



**Conversations  
In A Car**

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**Down in the Dirt 2004  
Scars Publications chapbook**

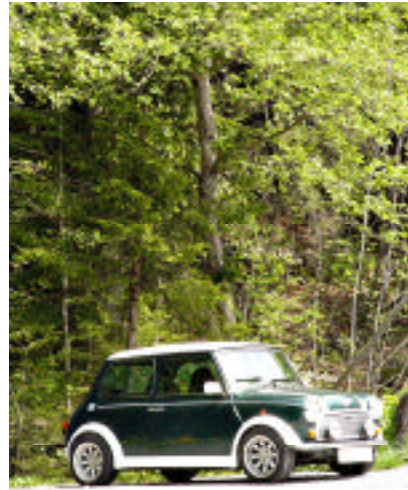
I keep using the past, present and future tense in these conversations. It's really a life that I'm speaking about. It's a reflection of two people falling in love at a relatively late age. And falling desperately in love. It's about a country that was in turmoil and two people embroiled in that. It's about everyday life. It's about buying tomatoes and potatoes and chicken and paring the chicken and it's about the opera and the ballet and small trips here and there. It's about one of the dearest people I ever knew and I will ever know. So, these are things that happened. Things ingrained in my imagination. Things that can happen today, things that may happen tomorrow. It's a whole life together. I'm not saying I'm finished. I'm using the wrong tense maybe. I'm writing this series in dedication to all the snores that she had to tolerate, I think I owe her this. It comes with no demand. It asks for no reply. It is just what it is and what can be. What will be.



*Ganichka – The term has a rather personal etymology. A Russian pronounces “Honey” as “Gaani” because there is no equivalent phonetic. The derivative “Ganichka” is from “Honey” and “ichka” is a term of extreme endearment.*

# Conversations In A Car – I

Early November.  
After the first snow,  
Except for the evergreens  
Trees are deciduous,  
Skeletons throwing shadows in pale sunlight.  
Nights are luminous  
Because of the reflections of halogens and strobes  
Against low clouds  
That promise more snow.  
Blades of grass  
Between cracks in the concrete on the tarmac  
At Sheremetyevo Adin  
Are already withered away.  
Snowploughs are at work  
Days are short and dark.  
Life is stark naked.  
Airplane landing lights are bright  
As they come down through the cloud cover  
In the arctic wind  
That freezes your ears and drills your bones.  
Moscow is magic;  
The trees, like Hamlet, unclothed.  
Life is stark naked.  
From the airplane window  
You see endless meadows of snow  
Unploughed, virgin, fresh,  
Polluted sometimes by a small dacha here or there;  
Windows boarded, fences in need of repair.  
And then the wheels land,  
The exhausts of the jets throw up a storm of snow.  
Airplane hostesses hand out overcoats,



Mufflers, mittens and caps:  
Armour before you go to war.  
A signalman in swathes of clothes  
Waves signal lights to guide you  
Into your parking lot.  
Your suitcase when it comes out  
Off the tractor on to the belt  
Is frozen.



Maybe it is different now.  
But when I was there  
Sheremetyevo Adin was always choc-a-bloc.  
Whole families in tracksuits and sneakers,  
Businessmen in camel hair overcoats,  
Babushkas with their golden and silver teeth,  
Devushkas in short skirts with expectations  
To keep in the body heat,  
The taxi-driver Mafia  
To catch the aware unawares,  
With the flakes coming down outside  
Mixed with the sleet and the arctic wind.  
You hardly have a choice  
Unless like me  
You have a driver with a Volga,  
A big wooden driver wishing you good evening  
“Dobre Vechar”.  
You negotiate your way to the parking lot  
Head down, turned against the wind.  
You have to step through spittle and cigarette butts  
In dirty snow  
Until you reach your car.  
And then you thump your boots  
Because otherwise the car heater  
Will generate puddles beneath your feet.  
You have to uncap and unmitten yourself,  
Take out the mobile and talk to Singapore  
And to India and to the bank  
And then the day is done.  
You lie back in the warmth of the car

