

A nighttime photograph of a cityscape, featuring a prominent suspension bridge illuminated with warm yellow lights. The bridge spans across the middle of the frame, with its towers and cables clearly visible. Below the bridge, the city buildings are lit up, creating a dense pattern of lights. The sky is a deep blue, suggesting dusk or early evening. The overall atmosphere is warm and urban.

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2005 Down in the Dirt Chapbook

Why I Return

Scars Publications

MIRAGE

Who do you look for,
camel rider from Ulan Bator?

The miles have silence,
the years are lonely.

A hundred dollar girl
warmed up his afternoon,
she had a silver ring
in Egyptian snake design.

In the rise and fall
of a heated room,
rugs had tumbled,
in the kitchen,
the refrigerator whirred
in front of a slanted sun.

The ring had cut
the inside of his elbow,
where the flesh is soft,
from the bathroom
she brought iodine,
the iodine burnt,
this was real.

As the scar is real.
What mirage do you look for,
traveler from Ulan Bator?

PREPARING TO RETURN TO SAN FRANCISCO

Never seen a corpse
bedecked with ATM cards,
eyes are glazed glass,
nostrils stuffed with cotton wool,
the church is sepulchral cool.

We build our castles
on cushions of air
between stalactites and stalagmites,
in drink in dank air
on river banks.

Have seen graveyards though
overgrown with yellow grass flowers,
epitaphs that echo elegies
on weathered stone in hyperbole.

Wars were fought,
light a candle,
valor inscribed in wrought iron,
light a candle,
father photographed in Sochi,
light a candle,
morning rain in summer Moscow,
light a candle,
sober umbrellas and no wind,
light a candle,
dead chrysanthemums on wet granite,
light a candle,
Sir Elton John and Norah Jones,
light a candle,
civilization is aflame, Tom Eliot,
light a candle,
George Michael,
light a candle,
write my name in Sufi smoke,
light a candle,
Huckleberry Finn, you light a candle,

Let the crows sing,
Wagner, let the crows sing,
we will go fly fishing,
hunting trout, hunting the hunter,
we, the punters,
will let Uzbekistan win.
On the Thames,
bargain prices for the dinner cruise,
we are Elizabeth,
we are the maidens who hear the motor horns,
we video on mobile phones,
in Fuji color, the salmon looks
pinker than it is,
life is a little more grey
than Photoshop,
on blooming acacia trees
in the Himalayan foothills,
what squiggles and skewed graphs
will improve the yellow?
And what is that purple,
the purple of evening,
the purple of sin,
the purple of confession
the purple of Baptism,
what is that purple
that people wear?

I will bring your sunset to you
inside your tourist infested limestone cavern,
bats will have faces of babies in the Chad,
I will look forward to Elk steak
and your 'Crater' blue
maybe if I dip myself,
I will be dyed that hue!

PREPARING TO RETURN TO SAN FRANCISCO – II

There was this Greyhound man,
these Greyhound people
were like a motorcycle clan,
they always ran.

Karl Marx was a historian
others turned his inevitability
into philosophy,
because that
is the basic tool
to rule.

Materialism I can see
when I stand at the 'Return' counter
of Costco,
we will acquire, then we will determine,
what to do with this newest sin.

Dialectics will always win
even when history
is a little askew,
astride a horse in a Texas ranch,
or on a sledge outside Moscow,
but let us fight this war on terror;
and then we will go back
to the slum,
to genocide,
to hunger,
to warlords,
to gang-rapes,
even to the death of the Gangetic Dolphin,
to UN Ambassadors who were Beauty Queens,
ugly mountain child,
snot flowing from nostrils,
apple cheeks and pot bellies,
limbless body,
are you Tutsi or Hutu?
Are you Christian or Muslim?
(in a whisper),

Do you have the crude?
We are wooed.

I am Hindu.
My wife must climb the funeral pyre,
when the world is finally rid of me,
She belongs to an upper caste,
she must carry on the tradition of 'Sati'.
So they teach in History books,
like the proverbial 'rope tricks';
but amidst all the pillage, bribery and rapine,
I found an internet café at 10850 ft!

PILGRIMAGE

One lotus,
Two leaves,
On ice
Cracked
Like grandmother's mirror,
Water,
Sweet.
No air,
Mules pant,
Recant sins.
What sin?
When He makes you do
As you do?
Climb down, climb down,
Air is rare,
Look for a beehive,
There, will be flowers,
Gigantic,
Like the peaks.

Weeks,
Before gullible pilgrims
Read Swift,
And realize,
That this too
Is them,
Lilliputs,
Wise Horses,
Wiser Mules.

Please, ...
Dear Mule,
Don't go
Too near the bend.

PREPARING TO RETURN TO SAN FRANCISCO – III

Old Russian Joke.

This vodka is going to kill me;
But if I don't drink or smoke,
I will die HEALTHY.

The Date tree is tall,
If you reach the top,
You get to eat ripe dates,
If you fall, you break your head.

Earnest, I want to fight the fish with you,
Woods have jackals,
Camp-grounds warn you about bears,
But I've never even said 'Hello',
Except to the carcass of a skunk
On 680.

Anna, this is a strange country,
They don't even hoard old newspapers
For toilet paper,
Eta ne Tashkent!

AND YOU

IRINA ALEXANDROVNA

It all began
as I was driving past
on a narrow street
by the Nevsky canal
I saw your morning face
in this I wanted to live.
There was this smallest garment shop
above a basement full of drunks
baby booties on a rack
it was called
Nadyeshda.

The lights turned green
the car changed gear
and jumped into fear
where was the tear
in the barracks
little boys shaved nonexistent beards
their mothers whored for English lessons
Nadyeshda.

