

By the Aral Sea

It was summer vacation. I had escaped my university in Beijing and taken the Trans-Siberian Railway across north-western China and then a series of busses to the Aral Sea. The town the bus pulled into was once a coastal town. The water had withdrawn beyond the western horizon. Massive merchant ships fell over in the sandy channels that were dredged for them before the water disappeared. White camels walked about the ships' rusted hulls. And the town, along with concrete quay and dock, sat in the midst of a blowing desert. I do not remember the name of the town; I wrote it in a notebook that I left on a Russian train.

I walked door to door offering money till someone took me in: a man of about forty with fierce green eyes set in a typically dark Central Asian face. I have forgotten his name; I will call him Adarburzin, which is a common enough name in that country. The house was made of wood and the wallboards were decorated with arabesques of blue, red and green. There was even a courtyard that housed a malnourished cow. I told the man how beautiful I thought his house was. He waved the suggestion away as though it were an insult. Like all Central Asian villagers, Adarburzin desired an apartment in an awful soviet building in a grey capital.

His wife was dead five years. His teenage daughter served tea, then sang and played on an instrument that looked like a very long-handled lute, with three strings and a small teardrop soundbox. I wrote the name of the instrument in the same notebook that now travels, obscured beneath seats, through indistinguishable cities and unmemorable plains between Beijing and Siberia.

'It's one thousand years old. A nomad instrument,' said Marjan when I asked.

Her name I have not forgotten.

We spoke Russian, her second language. I had taken my first lessons from a phrase book on the train, so our conversation was very simple

'Two thousand years,' her father corrected.

She played and sang again. I have never heard such a song: elegantly rising toward a pitch that was finally out of reach, then falling in order to rise again. Her song seemed as ancient and

strange as the shepherds that moved small flocks about here without any visible grass or fresh water; as sad as the vanished sea and poisonous wind.

She told me the lyrics were taken from Hilâli, a classical poet of Islam. I shuddered when she put the instrument away in her room and I saw a poster of an American pop singer pinned to the wall.

‘The water is still receding,’ said Adarburzin.

He told me the water went so fast there were days that fish got stranded. Then fisherman like himself shovelled them up and there were too many for the factories. But now there were not nearly enough and most of the factories were closed. Adarburzin told me how the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers feed the Aral Sea when there is rain on Mount Imeon and when the snow melts in the Himalayas.

‘But today,’ he said, ‘what is left is all salt and pesticides’ — the last word he found for me in my dictionary. He sighed painfully and shook his head. ‘The Soviet’s cotton is to blame. They took the river water. Then every farm and orchard and garden was taken. If you didn’t farm cotton you were sent to prison.’

Now the bulldozers that dug the irrigation canals were out there rusting along with everything else.

Adarburzin said he had to drive many hours to the western basin, else the same distance to fish the northern lakes, else he fished the Syr Darya now. And he did not have a license anymore.

‘And the fishing is not good.’

Mostly he sold scrap metal that he took from the stranded ships. But tomorrow he would take me fishing.

We slept on camelhair mats on the wooden floor.

The Syr Darya was a mirror of the sky. Marjan fished with us. I asked Adarburzin if his daughter often accompanied him.

‘Very often,’ he said.

She spent the day smiling benevolently at my attempts to cast and retrieve her father’s nets, often helping. I watched her work and wondered at the strength of her delicate frame and thought how Adarburzin had lost nothing in not having a son. I realised I had seen very few young men in the region. Adarburzin nodded in answer to my observation.

‘Many go to the cities,’ he said. ‘Many to the army. Some are sick from working on the sea.’

He told me Marjan was seventeen, though she looked barely fifteen to me. And this Central Asian life is hard on girls, on their faces and hands. Girls of twenty have sun and wind-burnt skin

that is resplendent and beautiful but makes them look ten years older. I did not guess what reason the man had to lie.

The next day we drove a rusted car owned by Adarburzin and his brother. We drove to a western village where the Aral Sea had not receded, to visit their mother's family. Poisoned as it was, I have never seen such a strangely beautiful body of water. Red flowers littered the shore, and all through the day and night the sea changed colour. Cobalt in the morning, turquoise at dusk, midnight green at twilight.

At twilight Marjan and I walked along the shore. Earlier in the day her father had taken me aside, noting how we enjoyed each other's company. He had said:

'My daughter is yours if you will keep her. Marry her. Take her to your home!' I told him it was impossible. Surely, it was impossible. I was twenty-seven; she was likely no more than fifteen. She did not have a certificate to prove her birth, much less a passport. She could not speak English.

'She is kind,' her father said, 'and good with her hands. She can walk many miles in a day. She is prayerful. She can fish and make good tea and she can sing.'

I stepped with Marjan along the shore. The blue water lapped about our feet. Her dark hair was wrapped in a red scarf. She half-hummed, half-sang a Tajik folk song. She was happy, perhaps dreaming she was my wife. I was dreaming that. She looked up at me and smiled and her eyes twinkled beneath the red scarf. And all at once I imagined her in a Brisbane social security office, in a cheap women's business suit, filling out a benefit claim form with an official glaring superiorly across the desk at her. No, I thought. I would not take you away from here if it were as easy as boarding a boat. I looked at her bare feet. The bottom of her dress was wet and wrapped around her legs. An anklet flashed in the moonlight. The anklet, she had told me that day, belonged to her great great grandmother. I had stopped myself from voicing stupid surprise that it had never gone out of fashion. I looked in her dark eyes then turned away to the ever-vanishing water.

'Why are you sad?' she asked.

'For the sea. For what has gone away and is not coming back.'

'Yes. It is very sad.'

I left the following day for Tashkent.