To the tunes of Anna someone or the other  
From Sheremetyevo Adin to Leninsky or even Mytnaya  
Is a long, long drive  
Made longer because of pit-stops  
For cigarettes, bottles of vodka and mineral water.  
But the driver never complains.  
And of course neither do I  
Because the winter evening Moscow sky  
Is something which words cannot explain  
As lights are turned on and Tverskaya comes afire  
Against the driven snow on your windshield.  
It is all so fairy-tale, so unreal,  
Made even more unreal  
By the pit stops at which I imbibe.  
An occasional pedestrian crouched against the wind  
Walking into the nearest metro  
May bring me back to reality.  
But then I always look the other way,  
To-morrow it will be another day  
And in Moscow, you live for today.  
Because days are constructed  
With snow-flakes that melt  
And time is absolutely impartial.  
The days get shorter and the nights longer  
And Moscow comes to life blanketed by snow.  
There are no flowers on kerb-sides anymore.  
Only snow, but the snow is so white  
That it reminds you  
Of the different primal colours of flowers  
On the kerb-side, last summer.  
But now it is winter  
And it is snowing incessantly.  
Now it is all in real time,  
Time for words of truth,  
For recluses and demons to come out of the woodwork  
And dance on Tverskaya.  
Now it is time for the Muscovite to live.  
They will of course cease to shower:

Perfume will sell by the gallon.  
In closed lifts  
You will feel a little suffocated by body odours.  
But then it is human bodies  
Storing within them human souls  
Strung with human emotions, aspirations  
And morning smells of pepper vodka;  
Variations on the same classical theme  
Of intoxication used to cleanse a nation.  
Always, always it is intimidation.  
Idiocy is infectious; it puts you in your place.  
I pray that it does not infect the nation  
Because whole generations have been bred on routine.  
You take a flower for your teacher on September  
Ever since you were in kindergarten.  
Even gestures are mass-produced.  
Clothes and shoes and artifacts mass-produced in Shanghai,  
They lose their element of spontaneity.  
All women should not walk the same way  
With the same sway of the same hips.  
There must be variety in the ankles and the boots.  
To protect yourself from the cold,  
You have to wear stockings and tweed  
But there are different checks in tweed.  
Renoks are different; potatoes in Renoks are different.  
Even politicians have different agendas.  
In this context it is important to understand  
What you are, where you stand.  
It is important to know that potatoes and tomatoes  
Grow in gardens other than yours.  
It is important to feel  
That sometimes it is sensuous to be uprooted.  
Alien climes generate alien chimes,  
Birds migrate from pole to pole.  
We are but human souls.  
Or whales spouting on our way to the pole  
One most remember that I talk of only a few years  
When the bouncers in Night Flight were tough.

Driving back in a Zhiguli2 was rough.  
Things must have changed  
Since whoring is now a major export.  
But my memory is nailed to an emotion fixed in time.  
I'm sure by now the roads have changed.  
There are new shops in the neighbourhood  
Which sell Gucci underwear.  
But the destiny of a nation and a people don't change.  
And therefore I will talk of a conversation  
We had in a car,  
Just the two passengers and the driver.  
It was half-light, twilight if you will  
And I told you that I would tell you a story  
Written in a book that never got written.  
You blushed  
Because you knew what the story was.  
You see, the book belonged to you and me.  
I got out of my skin and told the story  
As I had never told a story before.  
Because I had to win,  
I had to tell the story to you.  
Once upon a time long ago  
There was a pauper  
Who had this compulsion  
To let his arms and legs flow.  
But he could not sing,  
So there was just this spate of words  
That flowed in fury like rivers in flood.  
Innuendoes, analogies and metaphors  
Stumbled on each other.  
But somehow this prince felt  
That in the snow it is easier to hear,  
The words flow clear through the ether.  
So he told you a story that was true.  
What time and life would allow he did not know.  
But he was sincere,  
He told you a story that was true.  
Because he extemporized from his heart,



Perhaps because of the fading light,  
Perhaps because of the purity of the snow-flakes,  
Perhaps because of the angle of the nape of your neck.  
Because as he told you the story  
You did not look at him even once  
Knowing all the while that the story would turn your life.  
You did not look at the pauper even once.  
He told you of a white horse with wings.  
Charmed princes have stables of these,  
So do paupers.  
He told you that together you and he would learn to fly.  
He told you of lives in heaven.  
He spoke to you of destiny.  
He did say that for most of ones' lives  
We were actors in a play.  
As an objective observer I found spontaneity  
In the verbosity.  
I found loose blades of grass  
Subject to wind-direction.  
I found spontaneity  
Because the prince wanted to win your love.  
He was apologetic about stars  
He could not bring down from the sky.  
He was furious about the years gone by.  
He never asked for a future.  
He asked for days and years.  
You never held his hand even once as he spoke.  
But sometimes you blushed,  
Sometimes you were pale,  
Sometimes almost there was a tear-drop  
Balanced on your bottom eyelid.  
You said beauty would fade,  
Paper would crumble  
Dated, they would even remove you from the Internet,  
What after all does it matter, this book of yours,  
Who will read of middle - aged agonies?  
The world is young,  
The world has acquired new shackles of destiny.



