

GUN-AAJAV Ayurzana
Poems and a story

Six Poems

I grope in my life like a blind man.
The blind man has a cane.
I don't.

Eyes open, helpless,
In complete darkness, in the awful darkness
Of your body, like a blind man...

Somewhere a light flashed.
I asked a fortune-teller what it was.
"Your heart," he said.

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The sound of rain falling on the roof
The sound of rain striking the roof
The sound of rain striking the roof
Repeat the unrepeatable

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—*translated from the Mongolian by E. Sodontogos and Christopher Merrill*

I worship Sunrise,
Oh, my morning!
And worship Moonrise,
Oh, evening twilight!

Just one in a thousand rays
Is enough for the Light.
Time is measured

By legends of the Light.

Darkness falls to the ground,
Light flies in the sky.
The existence of light in the sky
Is known only in flight.

Through the dark blue evening
A cold wind whistles.
In the cold black sky
Red cranes fly.

How old is the mosquito
Squashed between the pages
Of the ancient sacred sutra?

From which age
Did the spirit of an insect
Just fly by?

Is losing yourself
Like finding yourself?
Oh, it's raining,
The valleys and hills are white.

Oh, to run in the rain
To the foggy mountain!
Will the wind be strong enough
To turn the rain-soaked page?

When Time takes a break
I take a deep breath,
And when it continues on
I heave a sigh.

When Time takes a break
I fall in love,
And when it continues on
I come down from Heaven.

When Time takes a break
I write poems,
And when it continues on
I drop my pen.

When Time takes a break
 I open my eyes,
And when it continues on
 I stare at Death.

EASTERN POEM

Such happiness
To see the sun set on the steppe!
When I feel its calm light
I forget my sorrow.

To breathe such air,
To be human is enough!
 Oh...
After that, let God take his brush
And write that I'm dying.

Such truth
To hear a branch breaking somewhere!

—translated from the Mongolian by the author and Christopher Merrill

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Birds of Time
Sing kuku kuku.
The splashed blue air draws
the distant oceans.

The profound oceans,
Now,
Just like this, inexhaustible.
I thought of you, standing on their edge.

A single bottle of spirits
Corked,
Within which my Isolation stored,
Now is floating somewhere, on the oceans.

MY WIFE'S BIRTHDAY

For Imam M. Azatkhan

Allah created a woman.
This woman
Like Azatkhan's beads
was thirty-three.

O this woman –
Just one smile
Worth a thousand rounds
On imam Azatkhan's rosary.

*

You –
A sadness comes into view.
A perfume, fleeting, where's it coming from?
But words unsaid have been thought,
Forgotten, but nonetheless,
And I feel sorry once they're spoken.
All my happiness
 vanished in a moment.

You –
The cause of sadness won't fade from me.
Such a floating, fleeting,
 everlasting perfume.
Words cannot surely go unsaid?
Absence arises incomplete...
 what on earth might it be?
 You.

*

All night, the rain
Strummed the felt roof.
The pizzicato on this ancient roof,

caught in drops,
Rang into a pail.

*

Heading home,
Across the hills at evening.
And now we have
The scent of thyme,
Like love of someone...

*

Fresh air in silent darkness,
A fragrance like perfumed water...

From such deep memories,
A silent misery permeates,
And a thought has brought loss,
Recently, into my selfish life.

*

Standing in the silence of night,
my mind stupefied,
Who was it flashed across my dulled sight?
This vision was as incense through the darkness,
The path of sadness hanging in the air.

I stumbled alone a lighted track,
Seeking what remained in my memory.
Rose garden nearby, and
I fell into the Past.

And suddenly I returned.

That perfume!
I'd fallen for it utterly, had picked it, breathed it in, -
O, what flower was it?

Was this truly someone's love
Floating around me? Or a shooting star?

Or else, in the silence of night,
Was flying a shining beetle?

*

WRITTEN ON A BOOK GIVEN BY CHIMEGBAATAR

Under the fool moon,
A round bright whiteness rose suddenly
From one of Issa's poems,
And I couldn't sleep.

Like a cherry fallen into snow,
Emotion welled up like a riddle,
From Issa's vivid poem,
Nothing else imagined,
And I couldn't sleep.

Compelled,
Excited, I shall gather my wings,
 my morning will be busy.
Occasionally, life draws
From poetry something essential.

