

Bayasgalan BATSUURI

Poetry and prose

"Let's play climbing!" he said. I agreed.  
The rooftop ladder stretched up to the sky.  
In my poor heart, I dared to believe that  
we could reach for the shining stars above.

"Let's play jumping down!" he said. I agreed again.  
Holding our shaking hands and counting one two three...  
But I was such a fool; when I landed,  
he didn't follow me, and releasing his hand from mine,  
flapping up to the clouds, to the sky..., flew away from me.  
I cried out for him, called his name,  
climbed up on the ladder stretching up to sky,  
but couldn't bring him back.

Now I am healed, my wounded heart has found relief.  
No more cries to threaten the sky. But  
sometimes he comes and sits beside me regretfully, and  
whispers hesitantly "let's play at making a noose!"

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On the infinite road we started,  
gradually, your light has gone out.  
The wind that brought you to me  
has died down in my heart.

It was strange to think about you in darkness,  
to miss your eyes and smile in starkness.  
I felt dreadful and insecure  
to know that I was holding an intangible soul,  
that we were walking on a tumbling roll.

When I realized we were not able to see anything  
other than the laughing faces of ourselves  
in the glimmer of each other's light,  
your light went out--fortunately.

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The string of lonely days of my life  
will be cut short very soon by your lovely sound.  
Then I will leave the days of my innocent youth behind  
and come to your side smilingly.

I let my hair grow this long for you.  
Let it be your rope to hold me back should I want to walk away from you.  
I have cut the cord of my soul completely from you.  
No one can play jump rope with it anymore.

Now, my last wish is to listen to the innocent voice  
of the girl who sings in heavy rain.  
To see all my desires which I once cherished in vain  
scatter on the ground like drops of rain.

## RECOVERY

Finally, I built my dream house.  
Then I put your portrait in an exquisite frame and  
nailed it to the wall of my new room.

But even in that place where your image elegantly postured,  
the ghostly emptiness still lingered around me,  
whispering that time is a wine I should drink alone.

When I thought it wouldn't be a new start yet again,  
Your image on the wall has grown old and  
the prison I built around myself broke down.

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I would not tell you when it was the last time I cried.  
The fierce, white days, like bared teeth of a savage dog  
rush towards us from the future.  
But don't be afraid of them, darling.

My eyes, like little boats  
That'd carry you away from all torture  
float silently on their tears.

I am still staring at you with eyes  
that would later often cry for you  
Yet, when I feel the joy of seeing you  
The tears under the boats begin to surge.

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May I play outside, mum?  
May I play outside this life, mama?  
May I go outside the life you gave me and  
put me in the middle of without asking me?

Had you reminded me that there is no such thing as a break from life,  
Something I can't keep a distance to  
Once I begin to flow I am a river's water  
I must flow until my body's last drop into the drains into the arid earth,  
Do I dare to play with your game, mama?

Poor mama, you look old and fragile.  
Your wrinkled face reminds me of arid earth needing water.  
The tears in your eyes are the last drops of the river  
you once were, flowing through the life.

Oh, mama,  
Are you too a victim of this game of immortality  
enslaved for giving birth to time and to being?  
Am I the time and being you created so you would go on  
Or were you trapped for billions of years in eternity's prison?

### Rubik's Cube

When the bus stopped, a man rushed to the front door, shouting “Will anyone offer a seat to a woman?,” and extended his arm back to pull the lady inside. The bus was not crowded, but every seat was taken. The two figures walked supporting each other and stood right in front of me. Again the man said angrily “Why don’t you offer your seat to the lady?” and made the young boy, who was sitting in front of me, get up from his seat. Then he ordered the woman “Sit down!” as if he was her master, to which the lady broke into a pleasant grin and quickly sat down. The man was about thirty; he was wearing sneakers with a pair of dress pants and a brightly colored unbuttoned shirt. His pants were dragging on the ground. When he put his hand on the back of the seat where the woman was sitting, his big callused laborer’s hand touched my face. Veins bulging, bones swelled, the hand seemed ready to punch at any moment: the drunk was holding on with all his strength in order not to fall. Having found a seat for his woman, he was now searching for one himself, his giddy eyes looking in every direction.

