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These journals, as they gradually reach a wider public, will contribute most effectively to the universal world literature we hope for; we repeat however that there can be no question of the nations thinking alike, the aim is simply that they shall grow aware of one another, understand each other, and even where they may not be able to love, may at least tolerate one another.

GOETHE

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TAJIKISTAN

Tajik Literature: Seventy Years Is Longer Than the Millennium

By JOHN R. PERRY The Tajik language and its literature are a tangle of paradoxes. Tajikistan covers much of the region where the earliest Iranian civilizations of the Silk Road flourished, even before that of the Medes and Persians on the plateau to the southwest; relics of much earlier Iranian languages are still spoken in the mountains. The written language and spoken lingua franca, however, has long been a variety of Persian, which spread to these parts from the Iranian plateau with the expansion of Islam in the eighth century. At the Samanid court of Bukhara this evolved into the vehicle of a great literature, replacing Arabic in the East as the voice of humanistic scholarship, mysticism, and poetry, of Avicenna and al-Ghazali, Omar Khayyam and Hafiz. Rudaki, the father of Persian verse, was born in Tajikistan late in the ninth century. Nobody else of truly international note has surfaced since.

From the eleventh to the sixteenth century, successive waves of invaders (the Mongols, Tamerlane, the Uzbeks) from Inner Asia massacred, ruled, settled, and intermarried in this zone of passage. Much of the Iranian population was driven into the mountains or marooned in the ancient oasis cities of the Oxus basin, Bukhara and Samarkand. The rank and file of the invaders eventually settled down to farm and trade among the Iranians. By the middle of the nineteenth century, when the Russian empire rolled into Central Asia, this ethnolinguistic cauldron had simmered down into a peasantry of turcoman Uzbeks and persophone Tajiks, a small urban commercial and intellectual class (chiefly Tajiks), and a ruling Uzbek elite that struck even the czar's generals as one of the more bloodthirsty and reactionary regimes of the age.

Illiteracy and bilingualism were widespread; Uzbek Turkish was gaining ground as the vernacular. Persian was still the principal written language of government, and classical Persian poetry was cultivated among the less devout and more iranized of the Uzbek khans. The spoken Persian of the north, including the dialect of the Jews of Bukhara, was heavily influenced by Turkic vocabulary and structures. Some literate Bukharans, with the ambivalent support of the Russians against fierce opposition from the Muslim clerics, introduced a modern curriculum and methods of education for both Uzbek and Tajik children, modeled on the so-called Jaid schools devised by Tatar intellectuals of Kazan. By the eve of the Bolshevik Revolution, the khanate of Bukhara was already undermined by indigenous teachers and poets such as Sadreddin Aini (1878–1954), who were writing a more vernacular style of Persian with a reformist content.

After the Bolshevik dust settled, Uzbeks and Tajiks were packaged in 1929 into separate republics. There were several problems with this neat arrangement, apart from the sizable minorities of each ethnos that were left in the other's SSR. “Tajikistan” was allotted the Pamir Mountains and their western foothills, with its capital at Dushanbe, a Russian colonial city; Bukhara and Samarkand, the traditional centers of the Tajiks' literature and culture, were now located in “Uzbekistan.” Nevertheless, Aini and other reformers-turned-revolutionaries (including the Uzbek, Fitrat) turned with enthusiasm and considerable debate to devising a new Persian literary language, “Tajik,” in a new Latin alphabet. A concerted educational campaign dramatically increased literacy throughout Central Asia. Then, a mere decade later, in 1939, Moscow decreed a change from the Latin to the Cyrillic alphabet, in order to facilitate education in Russian and consolidate the revised version of the Soviet Union. This time there was no debate. Persian materials in Arabic script were no longer allowed into Tajikistan.

The new literary models were to be Gorky and socialist realism. Aini led the obligatory parade of rags-to-revolution autobiographies. Some of his contemporaries and fellow reformers, such as Sadri Ziyo, did not change step adroitly enough and perished in the purges of the 1930s. Pairav Sulaimoni (1899–1933), whose poetry at first followed both the form and the content of classical lyrical and mystical verse, was fiercely criticized and in 1930 abruptly switched to a martial brand of socialist realism. His daughter Gulchehra became an established writer who translated Russian verse and

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whose own poetry was widely translated in the Soviet Union.

