



# Ozone Journal

*Peter Balakian*

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**Ozone Journal** Peter Balakian  
*from "Ozone Journal"*

Bach's cantata in B-flat minor in the cassette,  
we lounged under the greenhouse-sky, the UVBs hacking  
at the acids and oxides and then I could hear the difference

between an oboe and a bassoon  
at the river's edge under cover—  
trees breathed in our respiration;

there was something on the other side of the river,  
something both of us were itching toward—

radical bonds were broken, history became science.  
We were never the same.

The title poem of Peter Balakian's *Ozone Journal* is a sequence of fifty-four short sections, each a poem in itself, recounting the speaker's memory of excavating the bones of Armenian genocide victims in the Syrian desert with a crew of television journalists in 2009. These memories spark others—the dissolution of his marriage, his life as a young single parent in Manhattan in the nineties, visits and conversations with a cousin dying of AIDS—creating a montage that has the feel of history as lived experience. Bookending this sequence are shorter lyrics that span times and locations, from Nairobi to the Native American villages of New Mexico. In the dynamic, sensual language of these poems, we are reminded that the history of atrocity, trauma, and forgetting is both global and ancient; but we are reminded, too, of the beauty and richness of culture and the resilience of love.

## Ozone Journal Details

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## From Reader Review Ozone Journal for online ebook

### Corryn W says

I cannot claim to be a skilled (or even mildly informed) reader of poetry, but I can say that I enjoyed reading this collection for Balakian's musical, fluid quality of writing. There were many references that I didn't understand, as I think was the intention, but I appreciate that Balakian didn't dilute the material for the ease of the reader.

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### Brina says

Over the course of the year, I have made it a point to read Pulitzer winners from all platforms. As my reading evolves, I have found that I also enjoy reading collections of poetry at night, especially after an especially long day. It is in this regard that I found myself reading Ozone Journal (Phoenix Poets by Peter Balakian, the 2015 winner for poetry. In a volume that is deeply personal and falls back on his life experience, Balakian takes his readers on a journey to highlight various human rights abuses around the world.

In addition to his title, cornerstone poem, Balakian takes his readers to various locations that have meaning to him. He introduces the collection with Name and Place which sets the stage for the archeological dig he will go on later. He also takes his readers to Pueblo, New Mexico and discusses native American rights; to Detroit and talks about the African American perspective on what it meant for Joe Louis to win his title bout against Max Schmeling; and to Los Angeles where he gains inspiration from Hart Crane in his writing. While these poems were modern and innovative, they did not move as much as other Pulitzer winners I have read recently. The first poem I connected with was Baseball Days, '61 where Balakian contrasts the game of baseball with the promises of youth. He sets this piece in a historical perspective of a year where many records were broken in order to put one's youthful days into the context of a larger picture of life.

Baseball Days, '61 sets the stage for Balakian's title poem Ozone Journal. In 2009 he participated in an archeological dig to bring to light abuses that occurred during the Armenian genocide of 1915-1916. These abuses had already been brought to light in prose form with Balakian's *The Burning Tigris: The Armenian Genocide and America's Response*, and here he discusses his findings to poetry in motion. While he states that this poem is not intended to be a memoir, he falls back on personal experience, which makes this particular poem worthy of its accolades. Each stanza is in vignette form that moves back and forth between his experiences in the Middle East and his life in New York, especially his relationship with his daughter. I found the segments where he focuses on the father-daughter relationship to be among the most moving, even if they might have been intended to be a filler for the deeper issues he discusses here. He contrasts his daughter as a young girl buying her ice cream with an older teen on her own, as he attempts to reach her, perhaps in a college dormitory, from half a world away. These segments did diffuse the tension created and left me wanting more poetry just about Balakian and his daughter.

In Ozone Journal and other selections, Balakian also takes readers back to the 1980s when AIDS and the depletion of the ozone layer were hot button issues. He talks about his cousin who lays dying of AIDS and the paranoia of the general public in how they might contract the virus. Scattered throughout the entire volume are mentions of ozone gas and how exposure to it could cause various diseases and the fraying of society as a whole. I did find these issues as well as Balakian's mention of human rights abuses in Kenya to be thinking points; however, they did not work well in poetry form for me. Perhaps, even though this is a

new collection, the topics are dated and would have worked better, at least for me, as a non fiction book.