No one has written a book on me before.  
(She was flustered, you see.)  
So let me hear how it goes until the end.  
I said this book has no content,  
It rhymes desire with fear.  
But if we make a sum-total  
Of what you have seen and what I have seen  
And what I were to imagine,  
Which volcano would have erupted  
If we were eighteen,  
You a girl in pigtails with braces on your teeth,  
Me a boy with gangly crooked legs,  
How would it have then been?  
What have we lost?  
What has destiny deprived us of?  
Years and nothing else!  
Because we are still tentative  
In the holding of the hands  
And the touching of our lips  
As we shall always be strangers  
Exploring each others' mysteries,  
Feeling the texture of the strain  
In the holding of each other's hands,  
With tongues that delve deep in desperation  
Searching forgotten moments in times lost  
With cheeks that mingle perfume and after-shave lotions,  
With sweat on your upper lip  
And a morsel of rice on my moustache.  
We shall dream dreams.  
We are now old enough to compromise,  
To buy whole flower-shops  
That will say what we should have said years ago,  
Had we met.  
But it is always the morning-light and the waking up  
That tells the truth,  
The weather forecast on television.  
But to-morrow's weather will come to-morrow  
Just as tears do.

I have promised myself that like children  
We shall gambol in the snow  
Ride our sleds downhill in shrieks of ecstasy.  
I have promised myself that there will be  
This passing car and traffic lights  
Throwing shades of orange and green  
On your profile.  
There will be these street lamps  
Catching the drift of the snow  
As it catches flies in their last throes,  
And, sometimes, lust.  
Sometimes there will be glowworms in the dark  
To light up our nights.  
On park benches  
We will eat our sandwiches and drink our beer.  
You will make me walk up four floors of the Univermag  
Because of some trinket that you thought was dear.

Sunday mornings will be lazy  
With last night's TV recordings,  
Breakfast from dinner leftovers.  
You remember that I had said  
That I would not be naughty first.  
So you were naughty,  
And we ended up with no breath  
And realized it wouldn't do.  
It just wouldn't do.  
That is when we packed our bags.  
This coming together was quite uneventful  
Only a few volcanoes erupted,  
Only a few tectonic plates clashed.  
Your combination of wallpaper in gold and green,  
Your kitchen with the sun streaming in,  
Your chintz curtains,  
And the cold when you aired the rooms  
Every time I smoked a cigarette  
All this would happen so.  
I told you that in my book.  
In words, in looks, in anguish, in want,  
All of this I told you in my book.  
The fantasy when we were new,  
That fantasy was in my book.  
You normally never weep a tear.  
I thought you are so "Russian" heartless.  
Then one morning before I took a journey,  
While walking back from the Renok  
You wept and wept and wept copiously.  
It is good to weep even if you don't know why.  
Bonds are not even threads.  
It is just that I still needed my hair ruffled  
And you needed my smell.  
But apprehension was a part of my book.  
I told you so before we began  
Our conversation in the car.  
Ganechka, ami tomake chai



# Conversations

## In A Car – II

If you and I were to meet again  
After twenty years,  
How would it seem  
My darling friend?  
Faces changed, figures transformed,  
How would it seem  
My darling friend?  
In the Metropole,  
The same crab casserole.  
But different hues and different dyes,  
How would it seem  
My darling friend?  
With words all changed and trivialities blown-up,  
How would it seem  
To come back and share a meal with me;  
With the past and the present haunting us,  
With the future daunting us,  
How would it seem  
My darling friend?  
To share a meal with me at the Metropole,  
And crack a lobster leg with pincers of stainless steel,  
This whole wheeling and dealing,  
How would it feel  
My darling friend?  
Amongst the fish and the crabs  
And the lobsters' limbs  
And my special plate of frog's legs,  
How would it feel  
My darling friend?  
The crows atop the copper roof  
Make sounds.  
Maybe we can actually claim a discount  
Because we did not pay  
For the incessant pitter- patter



