

WARMTH

Nighttime in Dornod, nighttime on the steppe, nighttime in winter. Cold, very cold. On the station platform, cold and uncomfortable, people are battling against frozen shoes. On board, the passengers sit and doze, at their feet they have small cans, their possessions in small bags. Every time the door is opened, there's a blast of cold air and they yearn for warmth. Fortunately for those of us headed towards Ereentsav, our arrival is announced. They're all expecting it to be cold, it's like they're leaving their warm beds, a murmur comes from the carriage. There's a cold wind blowing, and this mirage of shivering bodies makes me think of how it might have been here before the poet Nyamsüren came to Ereentsav. In such surroundings, you could read his thoughts, you could understand what he had meant. But this is a poet who without doubt stood and observed the bizarrely normal and the bizarrely divine. For him, to go to Ereentsav was the most beautiful thing:

Outside, hanging on a line,
a white cotton cloth.
A breeze from somewhere,
my wife's perfume...

These lines emphasize the idea that everything was fine perhaps before he had set off for Ereentsav. It is true that those who traversed the lovely roads with him did not in fact grasp how this station was enclosed in wuthering mists and frosts. This little place, bare and exposed, struggled to conceive that it could be not frozen and numb. But Nyamsüren would stand there, and whatever he gazed upon awoke. The poet had inscribed upon my own mind the frosty beards of men who were the worse for drink, who didn't notice the ticket collector, the freezing young women who could barely keep from tapping their shoes, the snowflakes flying from their rosy cheeks, and even the direction in which we were going, and he had inscribed on my own mind the old women who, pursing their lips and wobbling, grasped me to ask a favor. And so, because of the extent of this great poet's world, I was on the train to Ereentsav, the golden homeland in the perfect vessel of the cosmic natural world, and of humanity, which chases after history, that it might receive the lovely whispering of that strange melody which expresses the breadth of creation. The cover of darkness grew thicker and, though we did not know in which direction we were moving, the frozen people we were following were disappearing into the warmth of the stations up ahead, but my own mind was melding with the warmth of the magic ink palace of Nyamsüren the poet. The others are dozily complaining, they hurry off, saying that in a while they'll be exchanging the smell of sweaty feet for the chill wind and noise of the Ereentsav snows. Hashaa, who is travelling with us, is chatting away. He says his elder brother had been talking about what the grass in the snow had been saying. Hashaa is a young man who graduated in journalism from the university after me. Although he had previously been in Övörhangai, he had spent his life on a Dornod newspaper. He spoke about his "elder brother." The great poet Nyamsüren lived his life close to the springs and the salt marshes, he held no oath of blood or association with his younger or older brothers, but still Nyamsüren was, for older people, their younger brother, and

for younger people, he was their older brother. One evening, arriving in Dornod on a visit from the capital to visit Nyamsüren, I had heard many of the stars saying *elder brother Nyamsüren, elder brother*, and I felt the warmth through which he gathered other people to him.

The poet, with his warm and kindly mind, imagined that the frosty grasses waving in the snows were frozen and shivering, and they were cradled in his beautiful words which would never again allow them to be cold. For instance,

The grass has eyes,
the water has melody,
the stars have memory,
and the sky,
every month, has a son.

All around, the hoary grasses are covered in pure white snow. A sign that we're approaching Ereentsav. Soon the train comes to a halt. We've arrived. It's two o'clock in the morning. I get out, noticing how the sky is spotted with crystal stars, and the snow closely packed. Silence. It seemed that there was nothing there for the people who had left the train. The wind was whistling, to them it seemed that Ereentsav was perhaps a very uncomfortable place. And so for them it might have been, but to this one it was warm and beautiful. And, strangely, through the window of the travelling carriage, an attendant soothing a young female worker, covering her shoulders with a deel, arranging her hair, her teeth indistinct in the low light. Her coworkers had not trotted off into sleep, but with half the night gone who knows whether this woman, having stopped doing herself up, had time or a tryst? In any case, we stood there, feeling the night, feeling the stars and the snow of Ereentsav.