While Ozone Journal did not rate as high for me as other Pulitzer winning poetry collections that I have read this year, I did enjoy the writing and that issues that Balakian introduces on these pages. I thought that placing mentions of the depletion of the ozone layer within the poems speaks to the quality of his writing. Also, the sections about Balakian's daughter, I found moving and I would be so moved to read an entire collection of his just on this topic. Perhaps, I will find his nonfiction more to my liking; however, Ozone Journal is a quality poetry collection on par with other modern poetry I have read. Only the topics addressed did not necessarily speak to me but might be better enjoyed by other readers.

4 stars

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### **Rhomboid Goatcabin says**

Much of today's "professorial" poetry's weaknesses are also its greatest strengths. Seeing as their work is almost exclusively biographical and faced with the bourgeois uniformity/interchangeability of their lives, (successful) modern American poets are forced to go full style-over-substance and get creative with their limited material, often successfully squeezing as much expression as possible out of everyday observations as mundane as seeing a person in an odd coat at Wholefoods. Balakian, though a 1960s suburban Jersey kid himself, has gained attention for addressing his Armenian heritage in his memoir, a non-fiction book, and an edition of his grandfather's genocide memoir; in 2005, he visited Armenia and the Syrian desert in a highly publicised trip which provides much of the material for the present volume's eponymous title poem. Despite his unique background, Balakian's poetry is staggeringly anodyne and unexpressive, simply presenting and juxtaposing his own observations in ways that are neither meaningful nor well-crafted. As an Armenologist myself, I might also add that, despite his posterboy status for the Armenian community, it seems that Balakian has to this day not learned any but the most basic rudiments of Armenian and relies perhaps exclusively on others for all matters Armenian that he cannot get from English sources. As shown in his memoir, he had not even learned the alphabet by the time of his 2005 journey, which weighs down Ozone Journal with painfully uneventful descriptions of car trips through Mesopotamia, which join his uninterested images from Nairobi, New Mexico and nostalgic recollections of 1960s suburban New Jersey baseball and bebop.

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### **Derek Kaellner says**

Peter Balakian's travels provide an ever-changing and hyper-sensual background for his poetry. The title poem is soaked in personal heartbreak, but his talent at connecting urban locations to their natural past makes our human tribulations seem insignificant and fleeting.

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### **Laura says**

Not being a regular reader of poetry, I'm a bit intimidated to even comment. But all of us readers have the

right to do so! I read through this once, allowing the imagery to flow over me. The poems take you to exotic locales, but also back to NYC and upstate New York. My favorites were the longest and title poem "Ozone" and "Aleppo". The descriptions of the ravages of war and genocide are vivid. But it's not all about that. There's also humorous references to American life. My last thought is that this is very masculine poetry. There's a restlessness and disconnection here. Not much about domesticity.

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### **Robert says**

Good book of poetry. Not happy poetry; poems about AIDS, the Armenian slaughter, etc. All I can say is that many of the poems are very good, leaving you with thoughts. I was turned on to this book from a poem about pomegranates in the Atlantic. Balakian also wrote the book about the Armenian slaughter that I read earlier this year.

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### **Just Zack says**

Pulitzer Prize winner... really? hmmm.

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### **Tristan says**

*Ozone Journal* is an unusual and elliptical collection of poems, but it is one I am immensely glad to have read and am excited to explore further. The poems of *Ozone Journal* deal primarily with closings, with shutting outs and shutting downs and keeping aways. They address genocide, parenting, AIDS, cultural destruction, the past/memory, and the intersections between these in many different combinations. The fantastic title poem does a particularly good job bringing disparate threads of these topics together in a fragmented and fluid piece that jumps off of the author's actual experiences when in the Syrian desert to find the remains of skeletons from the Armenian genocide. As an example, here is a (somewhat long) excerpt from "Ozone Journal":

2.