Babushkas not used to toilet paper
used Izvestia for ablution
what redemption
from endless queues to gastronoms
businessmen have Finnish shops
and Le Palace Europa
Our drivers will also carry guns
we will wear the Nike shoes
Nadyeshda.

Wafer sandwiches in Waldorf
and beautiful girls selling bodies in bars
language is no barrier
the driver knows he likes bolshoi

krasivaya blondinka dyevushka
Tomorrow his ship will berth
and then the port and the bribes
so today he will have a drink
Nadyeshda.

Every time twice a week
he stares at the victory gate
and thoughtfully lights a cigarette
alien chimes in alien climes
and then he drives to meet the Nachalnik
perigavarit dollarov
and after the discussion of dollars is over
he has a cup of English tea
Nadyeshda.

And then the ship unloads
rice for children
who carry a flower on Teacher's Day
who sledge in the snow
and 'fight' their dogs in early May
and rice for pensioners
without pension... 'visa denied'
for workers without wages
'visa denied'
but give me dollars and that Cross pen
Nadyeshda.

As I write this poem veterans march
be medaled belly full of vodka
fallen teeth not replaced
just as boys were during the victory war
and Schroeder gathers wife in tow
to watch them marching past
do you want to weep or laugh

don't waste time it is the day
for whores and tricksters
Nadyeshda.

I see the fire works from our bedroom window
I am enthralled Tovarisch
When I jump on your sofa
you think I am a kindergarten child
and hold me so
your fire works are like Swan Lake
remember how the seven girls became ducks
in St. Petersburg on a 'brandy' weekend
I wish we had two walking sticks
to negotiate the level difference
between the foot walk and the road
Nadyeshda.

And your valiant attempt
to initiate me into Chamber music
in a Cathedral opposite the Moskva
and then the ultimate overdose
of Tchaikovsky at the Kremlin
I became a gremlin
and actually snored
But I took revenge
in Bengali
I made you learn
'Aami tomake chai'
So it is as always it will be
'I want you'
Nadyeshda.

At the end of it all
everything is etched in fate
in hate in loss in regret
you told me you had golden years
for my offspring I fell from grace
my wife had married a god
in her godliness forsaking all
we will believe what we believe
and fool that I am
yet I pray
Nadyeshda.

Now you will have to live for me

replace as do shrubs in your pine forests
now you will have to see and swim
and eat the sturgeon of the Black Sea
They have transfused with B-negative
my blood is not my own
and with alien blood I write this alien poetry
I said it better in the car
even in the presence of the chauffeur
my steed will gallop up to you
you will jump up and ride into my heaven
my steed is young even now
on your sixtieth victory day
Nadyeshda.

NOTES: - Nadyeshda – Hope

*- Nevsky – all canals emerging from or flowing into the Neva
are Nevsky.*

- Gastronom – food shop, Vodka also available

- bolshoi – big

- Krasivaya blondinka dyevushka – beautiful blond girl

- perigavarit dollarov – discussing dollars

- tovarisch – comrade

- Moskva – in this context, the hotel in Moscow, not the river.

- Aami tomake chai – Bengali for 'I want you'

WHY I WRITE

1

LIGHT

Never commanding.
Never coercing.
Never manipulating.

Still pool
with one lily,
shadows
of weeping willows.

Lazy delta
churned into salt sea.

2

DARK

Clipped wings
that cannot fly or sing.
Bone cracking,
breath stopping,
wall climbing.

Darned socks
and boxer shorts.

Silence
in untamed violence.

3

TRUTH

All is a call.
Across ether
words wither.

Truth
death will bring.
Until then
frogs croak,
mating.

LAZY

A stray bull gored a stroller,
hunger, thirst, heat,
but bulls cannot retreat,
Hindus dictate so.
No slaughter houses,
madness is OK.

There was a man
called opportunity
who swore by connectivity,
brushed thoughts under carpets,
rolled sleeves,
and sweated in activity.

My pets cannot
think for thinkers,
cannot plan and implement.
No 'self helpers',
they pray to the good Lord
for their master's sanity.

Judge me not with geometry,
Arithmetic is hours
in television days,
intimacy is people
who brush your shoulders
and pass you by.

Or the bull's horns
in your entrails.

VULTURES EATING A DEAD BUFFALO

Deciduous tree
Empty branches
Crawling with black ants
Who eat into white bark
Stark

Death decides to die
And die again
The cinematography
Of past folly
Ad Infinitum Ad Nauseum
Rolls past mind's flat screen
Ennui

And then
The stars awaken
It will be good
As long as it lasts
Vultures are steadfast
In their motion before takeoff
Disdainful ungainly in their
Waddle

They work
With cellular phones
Others gather
Torture torment tear hard
Pick at maggots
From beneath yellow skin
While the Black Raven shrieks
Sacrilege

Inquisition
Just to see what will be
Fun and games and sundry
names
All defecate to death
From dust to dust
With insatiable thirst
Lust

MY TADPOLES BECAME FROGS

The mist is like a beggar's clothes,
gaping holes.
Somehow hiding the valley's shame,
moonbeams slant
like a digit less leper's crutch,
bandaged with pus and blood.

Once there were Sisters of Charity here,
now monkeys beg.
And roadside stalls blare vulgar songs,
messages to tourist buses
that belch at delicate spring flowers,
divinity has been re-found.

Here I lay in a shallow stream,
two young decades ago,
twiddling my toes at tadpoles.
Vodka chilled
in mountain water tinkling by,
sunlight on the distant peaks,
brightness, that I wished would stay.

Now I am prosperous, I travel the world,
amidst corridors of creativity,
and yet,
I grope for mountain treks, in which sanity prevails,
gaps between 'outages' and breakdowns.
By that mountain stream,
in rents in the mist, I still look for tadpoles.