Nyamsüren's wife Handmaa was waiting for us, dozing a little. She was rather apologetic, she explained "I fell asleep listening out for you," but the tea and the buuz and the hushuur were in disarray. Her welcome was polite but, that being said, it appeared that she would have a welcome for to whomever came in the darkness of night. She laid a spread, nothing was spared, there were horsemeat buuz, round and rosyripe apples, sweet fruit, cabbage and tomatoes. I remember once how Nergui wrote how Nyamsüren was a Buddha, his hospitality was of the very best, as was the custom in Dariganga, he loved his guests as he loved his seven children. Such fine visits were truly a continuation of eternity, the inextinguishable candle of the mind. This remote homeland of Ereentsav was the quietest spot in Mongolia, and I know that in this distant backwater hospitality of Mongolia's warmth was of the greatest importance. This was an excellent visit, a melding of milk and heart.

Handmaa is very slight and petite. Having had seven children, and now without Nyamsüren, her mind is concerned with the fate of her seven children. Handmaa is living directly through their destinies.

I like to be invisible, a pale mist
blending into the deep and timeless sky.

There would be no more writing of poetry, we took a few verses back and stood there to welcome the morning at great Nyamsüren's house, with his wife. The sun rose overhead. Something raised up the Ereentsav sun right

where we were. Maybe it meant something. And these words, written by the man of the house, were in my heart:

I am living in a simple building,
a distant place, away from prayers and curses.

In the living room there were some pictures in a frame. A few were of Handmaa and two or three of Nyamsüren. The pictures remained as Nyamsüren and his wife had arranged them. Two or three pictures had carefully been taken while she was studying in the Ukraine and, when she was in the tenth grade, she had taken two or three pictures of her contemporaries. I imagine that, when they arranged this frame of pictures, looking upwards as to a beautiful poem, they placed it on the wall of this white building with a smile of happiness. There were two versions of one picture in the frame. One was a photo of Handmaa, she was looking straight ahead, and the other, below it, had been drawn by hand with a graphite pencil. Oddly enough, it seemed that the drawn image was clearer and more attractive than the photo. This one, Handmaa with her small frame, had been taken by someone and sent back from the Ukraine, and delivered to Nyamsüren. Handmaa didn't know who had drawn the picture. Who knows whether he had drawn it himself or asked another to draw it. What we do know, though, is that whoever had cast their eyes upon the picture and drawn it by hand, had rendered her delicate beauty more faithfully than had the camera. To look at the picture was for them a joyful task. There was a picture of O Dashbalbar, who won the State Poetry Prize, and Nyamsüren, both now dead, together with another poet, G Mend-Ooyo, all on horseback and dressed in Russian clothing, on the southern slopes of Otgontenger. There were pictures taken of these three. But this picture was no ordinary picture. Balbar is a fine young man, his pale, yellowish face seems to show considerable melancholy. Mend-Ooyo, that his hair would be photographed, haughtily turning his small trefoil head and looking up at the distant peak, his broad white face center stage. But Nyamsüren, up by the horse's ears, seems perhaps to be looking at the grass on the Badarhundaga ridge. So these three Dariganga poets had gone to offer a sacrifice to Vajrapani, and this picture was taken looking towards Ganga and Naran. How beautifully they talked together, how lovely the verses they spoke, how fine were the strands they unloosed, how happy they were, crossing the mountainous taiga of the Hangai. And now someone is looking at this picture. And these three poets have been blessed with children. And these three all gave their children names derived from their homeland. Dashbalbar fathered Gangabaatar, Mend-Ooyo fathered Naranbaatar and Nyamsüren fathered Naranbaatar. The minds of these three poets, what is intimate to them, shows how thick are their threads.

Another picture. On a rock, this side of the waterfall, its white waters foaming and crashing, Nyamsüren took a picture. On the back, he wrote, *at the spot called Men's Tears*. Superficially, we can see that it was Nyamsüren who had taken the picture, but if we take a step back, we are reminded of Ts Enhbat's account of a journey he had taken with Nyamsüren into the Kavkaz mountains. From above this waterfall, Man's Tears, the great poet had found a warm poem, this is probably a picture which he had been trying to take all

day. And a picture of Handmaa, among the swirling patterns cast by a threeheaded morin huur upon the walls around the seat of honor in the great poet's house. In her deep red deel, Handmaa retains the gentleness of her youth, with all the dirt washed, washed away by the waters of the river Ulz, such a picture holds fine memories. Looking at this lovely young woman, Nyamsüren felt compelled to write a poem, he had made his noble Handmaa into art, and inscribed here the poem he had composed. Handmaa talks about Nyamsüren. Imagine how lovely were the fires he lit. And these fires possessed a strange warmth. He gathered the wood and lit the fire, just as he might write a poem. He gathered and cut and piled the wood, he lay the pieces out as though arranging reeds, and ignited the fire. It took well, and so he lit the clay oven, and the children, their faces pale and pink, flushed red, they were sitting happily there. And the warmth spread through the house, and certainly he took an extraordinary pleasure from his wife's joy.

