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Turksib

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English sample translation by Alexander Booth

The jolts of the tracks were stronger now and came at irregular intervals; with my arms outstretched I held myself between the walls of the tiny cabin. A metallic drone rose up from out of the feces spattered steel-can, a whining and hissing and, now and again, something close to a laugh, something that had to have been crouching in the abyss, in the crushed stone of the railroad embankment, and it rang in my ears like a miserable *Semey-Semey*. I wouldn't be able to stay much longer, not unless I wanted to give some kind of explanation upon return, something that would immediately become twice as long in the translator's mouth and ten times as long in the consul's ensuing comments.

Even in this country it was, as far as I knew in the meantime, not illegal to have a Geiger counter, on the contrary. European travel-guides recommended it, above all as a means of reassuring the traveler, they said, that the measurable level in most areas was far below acceptable limits. I had never thought about acquiring such a piece of equipment before nor had I ever considered the possibility of owning one. And so the gray-green, already somewhat worn-out little box and the way I'd gotten it before the train's departure from one of the hooded peddlers blocking the platform with their strange goods seemed all the more precious and peculiar to me now. Almost everything that had been held out to me as a "Souweniiiir!" had seemed to come from the evidence

and securities chambers of an empire and its army in the process of total dissolution. Yet I had also seen mountains of meat, animal skins, raisins, bread and nuts in half-covered children's wagons, often in continuous movement, being pushed across the snow-covered platform right up to the steel treads of the railroad cars. In the end, no one came around to pay for anything at all. The counter had been my ticket inside.

It was its delicate crackle, that sizzling and grinding sound it cautiously but continuously emitted. At times, when I brought it closer to my ear, I heard a kind of melodious scratching, then once more a buzzing and whispering, which, like a thin counterpoint, floated softly into the sound of the train and seemed threatened with being engulfed. Suddenly my eyes were full of tears. All the troubles of my winter journey paled in comparison to what my counter wanted to confide in me. In spite of the hundred rubles, I hadn't really believed it would work like it was supposed to, and it was obvious that it wouldn't work like it was supposed to, but right then I unmistakably felt just how much it had forced its way in to me. I would gladly have stretched out across the floor, entranced by an extraordinarily comforting image the little whispering box held up to me. Something I couldn't quite grasp, a face perhaps, still a bit hazy, a mask beneath which there'd only be a dogged, or simply observant, silence.

In the weeks prior to my departure I myself had suggested that third place, Semey, Semey on the Irtysh, in addition to the previously agreed upon stations of Pavlodar and Karaganda. The consul had remained silent for longer than usual. Only from the consul's wife had a little list arrived, a few things she wanted for herself and for her family. An Advent wreath, some dominos, a medicine by the name of Uralyt. Finally, if reservedly, the consul had agreed to my suggestion. In Semey, he

wrote, however, it had to be the Dostoevsky house, an ideal spot for our theme. *Cities in Nothingness*. The title had been the translator's idea.

One of the consul's surprises was that my appearances were to be accompanied by a Kazach dombra player and his thirteen-year-old daughter. The singer, who thanks to her puppet-like appearance the translator had baptized our *tiny, gleaming mummy*, pulled the sounds from far away then stretched them out inside herself. In order to manage this inverted, twisted deep-in-the-throat form of song she would stand as if rooted, only her hands would move through the air as if carefully spreading something over something else, something that had to have been right in front of her. I found it terribly inappropriate to break the mesmerizing silence that followed the song with my own voice…Brasilia, Nairobi, and then down to the facts: the miracle of Astana, the "Capital of the Steppes."

I picked the counter up from the washbasin another four, five, maybe ten times, turned it on and then back off, laid it down or pressed it covetously to my ear and tried to concentrate. Soon I had to realize that the long awaited image would not come to light through effort alone. On the contrary. The crackle and creak of its whispering already failed to touch me with the same power, and threatened to slip away completely. I knew I had to calm down. As delicately as possible I investigated the functions of the two small toggle switches on its front side. Both of them silenced the little box. The left one unleashed a quiet vibrating; the right one evidently was to switch between acoustic and optical functions. All of the sudden at the top of the counter – my little narrator, as I now half-jokingly called the little buzzing box (for to name is to claim as they say and in this case I needed to calm myself further down and ward off whatever not entirely savory aspect of its engineering I could) – a little red light began to flicker and blink; I quickly tore the little box from my sweat-covered hand and hid it in the front pocket of my shirt, under my sweater. I wanted to go back to my compartment immediately.