RAILROAD CROSSING

Over this chasm there is a railroad track,
two rails with intervals of nuts and bolts,
there, where the valley ends
they will meet.

Over that one is a wire rope, chain and pulleys,
passengers sway in the mountain wind,
primitive gondola transport,
there, on the other slope
is the rhododendron track.

I drive by this abysmal abyss
and think of railroad tracks I have traversed,
junctions I have met and crossed;
if there is a god,
let him put me to pasture
beside a rarely traversed railroad track
with a snack.

I will light the signal lamp.
I will bring the barriers down,
I will ask the cars to stop
before I cook my evening meal,
of lentil.

And I will see the seasons turn,
I will fear the clouds that gather,
I will herd the milk less cow,
I will guard against the fox.

You will come and watch me work,
tend my garden for a tourist walk,
you will walk my walk with me
down your favorite Novy Arbat.

And when the sun has finally set,
you will tend to your railroad man.

NOTE: Novy Arbat – a Moscow shopping district

DRIVING OFF A CLIFF

And so,
the journey goes on.
Quite a drive this,
between daffodils and cacti,
on the car stereo, that same song.

A little tired in the spinal chord
from the hunch I carry on my back,
you call it life, I call it wrong.
There are moments though,
when amputation can be postponed.

And yet,
it began so innocuously,
one more birth with digits intact,
organs healthy, responses true,
proper oxygenation to the brain,
normal stress and strain.

Then, a virus crept in and enveloped all,
the hills made their sinister call,
'do not take that next turn,
drive on straight,
in ashes in an urn,
we will show you colors
you have never seen, music you have never heard,
souls you have not encountered'.

'And what about damage to life and limb,
what about my precious hunch,
what prognosis for heaven or hell?'

Fortune hunters is what we are,
gazing at a lonely star,
let me fight this one more war;
the next turn in this mountain road,
I just want to see
what new vista does unfold.

Wait until then.

SENTIMENTAL

You say this one more time
and I will weep,
like the pine trees do,
after an afternoon shower.

Tears have dried;
like blood
from an absently swatted mosquito,
and yet I sob.

This is how all sunsets are,
the afternoons
is what you should dread;
they go away.

As do years in myriad flowers,
farewell bouquets,
and promises made amidst a crowd,
'until then'..... when?

SET THIS TO MUSIC

This summer rain
is full of pain.
It falls on suppurating sores
from syphilitic whores.
I must weep
and get more sleep.
Ammonia in blood
after a flood.
Messes time
with haywire rhyme.
Blanks memory,
I worry.
Poems form like ectoplasm
in a nightmare chasm.
I actually thrive
on impotent life.
In elaborate chains,
the moon wanes.
Powdery dry leaves
fall through hydrant sieves.
Composted with sewage,
I get a daily wage.
Benefits are muscles
like crossword puzzles.
On hungry belly
outside glass front Deli.
Wire-rod loads on inclines,
my mother's child whines.
Malnutrition at traffic lights,
the mongrel fights.
Jaded maidenhead
on a familiar bedspread.
Continuation is perpetuity
of awfully boring virginity.
This familiar refrain

of mountain rain.
Sometimes they shake the kaleidoscope
it falls back into the same ugly hope.
Like post coital light,
that the eyelids fight.
I spoke
to rings of cigarette smoke.
White forearms with a veined map
did up the shoulder strap.
The rain had stopped
the Martin had hopped.
I, like my syphilitic whore,
have to go back to my daily chore.

SPECTACLES

After some forgotten debacle,
the right lens had cracked
like a star burst.
If the old man closed his left eye
he could see the world
distorted in his house of mirrors,
it was novel, but impractical.

Actually, the spectacle rim had split,
like the old man had
with age and midday heat,
and too many things to witness,
too much wear and tear.

So he set about some intricate engineering,
with thread, he built a bridge
based on calculations
of flimsy wire-rope constructions
above gorges he had seen
in the Himalayas;
where his mother had taken him
a century ago, to wash his childhood sins.
The thread sat on his aquiline nose,
bridging the chasm between his hollow eyes,
and elevated cheekbones.

Now he had to do some paper and scissor art,
What do they call it in Japanese?
He meticulously teased out the shattered glass
and fitted into the now empty chipped rim
paper shaped exactly so,
bright red paper cut into lens shape,
because this was the age of the bright
and the red.

Opaque right eye, quite cavalier,
like the brigands in wooden sailing ships
but he had no money to complete the image,
he couldn't buy costume and earrings.
It would be all right though.
To look at today's world
and read yesterday's story of pillage and rapine,
One left myopic eye
would more than suffice.
He would wait, as he had always done,
for his son-in-law to buy him
new spectacles on some special occasion.

LOVE POEMS

This magazine has put out a call
for love poetry
they need to print
on floral postcards,
they will pay
Twenty-five cents a line.

I am going to try very hard.
Should a poet not know
about love and doves and daffodils?

But I am afraid they will reject,
'Your poetry is interesting,
but we did not find place for it
on our postcard scheme'.

Love does not work
on acidity in stomach mucous lining.
I tell my barber, 'cut my hair
real short, hair cuts are expensive'
I have fallen in love
with old trousers frayed at the cuff,
Can I write love poems to shirts?

LEARN TO SAY

Language is not inadequate,
you and I are am.
Have you heard elephants trumpet?
Or lions roar, in the wild?
Have you heard the jackdaw caw,
Do they not unequivocally make their point?

It is when we embellish
a cheap plastic suitcase
with genuine leather trimming
that we inevitably flounder
and clutch at erudition
borrow wisdom from slippery fools.

Listen to the tree,
you will hear it breathe.
Stare up at the crescent moon,
you will see the black orb.
Listen to the silence of the gecko
when it hunts the buzzing giant fly.
Listen to an army march,
all clash and din,
a military band to hide fear,
a bugle at the last post.