Handmaa said to us, "He kept mornings for writing poetry, and during the day he would drag himself away to take tea. In the evenings he would finish up his work. This was his routine, he never deviated from it." When he was writing poetry, he was devoted and obstinate. And reader, you know that he wrote this fine poem as a warning, a warning to his Handmaa, whom he loved more than anything else, not to put obstacles in his way.

You must not manage me
when I'm writing poetry.
The bird called poetry
will not drop into my lap.

Into these lines he smelted an unwritten law, he lovingly worried at them, this Ereentsav bigwig. On this day, December 12, they would be talking about him, wherever they may be. The mountain path was steep and silent, the hills pinkish with snow and rain. People were chattering away about this and that. But on this day, the best conversation in Ereentsav was between Handmaa and myself.

Nyamsüren himself once did a bit of politicking. Handmaa was telling me about how, initially, "he really wanted to give Mr L Tüdev the popular vote. He wanted Tüdev to win the Presidential election," she said with a smile, "and so he did some politicking." He spared no effort for Tüdev's victory. First he thought, second he considered, and then he got it, he was interesting in that way. But there was one man, a Mr Mahabarada, who followed Nyamsüren's philosophy to the letter. They were two people who were alike in Ereentsav. They say that this man would recite Nyamsüren's better-known poetry for about thirty minutes in poetry competitions, and though his reading sent people to sleep, he would finish the reading nonetheless. This white-haired old man was pushing seventy, he lived in Ereentsav year round, he went everywhere without a hat, rain or snow, he wore shoes of linen, he was a strange one. Mahabarada was attuned to Nyamsüren's words. And Nyamsüren came over to Mahabarada's camp. And the two were elected the following day. And a poem was born:

In the land over here,
there are many types of people.

Over there they talk of primitive things.
And so, one warm night,
they took and ate
the ruddy shelduck's chicks,
it was the time...

Handmaa strung out her story. Whether it was what Nyamsüren himself once said, or whether it had been said of him, it was as though a golden thread was being spun. It was Nyamsüren's food.

But it is no surprise that the master of the house would put his hand in his pockets or in his gloves, and stand there like any other man. It was the elder brother who got to slaughter the horses or cattle and Nyamsüren seemed as though, had someone on the edge of the encampment said, "Please bring everything back from here, it belongs to the owner," he would have understood, he could not have contained himself, he would have laughed for months. It was the others who provided food for the seven children of his large family:

My owner sees me as barren fat,
he has travelled far without hearing the news.
May my children not be barren,
and my little calves grow to be milchcows.
You crave the heavy and pendulous udders,
suck greedily though my nipple be dry.
Do not stray far from the herd, people are there, and dholes.
At your last moment, I will get you sucking,
and tomorrow the moon will touch your mother's forehead...

With this he set his mind to brush and inkstone and ink, he was standing amid other colors and scents. Nyamsüren, a tattoo on his hand, was a man who would not watch an animal's life being taken. Indeed, as he says in one poem,

My pen is soaked with camel's tears,
and I can write my poems in the sky,
among the fine galloping horses.

