

Portrait of a Child

*(Yerevan, capital of a republic
set up by those Armenians who had
not been massacred by the Turks.
In 1921, Turkey and Russia
divided the republic between them.)*

His face is quite peaceful, really,
like any child asleep, though the skin
is darkened in places, the curved eyelids
turgid, part of the ear missing
as if bitten off. He lies like a child
asleep, on his side, one arm bent
so the hand curls near his face, one arm
dangling across his chest, fingertips
touching the stone street. His shirt has
two rents near the waist, the slits hunters make
in the stomach of the catch.

Besides the shirt he wears nothing. His abdomen is
swollen as the belly of a pregnant woman
and sags to one side. His hip-joint bulges,
a bruise. His thigh is big around as a
newborn's arm, and from hip-bone to knee
the tendon runs sharp as a crease in cloth,
the skin pulling at it. His knees are enormous,
his feet peaceful as in deep sleep,
and across one leg delicately rests
his penis. Pale and lovely there
at the center of the picture, it lies, the source
of the children he would have had, this child
dead of hunger
in Yerevan.

Sharon Olds, The Dead
and the Living
New York: Knopf, 2000