Listen to Beethoven,
language will help you then.

NEIGHBOR

He is mentally challenged,
his dog is not.
They are a familiar pair.
Shopkeepers help,
some cruel ones laugh.
He insists on shaking hands
and enquiring about my general health.

He knows my answer, 'I'm good,
and you?'
He nods and smiles,
his eyes light up,
I suspect he is playing games
with this mentally challenged world.

PILGRIMS DREAM

Hooves slip on cobbled stone
I totter
center of gravity up in the sky

Transparent sheet glass of ice
still water
not a tree in the vicinity

Sun strikes one puff of cloud
air is rare
last lotus bud in the lotus pond.

Cracks on glass are spider webs
joined together
by divine design at crack of dawn

The west face is lighted up
blushes rose
blinding yellow assault on nocturnal shadow

The temple priest settles his turban
first mule train
little dots on cobbles far below

His palms are soft and comfortingly warm
against my palm
already blue in the numbing cold

A zombie redirects incense fumes
the Holy Book
lies open and covered with brocaded cloth

Silence pounds my throbbing eardrums
the Song
reverberates touches every mountain peak

I lead my litany into the vortex
metal melts
mule train with pilgrims undulates

They look for the Word that illuminates
mountain tops
grimly watch the language less deaf and mute

Crimson flower bigger than my fist
insists
it will go to sleep on marble steps

My poetry wafts back into my mind
futile
in the light of dawn no one reads the alphabet

Tablets of stone will disintegrate
bush fire
quenched by the power to meditate

Valleys shrouded by morning mist
life
our past is burnt by the uninterrupted sun

Presently the west face will be in shadow
move the sun
our future is cracks in sheets of glass

From mules the pilgrims disembark
stragglers today
burrow in anthills for some little heat

Salvation is a fistful of fragrant white flowers
plucked
to adorn the sanctity of the Holy Book

The Word is all and all is the Word
listen
as It floats by you to Its daily chores

ALL THE LIGHT FROM ALL THE SUNS

Take your sun,
Don't use Photoshop,
Let it be mid-sized, middle aged,
Just as it is,
Double click on the image,
Drag it with your mouse
To my documents,
The file that has all the other suns,
The young white,
The hoary red,
The nascent giants,
The twinkling specks,
Ones birthing, ones about to die;
Now save.

Copy paste,
Browse the infinite others
In this universe,
Open links within links,
Go to other universal truths,
Some suns will not open,
Others will need special software,
Some will give you their e-mail ID
And guidelines to submit your sun,
Some will have a theme,
Make your sun obtuse
Make it simple,
Move your mouse
In convoluted orbits,
Around this conglomerate of suns
From our universe,
Or some universe not ours.

Let light join light
From light years in the past,
For publication light years ahead,
Time is a dimension we create,
Just as we do space and motion,
There was before beginning
Before this poem I ever wrote,
There will be after end,
In archives I will access
In alien planets, with alien suns.

But right now
I have to transmit dots and dashes,
Messages of friendship
From one smallish planet
Revolving around a below average
sun,
How presumptuous!

What cover letter do I write?

SUNSPOTS

Dappled fire in Eucalyptus,
Fire from candles serene,
Campfires that glow,
Fire in glowworms,
Fire in Faust,
Tongues of fire burn up
Tchaikovsky's sky,
Fire to command Gods themselves,
Myriad fires on the holy waters,
Fire to cauterize,
Fire to purify,
Fire to drive away
Demons of the night.

Reflected fire in an overused moon,
Volcanic fires bubble like ulcers
In the bowels of Earth,
Fire to consume.
Mega fires are but spots
In nanoseconds on the sun,
Dead in fire burn,
With wind,
Why does fire turn?
For rebirth,
Change direction?

SUMMER

Baby leaves reflect back the sun,
They are arrogant.
The mature ones are opaque with dust
And sun block lotion.

My Anastasia was a puppy from Finland
Fascinated by the Indian April sun,
Now she seeks refuge beneath the sofa,
Or snuggles close to the air-conditioning.

We almost bought that excellent Land rover,
Except for the moon roof
Which lets in too much sun,
Too many sunflowers, which are yellow.

Let Van Gogh cheer visitors to the Hermitage
By the dark Neva
Beneath the gray sky,
You sunbathe by the Black Sea,
I have melanoma in my head.

VULTURES EATING A DEAD BUFFALO

Deciduous tree
Empty branches
Crawling with black ants
Who eat into white bark
Stark

Death decides to die
And die again
The cinematography
Of past folly
Ad Infinitum Ad Nauseum
Rolls past mind's flat screen
Ennui

And then
The stars awaken
It will be good
As long as it lasts
Vultures are steadfast
In their motion before takeoff
Disdainful ungainly in their
Waddle

They work
With cellular phones
Others gather
Torture torment tear hard
Pick at maggots
From beneath yellow skin
While the Black Raven shrieks
Sacrilege

Inquisition
Just to see what will be
Fun and games and sundry names
All defecate to death
From dust to dust
With insatiable thirst
Lust

EVENING AT 10,000 FT

In my evening,
Evenings fascinate me.

Seven Saints,
I see you twinkle in serenity.

One tiny satellite
Infiltrates your infinite domain.

Stars are suns,
Is there water in that dimension?

No mossy wet stone,
Now, where is my moisturizer?

Terraced measly crops
Are ghosts tapered down by poverty.

In gathering darkness
It is the reign of chimney smoke.

The voltage fluctuates,
Cable TV scowls with distorted breasts.

Beneath mushroom frames,
We block out the starlight
And play nightlong games,
Chiropractors with dominoes,
Why can't we wait
For the ambulance?