The second generation of Tajik writers may be represented by Sotym Ulughzoda and Mirzo Tursunzoda. Both were born in 1911; Ulughzoda learned classical Persian poetry at school, while Tursunzoda, the son of poor peasants, was brought up in an orphanage. Each joined the Communist Party in 1941 and dedicated his talents to its service. Ulughzoda produced exemplary plays, screenplays, translations, novellas, and short stories (e.g., “The Morning of Our Life,” which paints a glowing picture of the future of a prosperous socialist Tajikistan). He fell from favor after his son “defected” to London, and lives now in a small apartment in Moscow. Stalin Prize winner Tursunzoda (d. 1977) was a peripatetic propagandist, reading from his collection of poems (“International Friendship” and “Ballad of India”) to Third World audiences. His poetry was also issued in an Arabic-script edition, for export only. In their footsteps, an impressive quota of Tajik novelists, essayists, historians, and poets from all classes and regions converged within the unerring guidelines of the writers’ unions in Moscow and Dushanbe to define the republic’s literary personality.

As compensation for political subordination, the Tajiks even in prerevolutionary times had developed a cultural superiority complex. Was not Persian, their own language, the literary vehicle of Iran and (in its heyday) India too? Aini confirmed the trend with his “Sample of Tajik Literature” (1926, in Arabic script), which laid claim to most of the classical Persian canon, making no distinction between writers of Central Asia and of Iran. Under Soviet rule, the Tajiks were at the same time indulged in this anachronistic posturing and (except for university students in the “philological stream”) deprived of the materials and training to study their classical and international heritage. Iran and the rest of the world ignored them; Tajikistan was integrated into the Soviet system but remained the poorest republic in the Union.

The dialect base for the Tajik literary language had been conceived as essentially that of Bukhara and the north, which had some literary precedents. Inevitably, with Bukhara and Samarkand gerrymandered from the map, younger writers from the south and center of Tajikistan have since contributed their own idioms and genres. Folk genres—riddles, tales, ballads—were collected and imitated, and alien European genres—drama and opera—were imported and emulated as vehicles of both new fiction and traditional tales infused with a communist message. Despite the uniformity of approved themes, prose style has not yet settled into a standard mold. Poetry was (and is) the heart of Persian literature, for Tajiks no less than for Iranians or Afghans; its dic-
tion and lexicon have remained closer to an international Persian literary norm. However, since the new writing system did not distinguish the traditional long and short vowels (an opposition which forms the basis of Persian prosody), neither the odes of Hafiz nor the verses of new poets, whether lyrical or socialistic, could be fully appreciated or taught by someone who had no grounding in the Arabic script. It was not until the era of glasnost' in the late 1980s that this small item of dirty linen was publicly aired by Tajik critics.

The most dangerous challenge to Tajik literature and culture came, however, from the fraternal Russian presence itself. Stalin had imposed the yoke, but even Khrushchev exhorted all to grin and bear it: "The sooner everyone learns Russian, the sooner we'll build socialism." Accordingly, the business of government and industry was carried on increasingy in Russian, the upwardly mobile younger generations went to Russian rather than Tajik schools, and the intelligentsia read Tolstoy or Solzhenitsyn in preference to Sa'di or Bedil. Tajik literature began to take on the aspect of an approved folkloric relic, like one of those Central Asian folk orchestras modeled on the balalaika band. At a Writers Union meeting in Moscow in 1988, Chingiz Aitmatov, the world-famous Kyrgyz writer, and Muhammadjon Shukurov, a leading Tajik scholar (son of the ill-fated Sadri Ziya), declared the national languages of Central Asia to be in danger of extinction and called for a campaign of conservation and revitalization.

The response to this, and to the sudden opportunities for genuine criticism of the system permitted by Gorbachev's glasnost', was an enthusiastic, grassroots language movement which in 1989 forced through the lethargic Soviet of Deputies a language-status law, the first in the Central Asian republics. This declared Tajik Persian to be the state language and promulgated measures to increase its use in public life; among these was an undertaking to revert to the use of the Perso-Arabic alphabet at some future date. (The Latin alphabet, now viewed by pan-Iranists as part of the pan-Turkic plot to absorb the Tajiks, was not considered.) A flood of independent newspapers and magazines, some already printing articles, poems, and teach-yourself columns in Arabic script, carried the public into an unexpected, and largely unwished-for, independence in 1991. Scholars, journalists, and poet-politicians (notably Loyiq Sherali, Bozor Sobir, and Gulrukhsoor) disowned the fabrications of Soviet literature and vowed to draft a new Tajik identity as full members of the Persian-speaking world. Renewed contact with Iran and with the Iranian diaspora in North America, and the importation of books of classical and modern Persian literature, gave promise of a literary renaissance.