For those who do not really have poetry in their souls, this brilliant man was something of an oddity. It might have been during the election, when parliament was belching its pungent smoke, that Odbayar, who was at that time the local member of the People's Great Hural, came to visit Nyamsüren in Ereentsav. The political types had gathered at the local club, waiting for Odbayar, but right at that moment, it seems, he and Nyamsüren were sitting drinking together, and Nyamsüren was reading poetry to him. But Nyamsüren was reading and, because they didn't come, Odbayar caused a shock by cancelling the meeting. It was just a meeting, just politics. What I mean is, if Odbayar had read this:

They were lovely poems which I wrote before...
I sang frequently of lovely women,

down the deep ridges of their lovely backs
I rowed my hand, like a golden barque,
and halted its movement with lovely guyropes.
Lovelier still were the lovely poems which I wrote before...

might the great Nyamsüren have said, "You read it beautifully, but this 'movement' of yours is not my word, surely you mean 'advance'?" In this way, these two spent the evening talking poetry, which might have sent the political types to sleep. While Odbayar did not know poetry in his soul, by reading a word into a poem which the poet had not placed there, he could sense the tension, as though he had found a needle in the pitch darkness, he said he was "pure as the driven snow." For these two brothers, friendship was a beautiful thing. There's a good story, it was the first year of the Golden Feather prize. Mend-Ooyo and H Chilaajav were talking and they said that the prize would be coming to Ereentsav. Nyamsüren was quite relaxed at this news, he dragged his feet rather in travelling to the main town in Dornod at Handmaa's insistence. So they arrived in Choibalsan and, although the prize was to be awarded on the following evening, he walked around unperturbed as though he was at home, or smoking with his young friends, he told them, "a friend had me bring something to the city." But the following day, they learnt that there was no flight from Choibalsan to Ulaanbaatar and it seemed that the black-haired poet from Ereentsav would not be there. And so they spent the night in Dornod. In the morning, Nyamsüren again went out for a walk, passing the time with the locals. There was a poet there, she was somewhat confused, they had decided "to present the Golden Beak" to Odbayar, who was head of the aimag. Odbayar took his friend in hand, who claimed to dislike the Golden Feather, and told him, "please take the best car and go to Hentii." He called Öndörhaan, by now the car was pretty full, and there was a vast operation to get Nyamsüren sitting in it. And so, in his green deel, Nyamsüren flew to Ulaanbaatar's Buyant-Uhaa Airport and stayed with his family and he received the Golden Feather on an empty stomach. Nyamsüren and Odbayar were as one, reading poetry in Ereenstav, they were brothers, and their friendship shortened the distance between the very east of our motherland and its center.

It was long past noon and still we were talking with Handmaa. So we decided to go into Nyamsüren's room. But, before we went into the room where the poet's brush and inkstone and verses were resting, we went outside. In the enclosure there were some clothes draped on the line. Perhaps it was Börte who had washed them. Before these clothes, draped on the line, had frozen solid, Börte would have handwashed them, draped them on the line, the steam would have billowed up as the darkness had fallen. We wanted Nyamsüren to be there right then, looking, feeling the approach of a fine poem. There were not just two of us walking there. We were on the white porch, at the entrance of the tent. This was where he liked to sit and think. He wrote,

A light breeze from the south, its voice
clear as rock candy shattering.

Someone else was walking with us. The cowshed was a little livestock palace. Nyamsüren had built it himself. He had built it by checking one by one each beam that he laid. Handmaa told us, "He worked with great precision, finding the best way to craft his poems, or even to build a cowshed." The work had absorbed him, and so the cows here were happy, lying there, chewing the cud as they cried their warm tears. There were huge snowdrifts behind the cowshed. This was something that Nyamsüren really relished:

There were huge snowdrifts behind my home in Ereentsav,
where my son Hühdei Mergen
had ridden out with the children of Hüh Nuur,
galloping from the skies on great white snowhorses....

This is truly how it was. Hühdei Mergen had been brought up to ride out with his cousin Zev, they would gallop the great white snowhorses selected by his father.

And then we went into Nyamsüren's study. What would you see there? First of all, beneath a branch of golden caragana in the place of honor, your eyes would be drawn to the poem "Amitabha," written in tarblack ink on birch bark. Nearby, a chair, and a sheepskin placed loosely upon it. I sat down comfortably and read and reread a poem which he had written:

An aimless young man,
dithering on a sheepskin,
composes a poem
for a young woman, dozing.

And no matter if the sheepskin seat is warm, the poem written on the sheepskin is definitely warm.