He tapped the shoulder of a man sitting in front of the lady and said through his teeth “Hey, bro! Don’t you know that a man should offer his seat to a lady?” The older man, startled, turned back abruptly and asked with some annoyance “Where is the lady? Are you it?” The drunken man got furious: “Do I look like a woman to you? Am I woman?” and went on shouting “I am a noted man throughout Mongolia. You better behave!” All passengers were looking at them; it was obvious that they were annoyed. The driver said he would kick him off if he didn’t keep silent.

The drunken man shut his mouth for some time but could not stay that way for too long. He slammed the man’s shoulder and said as though he was reciting an eulogy “I am really a noted man throughout Mongolia compared to you. If you want to stay alive, you better shut your mouth in public place!” The other man turned to him: “Who is not famous in Mongolia? Look, I have my own proof, too!” . He pulled out his ID card, showed it to him and turned away, smiling whimsically. The man looked at his companion with confusion, then slammed the old man’s shoulder again, shouting “Hey, old man! Are you kidding me? Let’s get out at the next stop. Gangsters from my province are waiting there. Then I’ll show you who the Shand’s **fist** Gambiaa is.”

The other man turned to him: “Are you from Shand? I am from Shand too.” The man’s face, which showed no sign of being afraid of the drunkard’s behavior, broke out in a whimsical and sly smile. The drunk said “Poor you. I was thinking that I saw you somewhere before. You recognize me, huh! You should have said that right away. Where exactly in Shand are you from?” The other man thought for few seconds: “From Ulaanbadrakh.” At that moment, the woman broke out into a laugh and said “Ulaanbadrakh is a separate village, ya know?” The moment she opened her mouth it became clear that she was drunk as well. The man said “Don’t lie to me, old uncle. When did Ulaanbadrakh become a part of Shand, huh? Don’t try anything with me!” The other man smiled as if nothing happened and said “I am from Shand, that’s the truth. And I know you very well, too. You are our Shand’s Fist Gambiaa.” The

woman leaned over to the older man and said “You have some guts!” and then to her man: “He’s just kidding, ya know?,” sounding as if there were stones on her tongue. The man did not pay any attention to this, but as if motivated by his “local uncle’s” words, looking around at the passengers with some pride, announced “I am a really notorious in Mongolia. Once, I had inherited a bunch of money from my ancestors. I used to own livestock. I even used to have my own car. All the beggars, drunkards and hooligans in my province used to gather under my wings. I ate, I drank. And here I am now!” By the time the driver yet again warned that he would be kicked off the bus if he didn’t shut up, the man had already gained some courage and shouted back “You better be silent and hold on to your wheel. Brother, value the love and trust the passengers are putting in you. If you can’t do that, even I can manage somehow to move this barn of yours.” Some of the passengers couldn’t hold back their laughter. With that, the woman looked around as if wondering what had just happened, then pulled at the older man’s shirt and asked “If you really are from Shand, can you tell where is it located?” Annoyed, the man turned to her and said “It is really near to here, a little bit to the south.” The young man’s eyes got bigger. He swallowed and grabbed the old man’s arm saying “What did you just say? When did our Shand move to the west? Are you still joking? Let’s get out of here. My brothers are waiting at the bus stop. We’ll draw the map of Shand on your head so you’ll never ever forget about it.” The passenger, still smiling slyly, said “Brother, forgive me. Truth be told, I am from Khuvsgul.” The woman said right back “So tell us where Khuvsgul is.” He said without hesitation “To the south.” The young man was furious again: “What arrogance!” and pulled at his collar: “Then tell us where Umnugobi is.” The old man made him let go of the collar and said “Keep calm, brother. Umnugovi is in the east.” Passengers laughed to themselves and the driver looking at his rear view mirror and laughing as well, shook his head in disbelief.

The couple’s funny questions and the old man’s whimsical answers made it seem strange, as if they were playing Rubik’s cube with the map of Mongolia. When the tricky man turns Rubik’s cube, Khuvsgul province-- which is located in the north-- jumps south. And when he turns the cube again, Umnugobi, which is located into the south, shifts eastward. The other two were still confused due to their foggy minds, and just like kids who met a magician, stuttered their nonsense questions to him.