Came the civil war of 1992 and polarization between the neocommunists, who have regained power, and the Islamists, who continue an implacable opposition from across the Afghan border, with the pan-Iranists uncomfortably in between. With political and economic life in a downward spiral, language policy has taken a back seat. "Persian" has been dropped from the new constitution, and "Tajik" has resumed its place as the national language, still in Cyrillic (though orthographically reformed); in practice, Russian prevails again, despite the out-migration of tens of thousands of Russian and other European ex-Soviet citizens. The independent press has been closed down, and paper is in short supply. Yet Tajik literature, oddly enough, is far from dead. Poetry is increasingly published in Perso-Arabic script; the tenor of cultural debate has become less truculent and irredentist than during the 1988–92 redrafting of Tajik language and history, with more moderate voices seeking an accommodation between the polarities. The leitmotiv remains the continuing quest for a true Tajik identity.

The prescribed themes of communism no longer provide an automatic framework for literature, but the Islamic revolutionary alternatives offered by Iran are hardly more attractive. The Tajiks are not Shi'is, though their history too—and daily life in Dushanbe—has its share of martyrs; today's citizens want a future of their own, without having to toe the line of either of their Big Brothers. Writers, while still exercising political self-censorship, need no longer submit to collective self-criticism before they publish. Prose fiction may now thumb its nose at the sacred cows of the establishment, as, for example, Urun Kühzd's "Mother" subverts the idealistic, Stakhnovite views of selfless socialist labor, rural modernization, and women's liberation. It may (as in the stories by Sattor Tursun and Bahmanyor) explore the realms of the spiritual and the supernatural, which were automatically excluded from Soviet discourse as remnants of religion.

Poetry is a different matter. As the senior partner, more overtly humiliatated in service to an impersonal propaganda machine (cf. Gulrukhsoor's "Epitaph"), it must more consciously reinvent itself. In his essay, Askar Hakim contemplates the responsibilities and the craft of a new breed, the independent Tajik poet. This individual may never be as famous as Rudaki, but he is determined at least to be his own master.
Three Tajik Poets

BOZOR SOBIR

Letters

I opened your letters
And I gave them up to the air,
That they might become spring clouds,
That letters of memories
Might weep over the hills,
That they might weep springs and rivers.
That the letters might weep over us.

Last night I told a story
Of you to the wild wind.
In memory of you I recited from memory
A verse to the streams,
That the water might bear it away
And tell it to the rivers,
That the wind might bear it away
And sing it to the plains.

Last night under the rain
I walked road by road in my thoughts.
Your tresses strand by strand,
In my thoughts I walked, braiding strands.
The kisses that had not been planted on your lips
— Along, all along the road,
Along the edge, the edge of the stream —
I walked, planting them in the ground.
So that, ever following in my footsteps
— Along, all along the road,
On the edge, the edge of the stream —
Kisses might grow like daisies,
Kisses might grow like wild mint.

Last night it rained and rained.
The water was too much for the river to hold.
Last night my loneliness
Was too much for me alone to hold . . .

Last night the April rain
Washed the footprints from the ground.

The wound in my heart grew worse,
Because it washed away the imprint of your foot.
Last night I wandered the streets in vain,
Like a hunter who has lost the trail I searched . . .

Last night the world was all water,
The sky was refreshed,
The ground was refreshed.
But I, with your name on my lips,
All alone like the parched land
I burned up under the rain.

Translated by Judith M. Wilks

GULRUKHSOR

Epitaph for One Assassinated

You
They killed with treachery and bullets.
Me
They killed with long humiliation.
You
They buried in a public ceremony.
Me
They buried in the anger of the public.

Translated by John R. Perry

Bozor Sobir (b. 1938) completed his studies in philosophy at the National University of Tajikistan in 1962 and has worked on the magazines Mømøf va Madaniyat (Education and Culture) and Sadoyi Shang (Voice of the East). During the Soviet period his verse was widely translated into Western languages and even published in Iran. With the advent of glasnost' he became actively involved in the political and cultural movements for the re-persianization of Tajik and for an independent national identity. With four major collections of verse published in the last decade, he is perhaps the most popular poet in Tajikistan and the best known to the outside world.

Gulrukhsor Safiyeva (b. 1947), usually known simply as Gulrukhsor, joined the party at the age of twenty-one, graduated from Tajikistan State University, and has worked as a journalist. In 1973 she published her first collection of verse, Father's House. Several others followed, with poems on conventional patriotic topics, the family, and nature, plus a children's play, Cave of the Finn. She was awarded the All-Union Komsomol Prize in 1978. With perestroika she emerged as an outspoken Tajik nationalist and pan-Iranist. She heads the International Cultural Foundation of Tajikistan.
Frostbliighted Spring

Fire frozen in the veins of light,
Fibres frozen in the curtainweave,
Windowpanes frozen beneath dust,
Minds frozen inside slogans
— O God,
When will spring be here?