*

There,
 a thousand suns burning in my heart,
the words of the Buddhas in the infinite sky
Flew like a crane, leading the flock,
 into spring.

Some suns fade from existence.
Some words vanish from the world.
And some tumble into my eyes as snow,
And strike the earth.

Anemones, shocked into life by the melting earth,
Have gripped my mind.
I sensed their new buds, autumn's evening
Perfume from a thousand years away.

*

The Naadam had ended, and
The grass was fading.
The wind had picked up, and
Hearts were aching.

The horses, exhausted,
Headed back towards the horizon.
I peered in their direction,
These horses, indistinct.

Led on a loose rein
Along faint tracks, and
A grasshopper leaf,
Splashing dew.

And on they traveled...

*

The sound of rain falling on the felt roof
The sound of rain striking the felt roof
The sound of sound striking the felt roof
...repeating without repeating...

The sound of rain falling on the felt roof
The sound of rain striking the felt roof
The sound of sound striking the felt roof
...repeating without repeating...

*

A lark sings,
The rain clears.

I watch the mountains, they're
New, as though they are just appearing.
I notice the clouds, they're
Serene, like Buddhas who crafted the mountains.

*

Scudding spring skies,

A dense red dust.
And every particle of dust
Reeks of anxiety.

The anxiety in the sun's rays
Envelop the leafy aspens.
When I gaze with concern upon the aspens,
 I suddenly remembered
That friend of my childhood, suddenly appeared.
He has lived for a while,
 he hadn't time for a such sadness.

*

Snow falls into the ocean,
Snow upon the infinite...
Facing into the harsh wind,
I am short of breath...

Rain falls with the snow,
A white mist...
Beneath the drifting shadows of the sky,
Not a cold word is uttered.

*

I dream my favorite green tie
Is a hangman's noose, and
 I wake up.
It's terribly sweet, this taste before death...
And it's morning.

I don't have a tiepin to hand...
I live, disjointed from the expectations of the world.
It is not now forgotten,
 this extraordinary taste of torment.
This taste from that,
 yesterday I was licking my son's chocolaty fingers.

So everything is clear.
My morning sensitivity – your scent,
And this scent became part of me.
 Ten years following death of sorts,
I'm waking up next to you.

*

weakened by the wind
 creaking moaning
 this clapperboard fence...
drunk in the wind
 swaying staggering
 such a roseate house...
striking the mind
 blowing at the heart
 such a cold wind...
dissipated
 from the nape of you
 such a melancholy scent...
ragged moon
 made drunk in the wind
 such a fleeting glance...

*

Cold swallows warmth,
Clouds swallow brightness.

As much as glorious summer swells,
The season of melancholy draws ever nearer.
And just like brittle, yellow leaves,
The hair on your temples turns grey.

Translated from the Mongolian by Simon Wickham-Smith

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THE BUDDHA'S REMAINS ¹

(Once upon in my childhood, I found unknown golden stones, but The Old Man of the Mountain said, that I must to give again these yellow stones to that place, which's name is Shar Ganga...)

The Old Man of the Mountain came several times after the gold had been returned to Shar Ganga. This was before the cave had been completely ransacked, before the pious might go there secretly and say to one another in their distress, "The cave's empty!"....

Always the night had fallen, and always he returned before the whitening of dawn. One time, he gave my father a small book.

"I replaced the gold which I got for your children. This will be compensation."

The Old Man of the Mountain undid the cloth wrapping and fingered one of the corners. He opened it as though he would divine it, he held onto the pages. From within the text, a bunch of colored sheets fluttered and fell. The Old Man of the Mountain collected the text together and handed it back.

"Please give this to your kids when they're grown up. Just this. There's no end to these extra pages - whenever I open the text, they keep falling out. They can decide for themselves what they want to do." This is what he had said to father.

He also said, "Throw the pages which fell out into the fire." But mother kept some sheets back, thinking they might entertain me.

It was because I had these illustrated pages and, especially, because I sat playing with them under the gaze of agents who had come from the city, that my childhood came to an abrupt halt.

My father was summoned on important business to the Centre of District and we learnt that he had been taken to the main town of the aimag, and from there that he had gone to Ulaanbaatar. People who went to Ulaanbaatar brought back attractive and interesting things, so I was happy that he had gone. But father did not come back.