Of crow's feet  
At the corners of our eyes.  
There are goodbyes and there are goodbyes,  
But not like this  
My darling friend.  
And if you say I have to see,  
I have to see what will be,  
After the rivers have dried  
And I have tried,  
What will it be with the church-house candle,  
In memory what will be lost,  
I want to see.  
What will be gone, what will come,  
What will we say when we meet again?  
I want to see, not hear,  
I want to see your eyes  
When we meet again once more.  
For old times, for old songs,  
For memories, for memories not to be repeated,  
For afternoons in kitchens cooking lunch,  
I want to see what will be.  
How will it seem  
At that point of time to me,  
How will it look?  
This memory,  
How will it look,  
This dream?  
And if there were a garden near,  
I would have taken you there  
To think of me.  
One more time, to think of me.  
It's nothing but a play of words,  
Hidden emotions, guarded passions,  
Love is nothing but a play of words  
Upon the summer sky;  
So beautiful to look at  
But not to touch, not to feel,  
Not even to say "Hello".  
Because despite all that we do,

The stars will again shine  
And hearts will throb when we meet;  
Because hearts did throb when we met,  
And love will touch the hem  
Of our winter cloaks,  
As we walk back hand in hand  
Once again through the oaks,  
Hearts will throb beneath our winter cloaks.  
If you were to ask me once again,  
I would just say “Yes” once again.  
And that’s how it would be  
In the backdrop of the willow tree.  
That’s how it would be  
If you were to ask again.  
What storms would bear down upon us,  
I would say nothing more.  
Not one raindrop, not one flake of snow,  
Just you and me between the silver oaks,  
Heart-throbs amongst the trees of the forest  
Heart-throbs in the spring;  
Heart-throbs with the bees, heart-throbs in the water  
Heart-throbs as we ring each other’s bells  
To announce arrivals.  
Because departures are heart-throbs  
In the spring.  
If you were to shake my hand  
And walk away,  
That is how I would feel it should be.  
If you were to hold my hand  
And walk by me in the snow,  
That is how I feel it would be.  
It is for you to decipher  
This language, this feeling that we have,  
It is for you to understand,  
Because I have already understood.  
It is for you to see and feel  
How it feels, to touch, to smell  
And then say that “This is all right,  
This is for sure.”

# Conversations In A Car – III

If death and disease were flowers on the market  
They would have been sold every morning.  
Nothing to people is more fascinating.  
I realize that I could have eaten out for a whole month  
At other peoples' parties  
Discussing my cirrhosis,  
But after the month was done  
And the moon had waxed and waned once,  
They would have moved on to somebody else's cancer.  
Memories, memories of a diabetic coma  
Memories of a disease,  
Eases the flow of conversation between lost souls.  
And we who control NGOs  
And meet up with hotel chairmen  
For scraps of food for dogs and cats,  
We too are rats that live in newspaper columns.  
Cars with German aid are parked outside  
Whilst we gorge over human death  
In platinum and black.  
This is a strange country  
Where we take in stray dogs for irony  
And a thin, emaciated, tired, old dacoit  
Holds three states to ransom.  
Hyenas laugh, and beaches are virgin  
Because we are environment conscious,  
Yet paedophilia breeds like mosquitoes in the swamp,  
And incest is the fashion.  
Because forty-year old friends  
Look at each other's wives' cleavages  
And the wives show.  
This is the ethos of Probasi Bengal



From Wharton and Harvard, Caltech and MIT,  
 The lights are out, the nipples are out,  
 Post-menopausal nipples that cause ripples,  
 Shrivelled nipples that need a most assiduous tongue  
 And people save on shaving their armpit hair.  
 Dyes are the order of the day,  
 Maqbool Fida Hussain never used so many colours  
 So many browns, and shades of black.  
 In this tug-of-war, somebody has to take up the slack,  
 Somebody has to say, "No, I will not probe  
 At your nipples in the dark. I will just dance  
 A tune to the music and after the dance is over,  
 I will kiss your hand and say, 'thank you',  
 Even though you killed my feet."  
 I promise you  
 From this jungle gentlemen will retreat, predators  
 Will rule with their cheque – books and bellies and  
 Women with their cleavages and busts.  
 But time will take its ultimate toll-  
 No money for a face-lift, no money for the liveliness of the breasts  
 And predators look askance at dried or bloated meat.  
 The whole story lies in the crow's feet,  
 Forgive me my trespasses dear Lord, for I have been caught unawares.  
 It must be real, this is an intrusion,  
 They say you have to walk to your destination.  
 Now if what they say is really true  
 I've been smart.  
 I've been there on a trial run and come back  
 In Gucci perfume.