CAMERAWORK

One small black bird
above white cloud.
Peaks are inverted prisms,
ice meets ice
reflected in puddles
on my roof top lawn.

Always,
first the sugar, then the tea.
Streaming sunlight
shows up your curdled milk,
the jackdaw caws.

After the last turn,
this road is steep;
weep.

Cease and desist.
The mind must sing,
no more poems please.

In its madness, the river is mad.
Still magnolia awaiting the breeze,
fragrant,
without sleep.

Here she birthed me,
here she will un-birth,
into her womb,
where Time can see.

Don't peddle me
your pedestrian snow,
I know
how it looks in morning light,
or with afternoon cloud,
even in sunset rose.

KINNAUR

It must have deep meaning
for posterity to have to ponder.

This wait
for that one last shadow
to wither away,
for just that one chasm
to glisten white,
what meaning has this wait?
when all my peaks
are already on fire.

Now is the time
for cinnamon tea
with Yak milk,
and then toothpaste
with clove oil.
Before the sun, before the sun.

You I will meet
in afternoon shadow
on the plateau.

I will roam the snow
for the Leopard's footprints,
no birds, no tree,
just me and the Yeti.

Even the car is short of breath,
but I have to plant markers
on your midnight side.

Then,
I will not linger,
unless you promise
your sun will be warm
once more
tomorrow.

Blame the sun
for having won.
The sun gives definition.

NOTE: The Kinnaur mountains range from 12000 to 22000 ft. They are near the Indo-Tibet road and are best seen from Reckang Piu and further on. The car will normally go far unless a wooden suspension bridge is down and the road is good by Himalayan standards.

FOOTHILL TOWN

Gorgeous afternoon sun
showers violet, flame and white
flowers on upturned camera lens.
Catch a temple on the run
from rushing cloud,
trees see
and are tense.

Flies hover over
olive green sugarcane juice,
stray cattle fight,
mongrels are in retreat,
garbage fumes in summer heat.

Candy shops have aired
patch work sunshades,
fragile, they billow in gathering
wind,
respite from stifling cares.

Tourists drive by,
but no one here
goes anywhere.

Up the road it will be cold,
so they have been told,
therapeutic rain for prickly heat,
and then even numbing snow.

And so,
lives go on in summer sweat,
shirt collars are smelly and wet.

Buses come and buses go,
meaningless bargains
perpetually struck
with tourists they will never
befriend.

For a hundred years,
this has been the trend.

Beneath the bridge,
the river flows
fast and noisy,
and promises the hills,
a battle of wills.

PINNACLE

The pebbles are humble,
they do not hurt my soles,
all about my feet,
ice water flows.

I stand and gaze up
at the morning peaks,
they look grey
and really old.

I can see the 'needle'
dwarfed by sheer majesty,
in a third dimension,
insignificant
between two giants,
and yet I know,
the 'needle' is truth
like a tear drop,
intact on a lotus leaf.

Balanced precarious
on a precipitous ledge,
it changes color,
'needle' on edge.

As ice changes color,
moves inexorably forward,
a glacier forms,
carries along debris
towards freedom.

URCHIN

He has one pumpkin
and seven cabbages to sell.

He stands beyond the turn
on the mountain road by the temple.

Are these definitely his
or stolen from a neighbor's patch?

His sweater looks borrowed
but his shorts are his own above spindly legs.

The rose in his cracked cheeks
is 'trademark' hill child, a little wild.

Where is there any logic
in wearing socks with protruding toes?

But I don't have to act
my shoes wouldn't fit him anyway.

ILLOGICAL

Cactus in this roof-top desert!
Large robust flower,
the color of blood,
shown off by the white and slate grey
of desolate countryside,
valleys are wide,
the glacier is a slow conveyor belt,
you are driving against the flow.

In your headlights,
the ice takes on life,
hostile, animal eyes,
the snow walls glow.

All is occult that can be,
your puny ears
hear the monster river down below,
road shoulders are rock and grit,
one wrong turn and your skull will split.

And yet,
all you think about,
are the split-ends in your shampooed hair.

MY TADPOLES BECAME FROGS

The mist is like a beggar's clothes,
gaping holes.
Somehow hiding the valley's shame,
moonbeams slant
like a digit less leper's crutch,
bandaged with pus and blood.

Once there were Sisters of Charity here,
now monkeys beg.
And roadside stalls blare vulgar songs,
messages to tourist buses
that belch at delicate spring flowers,
divinity has been re-found.

Here I lay in a shallow stream,
two young decades ago,
twiddling my toes at tadpoles.
Vodka chilled
in mountain water tinkling by,
sunlight on the distant peaks,
brightness, that I wished would stay.

Now I am prosperous, I travel the world,
amidst corridors of creativity,
and yet,
I grope for mountain treks, in which sanity prevails,
gaps between 'outages' and breakdowns.
By that mountain stream,
in rents in the mist, I still look for tadpoles.

SENTIMENTAL

You say this one more time
and I will weep,
like the pine trees do,
after an afternoon shower.

Tears have dried;
like blood
from an absently swatted mosquito,
and yet I sob.

This is how all sunsets are,
the afternoons
is what you should dread;
they go away.

As do years in myriad flowers,
farewell bouquets,
and promises made amidst a crowd,
'until then' when?

IRINA

A proper word for this sheer drop
of five thousand glacial feet,
you would not have found
in your Russian-English dictionary;
The Americans call it – ‘awesome’.

As was Baikal in January.
But no fishermen drilling holes;
ice is rock, both here and there,
only no vodka, no fresh water fish.

And the road goes up and up
until my chest hurts, like it did
when you cried.
But here there is no respite,
no laughter to take the pain away.

Awesome,
wouldn't you say?