"Where did he get that American money? America's threatening to blow up the world with their capitalist atomic bombs! How did he get involved with spying in this backwater? How much money does he have, anyway?" And I stopped taking notice of people other than the representatives from the work units who kept on pestering mother like this.

After father went away, for many months afterwards, when someone came in a car, they would sit and talk with mother for some time, and then they would leave. And, after they'd gone, mother would say,

"Father will be back soon."

But father didn't come. For the Old Man of the Mountain's strange book mother and I received only a flimsy sheet of paper marked with the word TELEGRAM. Not father.

"Why didn't I throw those wretched pieces of paper onto the fire?" mother moaned sadly, tearing at her hair.

¹ The reader should note that the book mentioned in this story is not a regular, bound book, rather it is a Buddhist text, an unbound set of long, narrow rectangular sheets, wrapped in cloth, according to the Tibetan style.

From the waterfall in Orkhon there flow lots of minor waterfalls. But the waterfall I'm going to talk about is bigger than the one in Orkhon.

You need to go there not on horseback, only on feet. There are more petroglyphs there than in the cave of Khoid Tsenkher. They've got bucks mounting roes, elephants and dinosaurs, mountain goats and people bearing spears – it's all there.

It's a circular recess, like a ger. There's just a single entrance. Not exactly a door, rather a way of gaining access, like under the flap of a ger. A long, utterly dark tunnel. Having gotten in, you crawl for some time and then, suddenly, you want to turn back. Pitch darkness. But think of turning back, and you're too late. Inside the cave, you can't turn your body completely around. So, although you don't want to crawl on any further, you have no option. Close your eyes or go further....Generally it's so dark that your eyes can neither see nor distinguish anything. So dark that, once inside the tunnel, you inevitably get your bearings even while you're crawling along. Slowly an unbelievable grey light comes towards your eyes, as you fumble along inside the cold narrow tunnel, as you think Am I entering Hell? Some time passes, you're thinking, on the one hand, Am I going to get out? and, on the other, Am I imagining this? And then, little by little, like the coming of dawn, there's a pale glow and you're at the mouth of a little pit. Whether or not there's a way out through this pit, there's a brightness, and a beautiful, colored cavity comes into view before your eyes. Crawling along inside the cave, slowly the sound of water becomes clear and, when you come out into the bright opening, you see a tumbling waterfall, and it lifts the heart. In this cavity, you see rainbows in a thousand droplets of the gentle waterfall. Truly, this is the land of Shambhala!

This was where the Old Man of the Mountains lived. But I didn't know it is true or no. Only people so said.

I came out, I spent some months in preparation, waiting for summer to come. I wanted to say to the Old Man of the Mountain, "Why did you give this wretched book to my father? Whatever it was that came out of the book took my father away. Now, please bring him back." But how could I say these words, except to myself?

In the end, mother showed the Old Man of the Mountain's book to the people who kept promising that my father would be coming back, they asked where these strange green pages had come from and she handed the book over. Three years went by. There was no sign of father. I had no other option but to go there myself. Unfortunately, then I couldn't pray to the Buddha.

... slowly the sound of water became clear, and when I came out into the bright opening, I saw the tumbling waterfall, but it did not lift my heart. In the cavity, I saw rainbows in a thousand droplets of the gentle waterfall. As I gazed absent-mindedly at the beauty around me, the tears shed for my father's absence dried up.

After wandering about for some time, I came upon an indistinct track. I wandered around amidst the rainbows and, as the sun was setting, I found a cave. At its entrance sat a huge black condor. I thought to hurl a rock at the bird to scare it away but it was looking askance at me in a most unpleasant manner. I walked along the path, keeping the bird well in my sights.

The cave was quite small. There were three dark sooty rocks at the entrance, I peered over into the old man's brazier. There was a smell of smoldering, with here and there many large corpses lying about. There were what looked perhaps like the some footprints of wild animals and, in a pile of yellow fat, what appeared to be the plucked feathers of a great bird.

The smell of the yellow fat had attracted a fox or a wolf and, just as it was peering about, the condor flew at it, throwing up a chaos of small shards of food. A bit further on, at the center of a large and well-ordered collection of cased books, I was startled by a swathe of long waving hair.

The Old Man of the Mountain was asleep!

“Grandpa!” I said quietly. “Old man, sir!”

I hesitated a little and then went inside, towards the old man. His head, with its long grey hair, dropped away from the books which served as a pillow. The Old Man of the Mountain was dead.