Of all Nyamsüren's possessions, it was his library which stood out, running clockwise from the right of the door. His own horses led the field in the library. With *Springflow*, *The Nature of Mind* and *On the Lonely Steppe*, he let out his poet's tether from the saddle, the world counted them as thoroughbreds. These three books, these fine horses of his writings, each stretch the tethering-line in different directions. Then a small reading-stand, two legs, fashioned from birch wood, perhaps Nyamsüren's own work. Was it out of respect that it cut a furrow through the library, between his own books and the majority of books to the right? What volumes were in this precious library of Ereentsav? Few, very few. I'll give you the names. Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Rasul Gamzatov's *My Daghestan*, Anatoly Rybakov's *Children of the Arbat*, Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, Gombojavın Mend-Ooyo's *The Crystal Temple of Wisdom*, and Ochirbatın Dashbalbar's *The River Flows Gently*. Beyond that, very little. There were reference books of poets from the area around the Höhnuur depression. There was also a well-thumbed copy of the New Testament. This admirable poet led a life amid nature and humanity, which stimulate poetry, sweet as mute colostrum, he grew used to the grass, the snow and to the self and he found it sufficient to read these books alone.

A picture of the poet hangs on the library wall. It was painted by the famous Dornod artist Gantuya. His queue is like the waterfall in the picture of Man's Tears, his warm eyes, unwearied, like those of young shellduck, and his soft pink face seems absorbed in comforting his dear Handmaa, as though he pities the wormwood and fresh white snow.

The creator of this picture is reckoned to be one of the world's finest artists. But we don't know whether she was pleased with this portrait. What is most important is the appreciation of the work.

There's an ancient gun, long and black, as though guarding this amazing picture. Most likely a Berdan rifle. It had been brought with only one thing in mind. But you'd never guess there was any discrepancy here. The gun was a piece of equipment. For hunting. Nyamsüren the poet did not wish to kill animals, though, and he had had but a slight connection with this gun. He had once been friendly with the hunters in Ereentsav, had gone hunting with them, had cleansed their wickedness through his poetry. He didn't stop them from slaughtering wild beasts, and he would speak with Handmaa of what he had seen. So who knows whether he guarded his mind by preventing this long black gun from wickedness?

There was a curved sabre. And small tubes of bullets. How should I end this list? I think I need to stop here.

There may be some fear as to whether Nyamsüren did or did not use this sabre to chop things up, whether he did or did not shoot at things with these bullets. This brings to mind what Donrovin Namdag said, that "talent is nothing to be frightened of."

Handmaa filled one of the snow poet's vodka bottles with distilled spirits and gave it to us. There is no doubt that this mottled blue bottle, smokey at its base, was the grass poet's most favorite possession.

A friend has come from the mountains with a mind of spring,
and we down three thimbles of jade-like wine.

Thinking over and over about this poem, reading over and over from these beloved poems, maybe I'll get drunk on the wine. Nyamsüren was married. These two did not go along different paths, their own two paths were enough.

In the wondrous light of the eastern moon,
may we be happy as the eastern poets drinking wine.

This is good to hear. Dear reader, please check for the spark in this fine poet, who intended these lines for you.

The poet who looked upon the campfire and the flattened grasses collected together the letters he wrote to Handmaa before he went away. The most beautiful letters, without doubt, are the final love letters. This is how Nyamsüren began one such letter:

Handmaa, Handmaa,
I know that you love me.

Surely this is too regular, surely this is his own too tender style, surely this is too perfect an omniscience, surely this is too delightful a pressure? Handmaa

waited for these most beautiful letters, she took these most beautiful letters, she opened these most beautiful letters and, with boundless joy, she read these most beautiful letters. Because she had boundless joy, she lived with a poet of boundless scope. We amused ourselves in Nyamsüren's poetry parlor, wrote some words in the guestbook, and went back to the living room. Handmaa was talking.

"When he said that he didn't generally follow Dashbalbar's working method, he wasn't completely shutting it out. He had his reasons. Nyamsüren did not take Dashbalbar as his student to guide him in Mongolian poetry, and it is interesting that he did not come to wish his younger brother farewell from the world, who had stepped over the threshold of the state prize, "I can't do anything," he had said. He didn't see the point of going. One poem shows just how much love Nyamsüren had for Dashbalbar.

A SONG OF ABSENSE
(requiem)
(for O Dashbalbar)

Magpies are twittering
in the elms on the tundra.
My younger brother is not come
from the northern lands.
*The nightingale is singing
on the golden ridge,"*
but he is not hidden
in the nightingale's throat.
The yellow rays have drawn open
the doors of Shambala,
and he has abandoned the saltmarsh.
He was not my student,
*and the yellow arcs have drawn him
to the yellow rocks.*
You were my brother the gazelle,
whom Zev shot down, and
I would be with you, my brother, antelope
and man, wounded and unwounded.