RAILROAD CROSSING

Over this chasm there is a railroad track,
two rails with intervals of nuts and bolts,
there, where the valley ends
they will meet.

Over that one is a wire rope, chain and pulleys,
passengers sway in the mountain wind,
primitive gondola transport,
there, on the other slope
is the rhododendron track.

I drive by this abysmal abyss
and think of railroad tracks I have traversed,
junctions I have met and crossed;
if there is a god,
let him put me to pasture
beside a rarely traversed railroad track
with a snack.

I will light the signal lamp.
I will bring the barriers down,
I will ask the cars to stop
before I cook my evening meal,
of lentil.

And I will see the seasons turn,
I will fear the clouds that gather,
I will herd the milk less cow,
I will guard against the fox.

You will come and watch me work,
tend my garden for a tourist walk,
you will walk my walk with me
down your favorite Novy Arbat.

And when the sun has finally set,
you will tend to your railroad man.

IRINA ALEXANDROVNA

It all began
as I was driving past
on a narrow street
by the Nevsky canal
I saw your morning face
in this I wanted to live.
There was this smallest garment shop
above a basement full of drunks
baby booties on a rack
it was called
Nadyeshda.

The lights turned green
the car changed gear
and jumped into fear
where was the tear
in the barracks
little boys shaved nonexistent beards
their mothers whored for English lessons
Nadyeshda.

Babushkas not used to toilet paper
used Izvestia for ablution
what redemption
from endless queues to gastronoms
businessmen have Finnish shops
and Le Palace Europa
Our drivers will also carry guns
we will wear the Nike shoes
Nadyeshda.

Wafer sandwiches in Waldorf
and beautiful girls selling bodies in bars
language is no barrier
the driver knows he likes bolshoi
krasivaya blondinka dyevushka
Tomorrow his ship will berth
and then the port and the bribes
so today he will have a drink
Nadyeshda.

Every time twice a week
he stares at the victory gate
and thoughtfully lights a cigarette
alien chimes in alien climes
and then he drives to meet the Nachalnik
perigavarit dollarov
and after the discussion of dollars is over
he has a cup of English tea
Nadyeshda.

And then the ship unloads
rice for children
who carry a flower on Teacher's Day
who sledge in the snow
and 'fight' their dogs in early May
and rice for pensioners
without pension... 'visa denied'
for workers without wages
'visa denied'
but give me dollars and that Cross pen
Nadyeshda.

As I write this poem veterans march
be medaled belly full of vodka
fallen teeth not replaced
just as boys were during the victory war
and Schroeder gathers wife in tow
to watch them marching past
do you want to weep or laugh
don't waste time it is the day
for whores and tricksters
Nadyeshda.

I see the fire works from our bedroom window
I am enthralled Tovarisch
When I jump on your sofa
you think I am a kindergarten child
and hold me so
your fire works are like Swan Lake
remember how the seven girls became ducks
in St. Petersburg on a 'brandy' weekend

I wish we had two walking sticks
to negotiate the level difference
between the foot walk and the road
Nadyeshda.

And your valiant attempt
to initiate me into Chamber music
in a Cathedral opposite the Moskva
and then the ultimate overdose
of Tchaikovsky at the Kremlin
I became a gremlin
and actually snored
But I took revenge
in Bengali
I made you learn
'Aami tomake chai'
So it is as always it will be
'I want you'
Nadyeshda.

At the end of it all
everything is etched in fate
in hate in loss in regret
you told me you had golden years
for my offspring I fell from grace
my wife had married a god
in her godliness forsaking all
we will believe what we believe
and fool that I am
yet I pray
Nadyeshda.

Now you will have to live for me
replace as do shrubs in your pine forests
now you will have to see and swim
and eat the sturgeon of the Black Sea
They have transfused with B-negative
my blood is not my own
and with alien blood I write this alien poetry
I said it better in the car
even in the presence of the chauffeur
my steed will gallop up to you
you will jump up and ride into my heaven
my steed is young even now
on your sixtieth victory day
Nadyeshda.

*NOTES: - Nadyeshda – Hope
- Nevsky – all canals emerging from or flowing into the Neva
are Nevsky.
Gastronom – food shop, Vodka also available
bolshoi – big
Krasivaya blondinka dyevushka – beautiful blond girl
perigavarit dollarov – discussing dollars
tovarisch – comrade
Moskva – in this context, the hotel in Moscow, not the river.
Aami tomake chai – Bengali for 'I want you'*

STORY

except for the introduction, I attempt to develop this poem in expanding paragraphs, the first para starts with 3 lines, the second with 4 and at 8, I got bored.

No metaphysics, this,
no poetic tradition even,
I have been hit on the head
with the Yale Shakespeare,
and will limit myself to memories,
but it is a story,
because it happened to you and you and you....

####

In this underground pub,
on a 'winy' afternoon,
you sang like a lark.

####

Toads crowd onto pebbles,
sound modulated waterfall,
dead lilies float in *Narita*,
in afternoon sun.

####

Nipponski More in Nakhodka,
your boat bobs up and down,
one moment you are there,
one moment you are gone,
catch your fish, my love.

####

The soil is red in *Incheon*,
people glide, as they do
in Monterrey Bay,

and strawberries and cream
on the way,
see how the artichokes grow.

####

My daughters lure me back with Crater Lake,
they will throw me into the Canyon,
or make me walk shards of salt
near Badwater, after elk steak,
they will make me trudge the snow
around 'General Grant'
as if, I haven't seen enough in Moscow.

####

I saw the stars, my sweetness,
let me show them to you,
they were there in that Moscow boat,
they were hidden in the disheveled pillow.
You ask *Amy*, she will know
what it is to walk in the snow.
On snow slides, children play,
we wait for the *avtobus*, you and my shadow.

NOTES: - winy – a word concocted by me to mean , full of wine.