# Conversations

## In A Car – IV

As you stepped out of the car  
We were almost done.  
Your perfume, my after-shave  
In the elevator,  
We were almost done.  
I knew I could not live without you,  
You know you have me in your destiny.  
It all happened in the elevator,  
After my soliloquy in the car,  
And then we took a cab  
To Moskovsky Vagsal.  
And in the cab  
You shamelessly ruffled the hair on the nape of my neck  
And there was certainly no conversation in that car  
Except my saying “ Honey, don’t!”.  
Why did we take a cab, I wonder though,  
When we had two drivers warming their hands in the snow.  
What were we hiding?  
Had we done something wrong?  
And then you made me carry,  
My bags and your bags  
And almost lost a lover before you had found one.  
No, it was not Moskovsky Vagsal;  
The first time we went to St. Petersburg,  
We flew, because we had to reach before we had to reach,  
And the carpet in the cabin of the Peterhoff  
Was destroyed by you.  
In those first days we hardly talked to each other,  
We had things to do,  
To grope and touch and feel and heal.  
You had to get used to the cotton wool in your ears  
Because of my snoring;  
I had to get used to being in love.  
You had to get used to being in love.

# Conversations In A Car – V

If life had taken a left instead of a right  
I wouldn't have had to write,  
And this hassle would be out of the way,  
And we could have had quiet conversations  
In quieter cars.  
But I would not have smelled of vodka  
And after-shave anymore.

Healthy people have body odour  
And pyorrhoea in the mouth  
And instead of sanity they talk of vanity,  
Instead of valour they have pallor.  
No smoking inside the house,  
But I wished they used their dental insurance better.  
Preservation is the fashion  
And yet they die  
They also die  
And miss the evenings when bottles  
Rolled under the bed  
And we ate salads from plastic boxes  
And listened to Louis Armstrong 's horn,  
And then took the car to a forest  
Dappled with pale sunshine  
And trudged a foot or two in winter snow.

A visit to the Renok where we bought a leg of lamb,  
Evenings at the kitchen table  
With vodka and water and bottles of wine,  
Your totally expert dicing of the onions,  
My advice on the chilli and the turmeric-  
These were evenings of magic

Not meant for us I'm sure.  
We just happened to chance by them  
Watching "Dog Show" on television.  
And then the culture channel from St. Petersburg  
Alternated with scores of deaths in Chechnya  
And in Moscow, a rape or two,  
Talking of events that will become memories,  
Carefully skirting past problems  
That we know cannot be solved.

The wine was necessary, I can now understand  
Why should life not be such a beautiful haze?  
You and me watching dachshunds on television,  
Why should life not be a walk in the snow,  
Where should people like us go?  
In which cave should we hide?  
Or is it that we should never come out of the tube station,  
Constantly travel from here to there on the metro  
And admire the chandeliers and the pillars?

We searched constantly, if unconsciously, for permanence  
And yet everything is temporary, you see,  
As you are fond of saying-  
"Islands in the stream  
That is what we are".

And then one island breaks itself against the rocks  
And comes up with bloody fragments  
Which cannot be repaired with vodka or wine.  
And even though the islands are intertwined  
The current of the water carries the other away.

So everything is temporary,  
Nothing is permanent,  
And yet through our relationship  
We were looking for permanence  
Which got reflected  
In our conversations in the car.

I have decided to recite and not worry about what I say.  
It's a habit that grows upon you the difficult way.  
Not to attempt to be Shakespeare,  
Everyone thinks he has a Shakespeare in him anyway.  
Not to attempt to be Bill is even more difficult  
Because of the trappings you think will come your way.  
But to attempt to be yourself is the most difficult of all-  
You have to peel away so many masks,  
You have to deal with so many tasks,  
You have to shed an ocean of tears to cleanse yourself  
And you have to learn to laugh like a child.

Those lazy sunny afternoons on the embankments,  
Those whispering nothings in the ear,  
That naughty wind  
Those yachts bobbing up and down near the Fortress of Peter and Paul  
The portico of Mon Plaisir in the afternoon sunlight  
And the endless north.  
What the eye cannot see the mind does not comprehend  
Even if the brain sends signals  
The mind does not comprehend,  
It can but send signals back.  
It can waive the necessities of the logistics,  
It cannot transform simple hours of a sunny afternoon into magic  
And send up balloons in the air.  
Or we can stare at parachutists descending  
And exhibitions of different kinds-  
Actually an exhibition of the waters and the mind.