Is this poem worthless, or is there nothing left in the bucket? Now the pupil is sleeping in Altan-Ölgii, and the teacher is sleeping in Ereentsav. There is only Dariganga, Golden Hill, Shiliin Bogd and Ganga. And Handmaa is talking.

Asleep one night, Nyamsüren suddenly got up. "Handmaa, Handmaa," he said, "I've had a really strange dream. Two men just came, and then they went away." Handmaa took little notice, and the two went back to sleep. But the following day, two young men really did come by in a car. They might have been watching him....They said that there was a poetry competition in the eastern zone, and that quite a few people were gathered in Choibalsan, but he said, "I'm not going, I'm not going." But then he said, "In fact, I really should go" and they headed off and didn't come back.

Handmaa is talking. “He would say, ‘Handmaa, Handmaa, my darling, don’t be stingy with the booze.’ I made sure he had just one drink from my store.” This, she said, she kept in a box, this wine which he couldn’t get at. He was grateful, so very grateful for the kindness of this best of people, Handmaa, “who had been given to me.” He was in heaven.,
In his poem “The Time Will Come”, we read:

The time will come
when my student Sodnomnamjil will be abbot of Baruun-Zuu.

Sodnomnamjil indeed became abbot of Baruun-Zuu and, in the poem “Omens,” we can see that his teacher was clearly not shy:

I sense that
an extraordinary thing has come,
the world’s sound drones
every day in my ears.
And from below, from
beneath the ridge,
is this one thing
climbing up
in a stinking vehicle of iron?

This is unquestionably an omen. Nyamsüren soared into the sky from the hands of young Hürel in Herlen sum in northern Dornod. It was said, “There were two birds flying, did they take our elder brother with them?” But at the memorial which was erected in the place where he died, there is a cigarette lighter which the divine poet had used in his last moments. And his friends the snow and the grass are there. Handmaa and I spent the night talking, but the time of my train home was inexorably approaching. Handmaa followed us, she said, “Go and see Batjargal when you leave.” Had Nyamsüren wanted to experience when he was alive what we were going through, he would have written another one of these poems:

It’s strange,
these fine groups of girls.
It’s strange,
these kengia grasses in the corner of the yard.
I can’t get on the train to Bayantümen,
what is it that they’re saying...?

Hashaa, Elbegzaya and I followed Handmaa through the snow. The snow and the stars of Ereentsav wiped away the sadness of our final conversation and we arrived at Batjargal’s with calm hearts. He had been one of Nyamsüren’s youngest students. He had been serving on the northeastern border of Dornod for fifteen years and, in the snow, his wife had prepared food and tea for us, and he gave me a copy of his book *Remote Places*. At the beginning of this book, his teacher Nyamsüren had singled out some lines from one of the verses. Above them, as a kind of encouragement, he offered the following: “In the wondrous light of the eastern moon, may we be happy

as the eastern poets drinking wine.” These are the lines Nyamsüren had selected:

The twittering larks upon the golden steppe,
my brother, they are sweet, my brother, they are sweet.

Hürel’s family and Dugiimaa Batjargal were happy to spend time reminiscing with about the nights spent reading these lines in the light of the Ereentsav moon, and listening to the melody of the Ulz. It was hard to leave them, but we took our seat in the train carriage by way of the doorstep of Nyamsüren’s big white house. Handmaa came into every carriage and saw us off with much kissing. With great kindness, Batjargal came to the station in the snow with his wife. We were soaked in the springflow, we understood the nature of mind and, returning from Nyamsüren’s homeland, his lonely steppe, the temperature was falling and we craved, we really craved, warmth. Nyamsüren’s mind was absorbed in every flake of the white snow. Would that the spirit of the nation might sense this life in the snow.

As many of Ereentsav’s schoolchildren read this poem, it resounds across the skies from the depression of Höh Nuur:

Like a song, my motherland is lovely..
Like a poem, my motherland is lovely.
To live through the turning seasons is lovely.
The snowfall in Ereentsav is lovely.

21 December 2004