When the bus reached to the turn, the driver had to slam on the brakes. Still the only standing passenger, the young man could barely keep his position by holding on to the back of the woman’s seat. But still dragged by the earlier conversation, the man shouted in a high-pitched voice “Are you really a Mongolian?” The older man yawned as if tired out by the heat and said “Brother, if you want to sit, sit in my seat. I can stand”. The Fist Gambaa grinned at him and said “Will I ever beg for a seat from you? Will I ever beg a seat from an idiot who doesn’t even know where he lives?” and continued “Tell me. Where is Zavkhan province?”

“It is close to here, I think, nearby Darkhan, no?”

“Oh, God! One of the five western provinces is near Darkhan, huh? Hey, people, did you hear that? Hey, where is Tuv province? Tell us”

“That is very easy to tell. It is on the western border”

“You, liar! Can’t you make any assumptions from its name? It is called Tuv because it’s located in central Mongolia.”

The drunk and the sober man continued to argue and to play Rubik’s cube with their homeland, moving its areas back and forth. As if she suddenly remembered something, the woman, who had been looking silently out of the window all this time,



asked “So can you say where the *soum* Nariinteel of Uvurkhangai province is?” The man followed through right away and said “Tell us, where is Nariinteel!” But then he looked at her with suspicion and asked “Why are you asking about Nariinteel specifically?” His eyes gleaming, he seemed angry. The lady tried to laugh and said awkwardly, “Just a coincidence.” Then she fell silent. She sat like this for some time. Then, as if trying to distract the man, she asked the passenger in front of her “What happened? If you are so smart, give us your answer right now. Now, I say!” Again, Fist Gambia grinned with his teeth and moved his chin “There are three hundred and sixty five *soums*. But of all of them, you picked Nariinteel. Did you forget it until now? Hey, brother, listen to me. The lady here used to be really carefree and wild, like the wind. When she started exporting goods from Zamiin-Uud to her *soum*, I made her leave her husband and children and come with me. But her husband is still living in Nariinteel, herding livestock and raising their two children. Life is strange, isn’t it?” Even though the woman was at this point drunk, she could feel all the passengers’ eyes on her full of curiosity, which made her uncomfortable. “That’s enough! Please, shut up!” she said to her man, and went on looking through the window. Silence took over the bus for a while. When it stopped, some curious passengers got out, still staring at her. A few people boarded the bus.

Fist Gambia was quiet for a while, too. Then he tapped the older man’s shoulder again: “Hey, brother, why are you so quiet? Where is Sukhbaatar’s Uulbayan located?” The man replied: “Uulbayan is further from Baruun-Urt” and looked at the lady with mournful eyes. It was obvious that his sly and whimsical expression had changed into a worried and pitying manner. Maybe he said that to make the lady’s heart lighter and involve her in the game again. The drunken man did not oppose him this time, so there was no need for him to shout some odd curses at the older man. When the driver slammed hard on the brakes, the drunk nearly fell. In no time he gathered up his anger again and shouted at the driver “Be careful! Do you want to be killed?” But the latter did not respond.

The woman got back into the conversation: “Where is Khovd’s Bulgan, then?” While I was wondering which side the cube will turn to this time, the passenger answered vaguely “Probably on the western border,” then gazed through the bus window. The drunken man said “Good for him. He guessed right at last”. The woman muttered to herself “Maybe he is himself from the Bulgan *soum* of Khovd Province.” The older man did not respond and continued looking through the window. The drunken man started up again. “Brother, hey, brother! Where is Gobi-Altay’s Bugat *soum*?”

I was taken aback by those words and felt warmth inside, as if meeting an old sweetheart in a crowded street. Suddenly, I understood the guy smiling at the drunkard continuously until getting off when Zavkhan’s Ider was called out. I saw a small village in the high mountains of western Mongolia, its few old houses like chess pieces on a board, the sweet dreams of young girls eavesdropping on conversations between their brothers’ and sisters’ dates, sitting at night at the corner of a fence and spreading gossip about the dating the next day through the whole village, but still dreaming to grow up faster and have dates just like these under the starry summer nights, the orchestra of dogs barking that could be heard through these dreams, the monotonous life of the residents that would only seem interesting to dogs and the crows sitting on electricity poles... I finally looked at the drunken man, spitting while talking, with some respect.

Summer nights under starry skies... I imagined my first date to be just like it, but it happened on a cold winter night in the dusty smelling entrance of an apartment

building. The date started with a ridiculous question like “Do you smoke?” and continued with shallow conversation about our favorite movies and best-liked celebrities. When I finally said goodbye to him and was back at my place, I had no any information whatsoever about my date except that he liked rice and the movie *Terminator*. Having revisited a few of such encounters, I often thought that we would have understood each other better if it had happened in a summer night, under the starry sky and we had been talking about stars, the moon and trees.