You go around the porch in front of our house after sunset  
Very deliberately  
You have to light each candle, you see  
And yet a solitary gust of wind smothers one flame,  
It spoils your symmetry.  
As we mark our footsteps in the snow  
I totter slightly because of inebriation, you know.  
In the tottering also there is a pattern of abandon

Of things to be done which should not be done logically.  
And yet the wavering of the footsteps as they are left behind  
Disturbs your sense of symmetry.  
As summer comes, the morning light  
Falls on one side of the tree-  
On this side the leaves vigorously grow.  
It's not that they do not grow on the other side  
But they are weak and pale in comparison  
Because they get the afternoon light.  
This difference in the colour of the leaves  
Disturbs your sense of symmetry.  
Coconut palms should stand tall and straight  
And yet on Miramar beach they curve in back towards the land  
As if they are afraid  
Of the sea.  
On the island a hundred metres away  
Everything is fine, though.  
The palms are as they should be.  
But this curving in towards the land  
Disturbs your sense of symmetry.  
I trim my moustaches with the greatest care  
But the hand does not distinguish between the left and the right  
And sometimes they are a little cock-eyed,  
Not awkward but cock-eyed.  
If you measured them with the centimetre tape  
Then maybe you would find  
A millimetre or two off.  
Sometimes in the metro the sweater rides up my back  
Because I am precariously holding on to a rod.  
You sit and pull my sweater back  
And frown all day at my moustache  
Because it disturbs your sense of symmetry.  
Now that life is asymmetric  
What will you do?  
Now that it's all topsy-turvy and the best years are gone  
What will you do?  
I know what you will-  
You will find a new pattern in this chaos that is life.

I know the geometry is horrible in life turning the other way  
But it can be explained by a theorem  
And in the end you can write QED  
Even if you don't always agree.  
Matters tend to get worse when winter comes  
The bones, they crackle more,  
A strange lethargy sets in  
When even the daily ablutions are a chore.  
If I had to choose between the snow and the sun  
I would choose both,  
The snow and the sun  
And if my wish were granted  
Would it not be great fun?



Last winter, the wind blowing off Lake Tahoe  
Was not pleasant at all.  
I thought I was a veteran Russian  
So what can California and Nevada do to me?  
So I left my mittens and cap in the car  
And walked on the ice-  
Walked is not the right word,  
Slipped on the ice right up to the lake,  
The embankment at least.  
And then in about two minutes I felt as if I had no ears.  
The wind came up right from the freezing waters  
And the snow had been packed by footprints into ice.  
I have noticed before but I don't know whether you have  
There's something comforting about the snow  
And there's something alien about ice.

There was a little sun that day but little enough.  
I know my girls and boys had warned me not to be so tough,  
They even bought me a new pair of mittens from a gas shop.  
We do not know how frail we are,  
We do not know what trails we leave behind us of our frailty.  
We cannot fly and have to learn to swim  
In heated pools in the gym  
And then we do the treadmill

And exercise with weights  
 To lose a few pounds.  
 We acquire habits and traits that are destructive  
 And that's an understatement.  
 We fall in love  
 And we fall out of love;  
 We have hunger and anger,  
 We have separate beliefs  
 And fight for them and carry posters  
 To Trafalgar Square past Downing Street  
 And yet we hold coronations at Westminster Abbey  
 And have a statue of Ram Mohan Roy beside the cathedral in Bristol.  
 We fish for trout and then examine the level of pollution in the water.  
 We exercise clout and then display humility;  
 We do a deal and if the deal goes right, it's ours;  
 If it goes wrong we try to shift responsibility.  
 We take money to send students  
 To Manchester and Birmingham and Toronto.  
 When they come back, what will they do?  
 Teach in Munger  
 Or work in a power plant in Chattisgarh?  
 There must be at least 30 institutes teaching IELTS  
 In Nehru Place which is two steps from my house -  
 But I am yet to find a Hindi dictionary in Delhi  
 Which is the heart of Hindi.  
 I have to travel for 25 kms  
 And then find no parking.  
 Strange twists and turns!

Someone taught me how to cook meat in the jungle  
 Just boil red chillies and the meat on a simmer for a long long while.  
 Someone taught me how to jump,  
 And skip and hop across cold, cold streams  
 Running by roads on the Himalayas.  
 But no one taught me how to watch Indian cable TV,  
 How to sift the garbage from the garbage  
 And in the sifting of the garbage pick up a rare song,  
 A dance that didn't go wrong.