Narita – the airport for Tokyo, a small town with wonderful walking streets and a Temple.

Nipponski More in Nakhodka – Nipponski is Japan, More is sea, Nakhodka is a sea port on this sea which officially exports timber and through which you can get in virtually anything as confirmed to me by the Customs and Coast Guard Chiefs.

Incheon – I may not have the spelling right, Korean words do not lend themselves to English spelling, but it is the airport town for Seoul.

Amy – is our Cocker Spaniel in Moscow.

Avtobus – these are buses that run on electricity and tires.

PINK PINE FOREST

One of my editors in his pedantry,
told me pine needles can't be pink.

Have you seen a forest of pine
shadow a carpet of yellow 'down'?

Have you walked this forest of yours
just one step ahead of dawn?

As pink as carpets of silk can be
woven by some sun god in Astrakhan.

The pine cones are darker highlights
in divine design (not from Connelly's
on a discount).

Come away from your outlet malls,
nature calls.

HALF

run that half marathon
halves matter
like a cellophaned
half watermelon
or half a life
in half snow
between foot walk and
squelched road
half baked gold
from Dubai
the diamonds of the Czar
half a war
in a half vodka glass
drunk by a half priest
who is half orthodox

we half kiss
in an elevator
that is half closed
we half grope
because the chauffeur
has half a rear view mirror
we half live
and make believe
that we each own
half a quilt
we half snore
cotton wool in our ear
we are half age
half retired
half in love
half planned half impetuous
half in ecstasy
half in fear

PEAK

The mountains laugh
at my desultory attempts
at epitaph
when all I want
is to live forever
at least until I wash away
my sinful past
present and future
make confession
and am baptized
to bless the mountains
and all the gods and goddesses
who dwell in them.

The apple is in blossom
soon
the flower will disappear
giving way
to arrogant young fruit
green
and alkaline
but with immense promise
of sweet juice
on a toothless chin.

Cherry flowers fall on me
with peaches they are ahead
of staple apples
more effervescent though
lesser shelf-life
cherry flowers are like the afternoon
that all too soon
goes away.

But the Hibiscus and
the Rhododendron will stay
through the summer
they are good for alcoholic hearts
and cirrhotic livers
they look like blood
but are not occult
they camouflage
the Cannabis plant.

Peak
you are 10000ft higher
what grows at 22000ft?
Don't give me stories
about moss and lichen
I have crossed them at 13500.
You have nothing
to throw at me
except oxygen less dreams
and edema of the lung
so what
if you are the first
to catch the sun?

HONEY (GANICHKA)

Sometimes on me
sometimes on mine
tears flow
and your cheeks glow
on our way to Shyeremetovo.

We stare at ice
piled up outside factory gates
and we know
we are snow
de-iced from aircraft wings

Did it happen
because winter was long
was it lack of sun
or was it fun
like wooden toys
and children's slides
and summer breasts
hidden in winter minks
hot-dogs in Park Kulturi
falling leaves
on the University
lovers kissing
embankments below
Mosfilmovskaya
hanging cloud
children loud
in afternoon cold

We were told
that this is love
as dialectically defined
and yet we know
that this is love
as in holding hands
in taxi stops

possession in a Renok
shoes from Reebok
the twists and turns
that life takes
from metropolitan Moscow
to an American outlet mall.

Why do we stall
this shooting in the head?
We have the money
to buy a bullet
as yet.
Still we hit these alphabets
search in emptiness
journey through countless bottles
of the cheapest Vodka
made from rotting molasses
and make believe
we go to sleep.

God forbid
we are almost shackle-free!

*Ganichka is a word concocted by me...
Honey is pronounced Gaaney in
Russian, and 'ichka' is endearment.
a Renok is a traditional Russian market.
No more footnotes.*

NIGHT

If we keep these trysts
destiny will rule
and then
what will you do
if you've just come
and you have to go?

You brought the spring
let the air smell
let everything sparkle
let me live
for a little while more
let me quaff off
one more glass of Samagyon
and then I will permit
the sun to rise
and listen to all
that is wise

but
don't go just yet.

Samagyon is 80% v/v, no more footnotes.

TOGETHER

Life did a good job
to soften me up,
but that was brawn,
now that thunder sounds
and it is dark,
I await the onslaught
of the brain
in this worldly alliance.

With sensory insinuation ,
with sound and silence,
laughter and tears,
with light and shade,
just lonely thoughts
in darkened rooms,
assessing the solidity
of four walls.
Distorted imagination;
no comfort of the herd,
now that I am not bovine.

I am like a mutilated ant
that the kind schoolboy
(schoolboys will have their fun)
has kept alive;
antenna working,
head sensing,
just crazed with pain
jaws still looking for food,
still thinking of loss and gain.

It is, after all, a logical world,
feet firm on mountain ground,
it makes a living,
it gets around,
it moves on and walks its pets,
even grieves for an ant
just crazed with pain.

AFTERNOON

The emaciated stray cat
had just birthed a litter.
It lived in an empty neighborhood flat
with a broken window pane.
But the kittens were perchance born
under a parked car, in cool shade.

When I actually saw the cat,
it had a kitten in its mouth,
and was rushing
to the safety of its house.

I was out walking my dogs.
Now my girl has a thing about cats,
becomes violent, strains at her leash.
And cats in the neighborhood know.

The cat saw my dog,
I thought apocalypse had come,
but my girl was nonplussed
at the wiggly little thing.

The cat dropped her kitten
and ran for life, retreat from attack,
survival overtook maternal instinct;
the wiggly little thing stayed
wriggling on the ground,
too young to run, too young to even stand.

What was I to do?
I was a poet, a chronicler, not an action hero;
I turned, and walked my dogs the other way.
Now I surmise, why I am almost sure,
that because I walked the other way,
the mother must have returned
to take her kitten away.

