

Eating a Horsemeat Sandwich at Astana Airport

So yes, this blizzard in May has grounded the plane,
well, perhaps not a blizzard—a snow squall
with gale-force winds—
the building shaking in the gusts,
wind-blasts roaring and swirling off the endless steppe
like something alive,
writhing and coiling round the wings of the airplanes
that look so toy-like and disconsolate on the tarmac.

And why wouldn't I want one last horsemeat sandwich,
slathered in butter, a few pickle slices,
to go with my coffee as I wander through the terminal?

All around, people are curled up on benches,
coats and jackets for blankets,
looking like survivors of shipwreck—
the frosted-over window glass shivering and trembling
while the Kazakh policemen in their absurdly big hats
patrol the corridors confident as wardens.

The sun must have risen by now. Outside, the grey skies
and snow globe chaos
are perhaps brightening by small degrees.

As I munch my horsemeat sandwich, I see there are horses
for sale in the souvenir shops—
Kazakh horses in felt finery to go with the elaborate
felt yurts, camels, and ceremonial horse whips.

There are statues of horses everywhere in the city,
winged unicorns on all the coins,
horsemeat in all the restaurants and markets,
often washed down with *koumiss*, fermented mare's milk,
so minerally acerbic it can knock you down,
though everyone swears it's the secret of health—
the milk of horses, like the meat, made part of you
as homage to creatures we sense are somehow
greater than ourselves.

Kazakh Woman in a Windblown Skirt

“Nothing is more remote than yesterday, nothing is closer than tomorrow.” —Kazakh proverb

Far from her rumpled bed,
far from the wrinkled mountains,
she walks the rush hour street fronting
the endless steppe,
a thousand miles of windswept grasslands
perpetually whispering to her,
whispering of what once was,
whispering of what will be.

Riding the glass-walled elevator twenty-eight floors
to her cubicle,
she remembers horses, the rhythm of a horse beneath her,
a mountain of muscled flesh,
her knees and thighs sensitized
by the thunder of hooves on resonant earth.

She grew up in the foothills of the Altai,
nomadic,
her grandfather still riding out at eighty,
a hunting eagle on his arm,
her family having fled across the mountains
to Mongolia generations ago,
fled from the Soviet forced collectivization,
the slaughter of the migrating herds,
the mass starvation of the people.

She had never known permanent buildings—
home having been their commodious yurt,
plush with carpets and pillows,
family including the fellowship of horses,
the cycle of sunlight and grass.

But now they have returned, rejoined the twentieth century—
their former homeland, suddenly independent,
calling back all exiles.

Now she dresses in Parisian skirts, modish jackets,
suede boots with stiletto heels,
shares an apartment in a steel tower with her married brother
and two cousins,
helps prepare the evening meals of *plov*, *manty*,

shorpa, kuyrdak,
the gas jets of the stove not a dung-fueled fire
under the stars,
but still a fire,
a fire that whispers like the wind,
whispering of what once was,
of what will be.

At day's end, she descends in the glass-walled elevator,
walks the windswept streets,
the wind-groomed grasslands whispering eternally,
whispering to her heart,
to the horses of her heart,
her heartbeat attuned to the thunder of hooves,
her eyes forever scanning horizons,
knees hungry for a horse,
but perhaps soon might settle for a man.

The Apples of Almaty

Not the famous “Aport” apples in the Green Market,
but the wild apples in the foothills of the Tien Shan,
the Celestial Mountains,
their snow-capped peaks rimming the horizon,
marking the border with Kyrgystan to the south,
perhaps also the border with the world we see
and the realms we do not.

Here in these wild apple thickets burgeoning with fruit,
traders on the Old Silk Road took seeds and cuttings
westward to Europe and eastward to China
spreading apple trees across the globe.

Almaty, meaning “Father of Apples,” a city surrounded
by apples,
born of apples, suggesting that the earth itself
is perhaps a ripening apple
hanging from a canopy of stars.

Here, on the far side of the world from Wisconsin,
where day is night and night day,
you can stand on Kabanbai Batyr Street
looking up at the moon,
feeling the pulse of the city, the pull of the mountains,
the silent stealth of snow leopards
gliding across glaciers.

Here in the forgotten heart of the world
where humanity first domesticated horses—
learned to ride horses, milk horses—
perfected the art of mounted warfare,
of horseback archery,
their bows, eons ago, turned to the task
of playing musical instruments—the *kobyz*,
ancestor to the violin as surely as these wild apples
are ancestors to our Jonathans and Granny Smiths....

Here, where human language stirred among nomads
traversing seas of grass,
where maral deer forage and steppe eagles soar,
I walk the luminous streets, the moon, our mother,
a silver apple suspended in the sky,
and I think of the orchards of coulee country back home—
how I’ll paddle down the Kickapoo come spring,

the slopes alight with apple blossoms,
each blossom reminding me of friends across the world—
Ainur, whose name means moonlight,
Zulmira, who is Kazakh and German, Liliya who is Tatar,
Aliya who is Uzbek and Russian,
myself Irish and Polish twined into an American....

Where, I wonder, would we all be without this wild profusion
of cross-breeding?
No succulent apples, far less human beauty or genius,
the world and ourselves stultifying and static.

In today's human thickets of migrants and refugees
surging along hellish silk roads,
you can see it in their eyes—
beneath the hope and fear, the terror and anguish,
the unsuspected seeds of the future,
hidden like apple seeds within an apple—
orchards of unimaginable fruit that may or may not
come to be.

Buying an Umbrella at Khan Shatyr

It's true—Genghis Khan's mounted troops
could ride for days,
drinking blood from a slit in their horse's neck,
but here I am in this fantastical city on the steppe,
my stomach rumbling just hours after
a sumptuous breakfast.

I've sampled *shubat* and *koumiss*, fermented camel's milk
and mare's milk—
reminded that we are mammals—"of the breast"—
drinkers of milk,
with humankind alone continuing to drink milk
beyond infancy,
unable to let childhood (or butterfat) go,
its creamy richness,
our attachment to our mothers.

Here in Khan Shatyr, the world's largest tensile structure—
a tent, that is—
a space encompassing ten football fields, six stories tall,
I am lost amid the posh shops,
the labyrinthine food court,
life-size dinosaurs lending a Disneyesque touch
while legions of signs in Cyrillic bewilder my eyes.

Through the translucent, high-tech polymer
covering this gigantic yurt,
I see that it is raining outside,
so I browse a rack of umbrellas,
feeling like a modern-day Marco Polo
in some ersatz Xanadu.

I open one umbrella after another,
testing their mechanisms, their latticework of ribs,
remembering Genghis Khan's great ambition
to unite "all people who live in felt houses,"
nomads, that is,
and I toy with the thought that umbrellas make us
nomads all once again,
wandering through a world of wind and rain.

Counting out Kazakh banknotes, I buy this smallest
of tensile structures inside the largest,
and walk the crowded promenade, dazzled by

the chic clothes, Parisian couture, American fast food,
thinking that just a hundred years ago the Kazakhs—
or “free riders”—
were bound to their animals, always on the move,
their lives joined irrevocably to their horses,
their sheep and goats,
the cycle of seasonal migrations.

Venturing outside, I recall how Proto-Indo-European,
our collective mother tongue,
has no word for “city.”
Overhead, *Tengri*, the omnipotent sky god,
is a boundless umbrella of leaden gray,
my own modest umbrella paltry as a parachute
buffeted by the breeze,
the winds whispering how all mammals,
whether herbivores or carnivores,
owe our consciousness to grass,
while cities of concrete and stone
partake of the tomb.