The condor was peering at me at the entrance to the cave, watching me as though smiling strangely. It was precisely the smile with which our chickens now watch me. In fact, have you ever noticed the scornful gaze in birds’ eyes?

I rushed at the condor and it leapt aside to avoid me. I ran straight ahead, towards the waterfall. I gathered a little from the edge of the tumbling water and doused my head. I went back into the tunnel and crawled towards the darkness and the condor. The sound of the waterfall grew more unclear; I crawled amidst the unseeing darkness. “Father passed through here and then he died. Now there is no hope for this life - you don’t usually get any support.” I could barely feel this thought in the depths of my brain, like a milkwhite light, vaguer even than the closest wall of the cave.

I got back some time after midnight.

“The Old Man of the Mountain passed away,” I said to mother, and I slept soundly then.

The pious people said that they would bury their teacher from the Mountain and, led by experienced guides, they went off to the cave. Everything was as it had been when I saw it, except that the Old Man of the Mountain’s corpse was missing.

“The condor your son saw was a Buddha, it took him to heaven”, a woman from a neighboring family told my mother. I was lying down, looking away and pretending to be asleep. To me it seemed that that condor, with its ugly expression, was a messenger of the Devil rather than of the Buddha.

The thing is, I believe in the Buddha, but I also believe in the Devil. I didn’t know whether it had been the Buddha or the Devil who had in fact taken the Old Man of the Mountain’s body. No doubt, this man had been lying unconscious, as though dead when, later, a hunter had been out for a walk among the snowy peaks of the Mountains and could, in all truthfulness, say what he had seen through his binoculars.

“There’s no path going up there. He didn’t ride on a condor, nor on a ram”.

“He was on a condor?”

“There was a ram fallen a bit higher up. There’s no way he could have fallen from a bird and stayed alive“. The hunters were arguing down on the ground.

“It might have been that he was just sleeping really deeply”, I said, doubting what I had seen. Still, I knew that what I had seen had been real, but I also know that the hunter was not telling lies about what he thought he had seen, that he was in fact the sort of person who would clear up lies.

Later on, there was a slight earthquake in my region, and the mouth of the gorge through which I had crept was blocked, and so the information about who had been living there crumbled away. The old men of father’s contemporaries erected an ovoo close to the blocked mouth of the cave. They said, that someone called them from highlands. I think, it was even the sound of the wind. However, people stopped regarding the ovoo as anything special, they paid less and less heed to the Old Man of the Mountains and no-one apart from

the birds came to look, and it was said that the great ovoos on the cliff held the Buddha's remains....

In the twilight room, the old man's talk seemed to be coming to an end. The breathing of the three people slowly added to the stifling silence.

"There was no reason for your mother to take them away, they were your toys. Is it really true that those unlucky green sheets of paper were dollars?" Yevgeni Yefimovitch, sitting and listening to everything that was being said, suddenly opened his mouth.

Old man's eyes sparkling: "Are these the ones?" he said, and he pulled from his wallet a ragged five dollar bill. The dollar he had taken out, in the light of the candle on the table, seemed to show the date as 1950-something, but the final numbers were indistinct. "Is that real?"

"There's no such thing as real where money is concerned. It's just like life...like leaves pressed and forgotten in the pages of a book, they are objects without value. I told myself that, in saying to me that he recognized them, the old man had abandoned them within the magic book of my dark infancy, and so they were no longer there. It's just like life...So, the Old man of the Mountains was not here man. It was even conceivable that that old man had ridden upon a flying condor. We couldn't see, but right now he was probably riding a mountain goat, or a large bird, soaring across the mountain peaks, his beard flying....

The old man took out the dollars he had carefully stockpiled, brought them up to the lighted candle and from them, very slowly, he lit a cigarette. Up until that moment, they had been a symbol of his sad memories, but this fine quality paper, embossed patterns upon its thin faces, now became transformed and fell, twisting, into a vessel of water.

I imagined how my childhood might have been the old man's childhood. In fact, everyone's childhood is similar after a fashion. Sometimes the ancients do not recall anything special from when they were young, and it seems that it has been like this at every step of their life. Ideas about the man who flew with his flowing beard meld with the clinking of beer glasses, and I feel each and every finger of that little girl, her little wings, her fingers frozen where she stood upon the snow.

Translated from the Mongolian by Simon Wickham-Smith