SO YOU SAID

waiting for you
all night long
crumpled pillow
says you have come and gone
now my breath
on a drunken telephone
will wake up your husband

and then the winter
piled up snow
tires skidding
on bulldozed roads
sundry toads
to take me away
to sanity in tropical climes
a slice of yellow juicy lime
and tell someone to stop time
before my driver takes you home

civilizations were destroyed in Rome
a queen gave Egypt away
so who are they
those phantoms in some Shakespearean wind
we wait for Iago to pick at roses
grown on Stratford-on-Avon
Hamlet cries Desdemona shrieks
Juliet produces Italian cars
with which to race Japan
all is won

the horizon tells us
that all was lost
on the Seine
at a quarter past ten
in coffee dregs
some wind got mixed
it was like Chamber Music
played by some freak
leading Apollo men
Venus women
asphyxiated by the hunch
on his back
overwhelmed with awe

we turn from side to side
with the evening tide
tamed
we canter to noises from today's
park
dogs bark
cats slink away
to suburban homes
garbage out just once a week

if I die in between
I will be refrigerated
I can't be thrown away

AMSTERDAM – SINGAPORE – MOSCOW

Kolkata in between

I will propose to you
with recycled flowers
picked from corpses' biers
sensible
to recycle
what will not burn

there was this guy called Michael Dutt
oh! what an outcry
he denigrates our poets so
but as we turned Park Circus
not a single girl cooed
Michael's poetry
in my ear
no one knows
except verses that you have to memorize
and analyze
in Graduate School
before your spouse can pour the beer
without froth
or just one eighth of an inch
as was written in 'finishing books'
thankfully not by Madhusudan

I knew a hockey stalwart
Michaela from Amsterdam
who had come slumming
taken it serious
as hockey players are prone to do
and was now subservient to a small China-man

Michaela come dance with me
let us forgo
the pigs' trotters
we will have fresh squeezed orange juice
I can still save this night
I will take you over wooden rafters
and make the proudest swan
stare
at your skirt with flowers
over hockey legs

*NOTE: Michael Madhusudan Dutt –
a famous Bengali poet of the nineteenth
century, a man of tremendous ability,
curbed by sensibility..... an epic man.*

HERETIC

You who live
beyond the round horizon
what do I sing to you
on this endless night

Rock will listen
but the sound will take light years
to travel to the stars
then why do they twinkle
like sapphires

As Eliot says
the hordes will march
but we are the hordes
in us there is our pagan god
Brocaded purple robes
on pre- ecclesiastics
no elaborate baptisms
no sign of the virgin super conscious

We bury our dead shallow
and cover them with stones
in graveyard trees
the monkeys play
from branch to branch of 'camel thorn'

Even now
we have bananas for sale
for humans on the monkey trail
Even now
the dead are being reborn

IF CHERNOBYL WERE NEAR FREMONT

Not your fault
By default
The sun did rise
Gravity reigned
Rocks did not
Become meteors

Whirlpools of dust
Debris of history
Wrung the asthmatic's neck
Anaerobic fish
survived the ocean depth

Eyes on their tail
camouflage
for children absent
from the jungle gym
Mayakovsky
wrote a new play

Babies grew wings
And clung
Hung to their hi-tech cribs
Waiting for night
To hunt for blood
In electronic toys

Limbless bodies
Wafted in the mushroom wind
Below a sickle moon
While damsels swooned
And vomited fetuses
Into toilet bowls

Cancers grew
As they do
And then 'chemo'
Bald zombies
Sat at conference tables
To discuss

The non proliferation
Of human rights

SILENCE, SIL VOUS PLAIT

I always won
in a debating competition,
I 'out-talked' the other guy,
Why?

And then I talked of ships
full of rice and starch,
Vodka, of course,
Lithuanian Flags
full of lice and mice,
But whoever said,
Russians were vegetarian?
This would make good
Vietnamese fried rice!

She boiled fresh cabbage
with the black ox tongue,
diced and tossed with parsley,
some red chilies
for my Asian Indian palate,
how could I explain,
that I ate no one's tongue,
tongues produce so much garbage.

Result?
Now I am reduced to discussing
The Hippocratic oath,
with sundry medics
who refuse to treat an incorrigible;

I, most definitely,
need to become a shrink.

[Author's Bio]

Ashok Niyogi was born in 1955 and graduated with Honors in Economics from Presidency College, Kolkata.

He has been in international trade and has traveled the world over including a 10-year stint as an expatriate in Yeltsin's Russia, where he was Managing Director of a Singapore based Commodity Trading Company.

He has been and will be published in innumerable magazines and anthologies (print and on-line) in the USA, the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and Europe. He has not been published in Africa, or the Caribbean and this rankles.

Ashok has two books of poetry published by A-4, India---'CROSS-ROADS' and 'REFLECTIONS IN THE DARK' and one 225 page paperback/E-Book of poems ---'TENTATIVELY' from iUniverse, USA, (with Amazon, B&N, Borders etc. distributing), out in March 2005. He also has chapbooks published by Scars TV – USA.

He has recited and read his poetry in many forums and his readings are available in India in CD form.

Ashok was schooled in Irish Christian Brothers' schools and writes in Indian English, with whiffs of Russian, inevitable Americanisms and the odd Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi and Bengali turn of phrase. He claims to have basic survival skills in these languages.

He is an avid reader and traveler and this finds its way into his poetry.

He is unemployed since writing poetry is not a gainful occupation, and lives off his savings, charity, inheritances, gifts and his wife's earnings (she is a senior corporate manager in Delhi).

He divides time between the Bay Area in San Francisco, where his daughters live, India, Russia, airplanes and wherever his poetry takes him.'

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