I didn't really notice what the man said about the location of my home region, but Fist Gambia was furious again: “I recognize this little man. He is definitely from Shand. He wanted to make a big fool of me.” Then he pointed to a woman sitting behind me and asked “Hey, aunt, are you a geography teacher? When I was young, I had a geography teacher who looked just like you. I wonder what that woman taught the kids, so now my province is full of idiots like him. You make the name of my province dirt, brother!” He turned back, still spitting while talking, then attacked again “Hey, brother, tell me where Arkhangai's Tsenkher is! I will knock you out if you get it wrong!”

Another beautiful memory... One spring, when I was working as a correspondent I headed to that part of the country to report on deliveries of young animals. Our car got stuck in knee deep snow and at the very point we were freezing in the cold, a herdsman found us and brought us to his home. When nighttime came, the quiet guy traveling with us asked for many warm blankets and clothes, all of which he carefully put on me. Then he covered himself with a thin blanket. In the middle of the night, the husband of the family woke up and put on him his warm sheep skin costume and I heard him say to his wife “We were like that too when we were young, weren't we?” Lying under the layer of blankets, the result of kindness of a man almost stranger to me, I felt for the first time the pleasant burden of being a woman. When with some difficulties I woke up in the morning under the layers of blankets, everybody in the family was already up, doing family chores. The guy at the stove noticed I had woken up and warmed my shoes, which had been left out overnight. Walking through the snow in my warm shoes, I felt that I had now completed my mission of being born as a woman. Because of my satisfaction with my happiness, our relationship didn't seem to take off.

I wanted to show my gratitude again to the drunk as he brought back the memories of Arkhangai's Tsenkher: the beautiful landscape filled with snow and cold air always brings warmth and comfort to my heart, even these days. Meanwhile, the cube had already been moved to south, west, north and east few times. When the Munkkhaan *soum* of Sukhbaatar province was called, the response was “It is close, it is nearby”. Thinking it would have been real nice if only that fact had been true, I recalled the man who went there to help his grandmother during her final days. Just like when we play “He loves me, he loves me not” with flower petals before going to sleep I decided to move to the countryside to live with him and his grandmother, to follow him tomorrow, as I had experience living in countryside. But when I woke up in the morning, all the little belongings I have collected in this city, all the unfulfilled desires of mine that I had to make real here, all the little comforts I have become accustomed to and that could only be found in this city, always held me back. After three months passed this way, one sunny morning when I found a newspaper in my mailbox in which my poems had been published, I decided to stay in the grey streets of the city— a city whose coffee shops had comfortable corners in which to sit until

the contents of my cup turned cold, which had buses on whose foggy windows I enjoyed writing my name, then looking through the tiny letters at the strangers outside, unaware of my existence.

Thinking about such moments, I realized that people and encounters seemingly lost to me were right beside me, not even an inch away from me. Human life is a Rubik's cube, consisting of so many different colors of memory. The memories in the cube might move back and forth, they might brighten or fade, but they are never lost. The pieces in Rubik's cube fit perfectly with each other, but they never displace each other.

It seemed like the men had already lost their interest. On the other hand, the woman was passionate, demanding, "Where is Bulgan's Saikhan? Tell us!" When the older one did not respond, she replied herself "It must be in Korea, right?" and laughed, snorting rudely. Having not understood the rule of the game from the very beginning, she broke off a piece of the motherland cube and threw it abroad. The men looked at each other with surprise—a sign that they both agreed that in that moment their game was ruined.

The older man said "I am getting off at this stop. If you, my young fellas, don't mind, I would like to treat you to a bottle!" Amused, the young man laughed and said "Would I beg for vodka from you, idiot? Until I get my retirement benefits, I am not in a position to even take a lick from what you offer." The woman stood up, glanced through the window and looked at her man with hope. When the bus stopped, the old man got up and said "My young fellas, nice to have met you. If you don't like the idea, I will not force you. Good bye!" As he stepped off from the bus, the woman jumped up from her seat, called out "Brother, wait for me" and began walking clumsily after him. With some surprise, the drunk looked at the two empty seats, then followed them as well.