Before even comprehending the snap, the door hit me in the back. In front of me stood that tiny woman with the peaked cap who at the table the consul had called *our Wagon-Mama*. She silently pointed to her golden watch, the metal band of which cut into her forearm, then gestured over her shoulders back into the corridor. While I tried again to steady myself against the walls of the carriage, the Wagon-mama stood completely still, only in her knees was there a delicate, almost imperceptible rocking, from my perspective, however, the jolts seemed to disappear into her body without a trace. No doubt I had made a helpless, sickly impression for without any ado the Wagon-mama grabbed me by the arm and pulled me out of the bathroom and into the safety of the car. Her touch was not unpleasant, it somehow made the little narrator box's pressing influence, as I all of the sudden believed to have felt, a little less insistent, that influence I was passively letting carry me away.

The woman was so slight that as we walked along I could see over her peaked, mosque-like cap out into the open. In the shelter of the railroad embankment out in the snow there stood a thin, glittering copse of gold; a single rider floated before the sinking sun. In the emptiness that surrounded him he seemed a little too big, and at the same time sharply delineated like a dummy one could slowly push forward across the line between heaven and earth; here you never know just how far you are seeing, the consul had said.

In the dining car a vapor of used breath surrounded us, which smelled of curd and fried food. The prodigal son's return on the arm of the Wagon-mama – laughing the translator filled our glasses and explained to me that the others, the consul, the small, gleaming mummy and her father, had at first waited, but had then excused themselves for their compartments; her short, peroxide-blond hair shone, only her neck, left exposed, was overshadowed by a darkish down.

I drank, doubled-over, something foreign burned into me – *breathe! breathe!* the translator cried, you must breathe more quickly, pant almost, like you're giving birth, only then will there be the right mixture in the body. How one was best supposed to *then breathe* she demonstrated herself by stretching up and raising her fearless eyebrows skyward. At the same time she swallowed and pumped her shoulders up and down, which forced her upper body into an intriguing movement. I carefully pulled at my sweater until I could see the narrator's little red light through the loosely woven wool. For a moment I was as excited as a child on Christmas Eve, but then realized I had to go. I sat up with a bolt, but immediately fell right back down onto the seat, the aisle blocked.

A uniformed man asked for our passports and another made a take-the-film-out-of-the-camera type of gesture, but the translator simply laughed and touched my arm. Did I know that the little mummy's song had been about love for the Steppes, a feeling that transcended any other Kazach longing? Did I know that here, while still alive, every deceased-to-be dragged a song behind himself as each of the Steppes' inhabitants was personally responsible for their very own mourning song? Were he not to have one, nothing at all would be sung, people would simply stand around the feet of the deceased in silence, but the deceased would be unable to find peace for he would forever remain in debt.

I was exhausted. In the meantime I had begun to smile at everything, but that cost strength, and was difficult to keep in check. Doubtless something false was about to come out, but before that falsity could become obvious, I grabbed – far too quickly – the translator's hand.

We made our way along the cold, dully illuminated walls, clutching at the safety rails. A stove, which served to heat the car, narrowed the beginning of every new corridor along with a samovar. The kettle was woven into a web of tubes and valves and ceaselessly emitted a greasy, shimmering steam, which would then wobble down the corridor. Afraid of being touched by something clammy, some living thing you might want to shake off, I held my lips closed tightly together, and then, with an elbow in front of my face, plunged into the fog.

Slowly I grew accustomed to the wavering darkness. Now I was the one walking ahead to open the heavy, half-iced doors and hold them ajar so that the translator, bowing slightly, could slip her way through. A gesture that weakened from door to door and inevitably turned me into a thread-like figure, precisely there where the few steps through the blustery overpasses between the cars should have been enough to catch up with her.

Suddenly I stumbled, collided against something on the floor, two or three legs that jutted out into the corridor like fallen tree trunks. In some cars such a darkness reigned that I could easily recognize the dark red blinking of the little narrator under my sweater.

I stayed two thirds of the car behind then put myself in a position to overtake the translator. From time to time I was pulled through the corridor by long jolts, but soon understood that I had to walk with shorter steps so that the corridor would not take off from under my feet and run away from me. I unmistakably felt the translator's eyes in the back of my head; I felt myself likened to another, to a whole number of others maybe, every one of them far away, not here in a night train named *Turksib*, a caravan of antiquated metal coaches on a track called the silk rail that cut straight through the Steppes, from the Orient to the Occident, as the consul liked to say.

We had already made it through twenty carriages or more before I noticed that there was no rule to the numberings: the train must have grown larger along the way. The corridors became a provisional mineshaft that seemed to lead into a tougher, older form of time. No matter how hard I stared through the crusty mirror of the bolted windows into the gray, dirty tangle of frost blooms that over the course of the journey had crawled like eczema over the flanks of the carriages, there was not a single sign, nothing from any life outside flashed at all. No moon, no stars. Only my tired, unsubstantial self staring back and staggering with me through the tunnel: the stocky build, the wide shoulders between which the narrator's heartbeat blinked, from the vibration of the panes it

shivered into a fist-sized, dark red glowing swarm while at eye level a colorless and inscrutable face floated next to mine – this was how we overtook the translator.