No one taught me how to fly  
But I fly.  
No one taught me how to dance  
But I can take a step or two.  
No one taught me how to cry  
But I can still shed tears.  
There's only one thing that everyone taught me how to do -  
How to die  
And yet I cannot die.

If I had to find you wherever you went  
I would still find you  
Because the mind connects with the mind  
But I want you to find me first,  
To search and look and trust for me  
And if you do,  
On one sunset  
I will find you.  
There's construction going on in the floor above.  
The chisel hits hammer incessantly  
Or is it otherwise?  
Actually we look at the hammer as being so aggressive  
But the chisel weasels into concrete.  
Now how would you prefer to die,  
With a chisel or a hammer on your head?



# Conversations In A Car – VI



We woke up in the morning  
After a night full of smells  
And I played this cassette for you.

“First of all I want you,  
Second, I want you,  
At the end of it all I want you,  
Ami tomake chae”

A song sung by a guy and a guitar  
And the words, they ring so true,  
On heaven and earth, I want you.

All I remember is the walking in the snow  
And the waiting for the Avtobus.  
All I remember is the feel of the breast  
Against the underside of my arms.  
All I remember is the warmth of your smile.  
All I remember is the movement  
Of your fingers inside my hair.  
It is as if we lived in a fox's lair  
And the magic, it happened every time,  
The magic was the rhyme  
And sometimes, just sometimes  
It turned into glory.



There is a story to be written in all of this.  
But I am a minor guy,  
I write poems and get by.  
I listen to songs and catch a line  
And hum it all day long.  
I can recount every minor detail  
But there is a story to be told in this tale.

There was a story when I kissed your frozen red cheeks.  
There was a story when I touched your lips with my tongue.  
And there is a story that will largely remain unsung.  
Except for “tomake chae”  
Except for “ami tomake chae”.



# Conversations In A Car – VII

If you remember, we had some conversations in a car.  
After that, what happened?  
Would you call it life or would you call it destiny?  
I call it love, as I forever will.  
A bout of sickness that affects the heart  
But it need not, it should not.

We could have been acquaintances shaking hands  
Saying “Hello”s and “Hi”s  
And yet we said,  
“Ami tomake chai.”  
Our lives were organised and yet  
Why did we make this mess.  
This heavenly mess,  
This beautiful mess.  
Why did we make this lovely mess?  
It was only because of your profile in the traffic lights  
That I jumped out of my skin and talked like a monkey  
And having made this mess why did I,  
As the Americans say, “unmess” it after all?  
And why am I writing poems to you to-day  
Across the Caspian Sea  
When we are not blind and can still see  
And can still look into each other’s eyes?

If you think it was the sequestering that I wanted  
You think wrong.  
If you think it was the warmth of some other arms I wanted  
You think wrong.  
Once upon a time  
I could read your every thought

And I don't now even know what you think anymore.  
But screw your Dolly Partons,  
We are not islands in the stream,  
We will meet and retreat  
And we will meet again, tentatively.

As we grow older  
Perhaps we shall become more tentative  
But that is mystery, is it not?  
That is what chocolates are made of-  
You know the stuffing but you don't know what's inside.  
You know the dreams  
I always dream about you  
But you don't know what dreams are made of:  
Always love, always kisses,  
Always Ganichka,  
But sometimes apprehension, sometimes fear  
Because you are so dear.  
A quiver of your lips breaks my heart,  
A shy smile from you makes my day.

If you or I were to really, really forget our way  
We would walk each other through the snow  
Even today.  
Then why is it that you change the complexion of the fears?  
Why is it that you change the taste of the tears?  
Let the car go on-  
And we will have one more conversation in the car.



# Conversations In A Car – VIII

This is the next in a series of poems called Conversations in a Car. Many of these conversations did not take place actually in a car. They are obviously embellished by my convoluted imagination, but the feeling is something I really wanted to convey because I thought it was very rare.

It may not be in the best words or rhyme  
But then I don't like chicken and thyme.  
So, as long as I can get under your skin  
Perhaps I would have made it.

We sat in our kitchen on kitchen chairs  
And you sang old love songs for me.  
You remember the Dolly Parton ones.  
Through the window there was that meadow  
Beside Leninsky,  
White with snow and the Marlborough hoarding.

