn't art," Kevorkian said at the ALMA opening. "I call it pictorial philosophy." In his exegesis of the painting, Kevorkian writes: "Most of us will do anything to thwart the inevitable victory of biological death... How forbidding that dark abyss. How stupendous the yearning to dodge its gaping orifice. How inevitable the engulfment. Yet, below are the disintegrating hulks of those who have gone before; they have made the insensible transition and wonder what the fuss is all about. After all, how excruciating can nothingness be?" It was like a dreamless sleep, Kevorkian surmised. (For the Doctor, whose dreams often kept him awake, this must have seemed a relief.) In a 1966 publication titled *Beyond Any Kind of God*, he writes, "Dreamless sleep entails absolute nothingness which we crave and know to be indispensable. It is an experience which affords us the unique opportunity to begin to 'know' the inscrutable essence of absolute nonexistence... which rules out any implication of transfer or transformation or transition from this world to any other world or to anywhere, anything, or anyone else. There could be no heaven, hell, purgatory, paradise, nirvana, moksha, or reincarnation — and no god."

Kevorkian painted and repainted such works as *Nearer My God to Thee* in an attempt to shock the public into a new way of thinking. Death is an inevitable, natural nothingness. All humans should have the right to choose not to go on living if existence becomes unbearable. Everyone should have the right to die a "good death," with dignity and planning. End-of-life treatment, hospice care, do-not-resuscitate orders — all should be openly discussed. And yet the Doctor's death portraiture is so morbid that it

seems to lead us away from the calm, dispassionate contemplation of death and into abject horror.

He may have been light years ahead of his time, but he was terrible at marketing. On one occasion Kevorkian harvested the kidneys from one of his assisted suicide patients and went on television, pleading for a transplant surgeon to take them and save a life. No one did. His house was constantly surrounded by angry bands of Right-to-Lifers chanting, confusingly, “Kill Kevorkian!” In 1999, he was convicted on second-degree murder charges after he euthanized a patient so paralyzed by Lou Gehrig’s disease that he was unable to start the Mercitron himself. Kevorkian filmed the death, mailed the tape to CBS, and dared the Supreme Court to charge him — to try to force the issue of assisted suicide onto the national stage. Yet the issue could never be disentangled from Kevorkian’s off-putting persona. On *60 Minutes*, Mike Wallace asked a series of leading questions.

*“You were engaged in a political, medical, macabre publicity venture, right?”*  
“Probably.”  
*“And in watching these tapes, I get the feeling there’s something almost ghoulish in your desire to see the deed done.”*  
“Well, that could be.”

In the debacle of a trial that ensued, Kevorkian fired his ace lawyer and insisted on representing himself. He was convicted after a day and a half.

From prison in 2004, Jack wrote, “Look at the forces against me — the government, the American Medical Association, pharmaceutical companies, and religion. Is there anything more powerful than these four?” In his cell, prisoner #284797 continued to write poetry and to compose minuets for flute and organ fughettas. He imagined an international, eBay-style auction site for organ trafficking, for which he bought the domain [www.viscus.org](http://www.viscus.org). He worked on refining a new table of measurements for extremely small and extremely large magnitudes. (The number of atoms in all life on earth should be called a “Pynu or Pinu,” he wrote, without terribly much by way of explanation.) He plotted a campaign to run for Congress — and then, when he got out, ran as an independent in the 2008 elections. (He received 2.6% of the vote.) As he once told an interviewer, “I failed in securing my options for the choice [to die] for myself, but I succeeded in verifying the Dark Ages is still with us... When history looks back, it will prove what I’ll die knowing.”

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In the fall of 2011, photographs began appearing on the internet of Ava Janus, Kevorkian’s niece and sole surviving heir, posing with the Mercitron. She was advertising an upcoming auction of Kevorkiana: empty prescription vials, a white bulletproof vest, a paintbox, his flute, the death machine. “There is no stop button,” Janus coyly told reporters. No one bought it. No one bought any of Kevorkian’s paintings, either, which Janus had offered for sale despite their presence in ALMA’s permanent collection. In a lawsuit that is yet unresolved, Janus disputes the claim that Kevorkian donated the works to the museum. At the auction, photographs of

the paintings stood in for the originals, which are currently locked away in the first circle of ALMA’s vault.

In their place, the museum’s third-floor gallery features an exhibition commemorating Stalin’s Ukrainian victims, sponsored by the Connecticut Holodomor Awareness Committee. Visitors will find it curiously minimalist — there are no yellowing letters or relics of clothing, not a single artifact, just glossy Photoshopped posters of elderly, hunched-over peasants and emaciated children with eyewitness testimonials printed in bold, in-your-face type. And the headline, a hope dressed up like a promise — “We Must Not Forget!”

I turn back to my list of “Genocides that follow the Armenian Genocide.” Ukrainians were the third, after the Jews. The list ends with Darfur, and then an ominous “...Who Is Next?”

Perhaps it’s the silent question posed by all memorials, some more memorably than others. In the Spring 2010 issue of *Yerevan* — the one with Andre Agassi on the cover — there is a list of the top Armenian-genocide monuments worldwide, ranked by emotional impact. Number one is Tsitsernakaberd in Yerevan, a stele so tall and pointy it could make a kebab out of the moon. There are blank slates in Lyon, a skeleton of a church in Montebello California, an abstract winged creature in Cyprus, a modernist shrine in Sydney. Like the Doctor himself, the memorials at once deliver and soothe the sting of death. They are a sharp reminder to those who forgot and a salve to those who have always remembered, but need some surface onto which to draw the map of memory. The way they are photographed reminds me of a line from an Elizabeth Bishop poem, about an enigmatic monument: *The view is geared (that is, the view’s perspective) so low there is no “far away,” and we are far away within the view.*

It was only in his most delirious hours that Kevorkian linked his fight to legalize assisted suicide with redemption for Armenia. On one occasion in which he was incarcerated, pending an appeal, the Doctor went on hunger strike for eighteen days. He nearly died. In his cell, a hallucinating, disoriented Kevorkian told Hugh Gale’s widow, “I will not be a slave. My people were slaves, and they were slaughtered.” Moving beyond the commemoration of tragedy in its exceptionality, Kevorkian memorialized the universality of death itself. His monument was the fight for dignity and self-determination — in a world in which we are all just somebody else’s amoebas. After he was freed, his lawyer brought him a slice of apple pie, but Kevorkian refused it. Too much sugar, too much fat.

“Bet you never knew,” the Doctor once wrote, “that the swing tune ‘Celery Stalks at Midnight’ can always be counted on to make me smile.” It’s a Doris Day song, recorded during World War II. “Celery stalks at midnight/Looking at the moonlight/What’s this funny nightmare all about?”