Snow dusted the sheet steel between the cars. Gooseflesh grew over my skin and onto my back like a cold, balsam-covered kerchief across the rear of my skull and became a wonderful kind of helmet that pleasantly moved when I raised my eyebrows even the smallest bit upwards.

We stood indecisively before our compartments; the car rolled through a curve, I tried to cross my arms in order to better conceal the blinking of the box, the translator took a step back.

Two half uniformed figures had appeared in the steam of the samovar; they paused a moment within it, then slowly pushed into the corridor. Clearly they were waiting for someone to acknowledge them at last and approve of their approach. The smaller man in back pushed the larger one out in front of him, who, however, seemed reluctant and, with a half-bow as well as a carefully called *Salam alaikum*! from afar, seemed to want to apologize for the disturbance. I tried not to smile. I thought about escaping to my compartment but the two quickly moved closer. In the first I recognized the stoker, in the other the conductor of our car. Now and again the latter's expectant face appeared to the left or right of the stoker's large body, but mostly remained hidden behind him.

The stoker pointed at me carefully. *Nemetzki*?! Before I could answer he clicked the heels of his boots together, held his arms bent, chin slightly raised, his childlike face becoming cold and strict. I tried to produce a small smile to excuse us all. I asked the translator to explain to the stoker, who was a whole head taller than us, that he didn't need to greet me in such a way, that I myself, if he really wanted to know, simply held the rank of private in the reserves, the reserves of a long since vanished People's Army, a rank that without any doubt was below that of a stoker of the famous *Turksib* – and with two fingers thereby touched the dirty silver shoulder piece limply hanging down from his blue uniform jacket.

While I continued to speak, the stoker pursed his lips; his fine soot-lined eyes fixed upon my mouth, but the translation no longer reached him. First, as if still shoveling coal into his firebox, then from out of the depths with a plodding, scraping voice that over-expanded the vowels and not for one moment freeing himself from his strained pose he began to speak:

Watkud beeee zereaason vai

I zo zad‘nd lowww;

Alegen dfromzdiztaant taim …

Something snagged and stuck in his chest. Only his cracked lips remained in silent movement, his firm, small mouth opening and closing incessantly, ready to give form, whenever it was ready, to that which still was missing. Still, no matter how hard he tried to stretch up onto the tips of his toes and push his chin even higher than us into the vault, toward the blue night-lamp of the car, as if he only had to make it up there – his thin throat made it clear the rhyme with “so sad and low” just did not want to come to his tongue.

In the lamp light, in his tightened and seemingly glowing face, across his lips that refused to close and which bore the white shimmering strip of a protruding row of teeth it twitched: “*Alegen dfromzdiztaant taim …*” – groaning persistently and as if under too heavy a burden the stoker repeated the line. The translator worriedly touched my arm, but still I pointed to the stoker, convinced in any event it was appropriate and not only a question of manners or sensitivity that he have the opportunity to finish on his own.

In the tension that quickly rose to the skin’s surface, which thanks to the missing words came powerfully, my own mouth too had been set into motion. Silently I spoke the long sought after word between us, ever again, straight up to the chest of the stone-like man who stood only a hand’s distance away from me, as if from there through silent repetition I could whisper it to him. Without

realizing it I had adopted the stoker's upright posture, so that we soon stood before each other like two low ranking military men who halfway through their greeting (at least I could say so in retrospect) had fallen out of time.

For one moment of heavy-breaths the stoker and I remained in a sort of fish song which surged back and forth from his shore to mine yet never once made it to land – once again, and more urgently this time, the translator took hold of my arm, and finally I understood: this was *his* song. His very own, long treasured and memorized one. That very same one – after and wherever it first had flown to him – he had chosen to make his personal, posthumous mourning song. How else understand the unrelenting, by now almost somewhat doubtful and even if faltering never slackening seriousness of his appearance?

"Refuses to let me go" I almost cried down the corridor of the thundering sleeping car, a liberation, a wake-up call before whose trumpet-like intensity I myself was almost afraid. I found myself in the stoker's arms. He forcefully pulled me closer while he, as if the decisive victory had been achieved, repeated the line another time: "Reeefuuz-lit-meee-goooor." Then he pushed me away, but only to immediately pull me back and press me against his other cheek.

The conductor, who had remained behind the stoker's back, clapped triumphantly and laughed while I tried to wrench my body away from the stoker's thanks – cautiously, so as not to harm the festivity of the moment. I laughed and, holding back a wave of nausea, praised the stoker's pronunciation. I praised the Steppes, the *Turksib*, silk road and silk rail, the country and the smoke-hole of the yurt, that very one I knew was in the coat of arms – in other words, the stove in the center, the stoker…The translator, who had carefully stayed by my side the entire time, formed sentences from out of my stammering, sentences that seemed to come from a single pharyngeal consonant of *a*, a long *rrhaaarrhaaarrhaaa*, and simultaneously called them into the stoker's ear – but the embrace was endless.