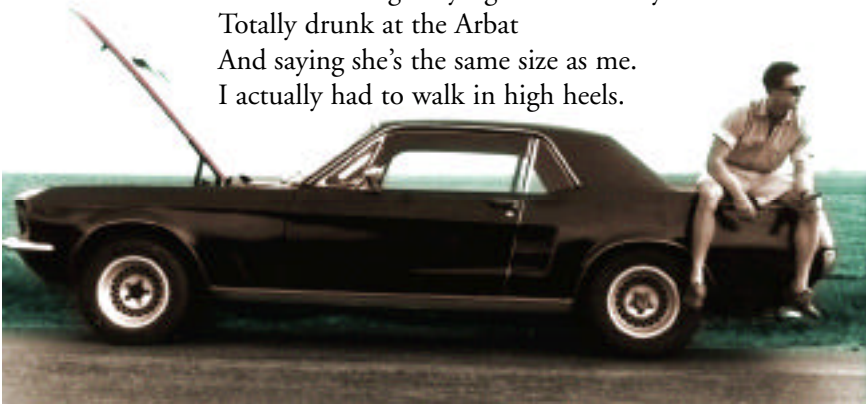
But when you sang it stopped snowing.

Then on the sky behind the KGB building  
There was a rainbow, why was it so?  
And those cassettes you recorded for me,  
The ones I took to Ulan Uday,  
I had the guest-house people play them  
Over and over for me through the night:  
They thought I was tight.  
And when I came back, your voice, with a cold,  
On my voice machine didn't sound right,  
Saying you had fever and you were bad.



Did you ever want to know whether I had fever  
Was my breathing heavy on the phone,  
Did I cry?  
I don't remember,  
I don't know why.  
I think because in those early days  
There were too many good-byes.  
Life has too many things to say  
We can't listen to them all.  
It twists and turns and goes the other way.  
Sometimes it talks in poetry,  
Breaks out into song,  
Sometimes it talks in stark naked prose.  
But in those early days  
You were always blooming like a rose.  
You had just fallen in love, you see.  
But I remember the harder times  
When you kept blooming and blooming for me.  
I will never forget how you shifted  
The mattress to my side of the bed  
When I had pain in my back  
And slept on the springs.

Those are the times I really dread  
Because they will not let me live  
And they will not let me die.  
I will never forget trying on shoes for you  
Totally drunk at the Arbat  
And saying she's the same size as me.  
I actually had to walk in high heels.



I will never forget the seafood restaurant in Tverskaya,  
Afternoons with heavy lunches and a Zhiguli.  
How can I forget your Olympic runs  
To the toilet as soon as you reached home?  
How can I forget the sound of your key at your door?  
How can I forget Amy  
Jumping all over your mink?  
How can I forget the gigantic breakfast  
You had at the American Diner?  
How can I forget your brisk walks  
To the photocopier on Leninski?  
How can I forget the Rive Gauche in your hair?  
How I can I forget the second bedroom  
Which you use as a warehouse?  
How I can I forget your refrigerator  
Which is stocked with food a year old?

I remember you eating salads  
From plastic boxes because you were suddenly hungry.  
I remember the bottles of wine under the bed.  
I even remember the shape of the glass  
In which you gave me my vodka.  
I remember your businesslike tread,  
I remember your holding my hand  
To help me cross the road.  
Your voice tingles in my ear,  
Your voice dazzles me still.  
So it will be,  
So it always will.

I am not ashamed of nostalgia  
I never will.



# Conversations In A Car – IX

There was this single instant of fame  
When I almost lost my name.  
When I recovered I saw passers-by  
Laughing at me as they passed me  
And friends topping up their glasses of vodka  
And mongrels with pity in their eyes.  
Why does it always happen  
That it has to happen in a car,  
Especially when we were so far.





# Conversations In A Car – X

What was the need in the holding of the hands?  
What was the need in the hunger of the words?  
If we traversed deserts and oceans  
And at the end of it all  
We found nothing at all  
What was the need of the lowering of the eyes?  
What was the need of those desperate cries?  
When did it go to this extent?  
Where did it go, the smoke of the chimneys?  
Where did it go, the snow in front of the window?  
Where did it go, the twelfth floor?

# Conversations In A Car – XI

The moons of Jupiter turned away  
When I cried,  
And after that she walked away  
Sitting in a car.  
We were friends  
As we are  
But she walked away, sitting in a car.  
And I said to myself,  
This is not the end of the world.  
But so it seemed,  
But so it seemed.  
I said to myself it was a joke  
But it was not,  
Was it a joke?  
This walking away from each other  
Whilst sitting in the back seat of a car.





# Conversations In A Car

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