All day I was digging Armenian bones out of the Syrian desert

with a TV crew that kept ducking the Mukhabarat  
who trailed us in jeeps and at night joined us

for arak and grilled goat under colored pennants and cracked lights  
in cafes where piles of herbs glistened back at me.

I passed out from sun and arak and camel jokes

in a massive hotel, my room opened to the Euphrates  
that was churning in the moonlight.

3.

When I woke I was dreaming back to the '80s on Riverside Drive  
where Ani was born on a bright spring day,

in a decade of money and velvet when the plastic voice of Sinatra  
floated through fern bars where we lounged

with wine spritzers and lemon-drop martinis.  
It was silver palette and more than cuisine

with its encoded sense of ending  
and the smoked sable at Barney Greengrass

where we took Ani for brunch  
on Sunday when the morning was lit up and open,

....

6.  
By noon I was leaning on the cotton white hospital wall,  
gazing at the islands of purple lesions on  
David's slightly swollen leg, the edema rising

in his groin, the sheets strewn and the IV  
dripping blue down the snaking plastic tube.

My year of magical thinking looped down  
the drain of my brain: "Take care, cousin."

I blew him a kiss,

The poem continues in this vein for the entirety of section two of the book, sliding back and forth between topics and producing a unique look at all of the themes through the lenses of the others (This poem is likely to be the second of the analytic projects I'm hoping to work on this summer) and makes each section at once a complete entity and part of a much larger whole.

The rest of the book performs similarly, although the shorter individual poems do not reach for the grand scope of "Ozone Journal" (or its semi-spiritual, semi-literal precursor "A-Train/Ziggurat/Elegy" which was published in Ziggurat and which I found before moving into the title poem of this collection). Balakian immerses himself in the world in order to write about it and each poem displays an intense commitment to the world around us (something that I think is generally necessary unless replaced with an equally attentive commitment to the world inside our minds and inside a poem or story's alternate reality) which is expressed in specificity and in side-angles and sometimes in both. "Here and Now" illustrates this characteristic very smoothly with its opening: "The day comes in strips of yellow glass over trees. // When I tell you the day is a poem / I'm only talking to you and only the sky is listening." The poems of the first section tend to lean on the (somewhat) confessional side of the collection, evoking characters very similar (presumably) to the author, but these to display, if not the eye of fiction, certainly the clarity of hindsight and of associated insight, which gives them the same quality of "closing" found elsewhere in the book. He is not afraid to speak, as when he says, in "Providence/Teheran, '79", "I saw / red blindfold wrap American faces, / iron bars of a gate twist the windows of American // exceptionalism. Morning. Morning. No dream."

In spite of the collections intelligence and fluidity, it did just barely garner 5 stars, and that mostly on my excitement to spend time actively exploring the title poem. This is because the poems did not "stick". They were elegant; they were thought-provoking; I fully expect *Ozone Journal* to grow in depth and power each time I return to it (I hope to return to it; I hope to return to almost everything I read), but many of the poems were not memorable. I found myself looking at poems, unsure if I had read them until I had started (at which point I found them, once again, intriguing and ready for another look). I give it five stars in anticipation of growth upon re-visiting and my interest in the title poem, but feel the need to mention this problem as it stands.

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### **Brittany says**

Most enjoyed:

Pueblo 1, New Mexico; Pueblo 2, New Mexico; Pueblo, Christmas Dance; Ozone Journal; Near the Border

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### **Ross says**

Some of the poems in the collection like, "Warhol/ Mao, '72" and the Pueblo series were strong and contained vivid of language. Excerpts from "Ozone Journal" were very moving.

However as a collection, I really didn't enjoy reading the work. I felt like many of the poems were too personal and discussed places I've never travels... not in an "open my eyes" kind of way, the poems were written in a "this was my experience" way. For me, the universal themes weren't there thus the two star review.

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### **Al Capwned says**

This one is full of lovely and emotional images. It's like travelling the world in just a few pages of poetry.

