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 Zhiguli 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 throe,
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 smothered 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 chaee”

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 chaee”
Except for “ami tomake chaee”.
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 to make 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,
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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