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### **wade says**

A Pulitzer Prize winning collection of poetry that is well worth all the acclaim. These poems are dripping with history and a vast array of geographical settings. What is most important is the tight construction and the unique and personal subject matter that the author brings to light. The title of the book is based on the longest poem but most of them are a comfortable 1 - 3 pages. Based on his poetry I will certainly check out his memoir and other writings.

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### **Stella Nelson says**



These poems didn't all land, for me, and those that didn't felt slightly... self-important? But the 2nd section, the one long ambitious poem with the same title as the book, is brilliantly put together and really moving.

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## Clinton Smith says

Ozone Journal takes the considerable strengths of Balakian's work and amplifies them, while adding some elements that work to make the communication within the poems seem more urgent, or direct, than was the case in many of the poems in "June-tree" (a strong work in its own right). Probably identifying the changed or added elements would be the best place to start in describing the difference. Ozone Journal is more willing to tell actual stories through the inclusion of dialogue, characters, and so forth; see the 50+ part title poem, where many of the most memorable passages have to do with individuals who are among the first who are diagnosed with AIDS, prior to there being effective treatment, and "On the Border". In particular, the latter poem is striking for the tension that builds to a pinnacle, where the dialogue implies the death of God, or at least (perhaps more accurately) the death of man's birthplace, through the discussion the narrator has with a priest about the ancient city of Ani:

"Byron thought the Garden of Eden circled Ani and on south"—I interrupted the priest—/  
"Yes, yes, Byron learned our language"—he shot back./  
"Just a romantic orientalist," I croaked—/  
"What?" —the priest turned and stared at me over the headrest/  
"You think anything's left there? After 1915?" .../

From a craft standpoint, it seemed to me (not universally so, but more than in his earlier poems) that Balakian utilizes more short stanzas and in general shows a greater willingness to use simplicity to great effect, as well as repetition. Finally, poems such as the uniquely powerful closing poem, "Home," make probably the most profound argument in favor of the concept (and emotion) that memory, while faulty, is the great unifier of place and the greatest way in which we are bound to each other, however painful that binding is: "...when you walked/into the/church where Lazarus had come home to die and you forgot that Lazarus died/because the story was in one of your uncle's book that were wrapped in/newspaper in a suitcase and/stashed under the seat of an old Ford, and when he got to the border/he left the car and walked the rest of the way, and when you pass the apartment/on 116th and Broadway—where your father grew up (though it's a dorm now) —that suitcase is buried in a closet under clothes..."

Numerous other subtle things could be pointed out. For instance, the greater use of em dashes, indicating both pauses that allow contemplation during reading and the presence of an interjecting thought that elaborates on the main "frame" before and after it, seems to bring a certain type of meditateness to some passages that perhaps would be different without them. Also, in a broader sense, Ozone Journal's emotional center is very explicitly found in the experience and the aftermath of the 1915 genocide, and its spiraling and forever-extending influence on the emotional life/memory of Armenians today. By vividly incorporating the experience of other subjugated groups, groups who've experienced death, Balakian enlarges the concept of emotional trauma and evinces its deeply personal nature in all of us. Yet, there's a sense of nostalgia that is palpable that, to me, seems separate from this suffering and allows us into the lives of his disparate subjects, as in one of the segments of the title poem, 37: "While our friends in Tribeca were buzzed/on other stuff we were sucked up in our belief—/... our belief—in Dylan Thomas's thunderous cadences/like backed-up water let loose over a barricade/as we went down by the riverbank/and were mad for the atmosphere,/the collision, the sweetest of entries."

Last, it's a remarkably consistent book: pretty much everything from "Joe Louis's Fist" on is of the highest order—something close to a life-changing experience for me.

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### **Sydney Goggins says**

One of the best poetry collections I've read in a long time, in literary and artistic terms but also especially powerful because of the subject matter. Balakian combines reflections from his personal life with discussions of history and its impact on the present. In the lengthy title poem 'Ozone Journal', divided into 54 sections, he contrasts a wide range of memories that are connected by several emotional threads. "Home" and "Baseball Days '61" are probably my favorite poems in the collection.

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