The harbinger of the cold killed the orchard,
The rising of the cold killed a world,
The blind regiment of the cold
Killed clear-eyed justice
— O God,
When will spring be here?

The breath of passion has expired,
The bird of inspiration died still caged,
The wind laughs at the death of the bud,
The cry for help died in the rescuer’s prudence
— O God,
When will spring be here?

The earth is bare and the road slick,
The old man lost and the infant crying,
The sapling in the orchard of fruitful fall
Is the bier of the assassination victim
— O God,
When will spring be here?

When will the angel in a white robe
Attend the banquet of the desperate?
When will the hot blood of hope
Course through the dry channels of the arteries?
— O God,
When will spring be here?

In my head there is a parasol of snow and rain,
In my body a wounded soul is weeping,
The days of my life
Are cloistered nights,
The spring of my life
Is ever winter
— O God,
When will spring be here?

Uprooted lies the book of fate,
Unplanned the ways and means,
Life clutches at the skirts of destiny,
A nation clutches at the skirts of God
— O God,
When will spring be here?

Translated by John R. Perry

GULNAZAR

A Letter

Whatever I see —
like waves on the water’s surface,
leaves no trace on my mind.
Are you me or am I you,
that you never leave my mind for a moment?

I pick words from the eagle’s footprints,
I take my paper from the mountain snow,
my heart is the abode of caring and hope,
I tame the wandering breeze.

So that you hear my voice for a moment,
I borrow the melody of the streams.
Although the lover’s tears are a tempest,
I will send you a drizzle.

In Badakhshan,¹
where rubies are rare,
I will seek out many rubies for you,
so that you know how resolute a heart is
in sincere fidelity toward you.

My heart’s condition resembles
a waterless desert beside a river.
One day the desert will be in bloom,
but my life will pass away like a mirage.

I compose a letter to you
in which my words are my country.
Images of plains and mountains and rivers
are my heart’s gift and solace.

I don’t know where your home is,
I don’t know where you might find a homeland.
Are you me or am I you,
that all my letters are addressed to myself?

Translated by Sunil Sharma

If I See a Barbed Tongue

If I see a barbed tongue even for a moment,
and see fluent words choppy,
and see a weak person in the clutches of weakness,
my heart burns for Rudaki,²
it burns for life today.

When I see a fellow countryman willful and self-serving,
who thinks he is the genius of the age
without knowing a line of Ḥāfiz and Khayyām,³
my heart burns for Rudaki,
it burns for life today.
When I see a show-off satisfied again, having acquired a new sensation for himself; if buying every new book is fashionable, my heart burns for Rudaki, it burns for life today.

When I know there is no scent of the Muliyân stream for me, there are thousands of Rustams but no epic for me, there is dust, but no caravan for me, my heart burns for Rudaki, it burns for life today.

When I see Bu Ali Sinâ wandering aimlessly among various destitute nations, but without access to my people, my heart burns for Rudaki, it burns for life today.

When I know that the six modes are out of tune today, when I see the mirror serving the blind, and our mind’s tablet is a gravestone, my heart burns for Rudaki, it burns for life today.

Translated by Sunil Sharma

The Lover’s Advice

“My kisses, like the spring rain, fall warm upon your head and hand and face . . .”

— Kamol Nasrulloh

If you have given your heart to me, If you have stood firm in the path of love, If in remembering me you cannot sleep at night for one moment, If you find no chance of happiness for one moment, If your heart is aching, If the world seems colorless to you, If you burn like the thirsty earth, If you cannot find one spring in all the land of Tajikistan, Take to heart this lover’s advice: — My love! Leave behind your umbrella, So that I may pour my countless kisses Upon your head and face like the spring rain!

Translated by Judith M. Wilks

GULNAZR KELDI (b. 1945)—formerly Keldiyev, generally known simply as Gulnazar—graduated from Tajikistan State University in 1966, worked as a journalist, and served as poetry editor for the magazine Sadoyi Sharq (Voice of the East). At least six collections of his own verse have been published, as well as stories and criticism. He is a winner of the Lenin Komsomol Prize (1985) and has been widely translated in the former Soviet Union. Since 1991 he has been the editor of Adabyot va San’at (Literature and Art), Tajikistan’s leading cultural weekly.
The River Was Once a Drop of Water: Tajik Poetry in the Past Six Years

By ASKAR HAKIM  Being a social poet means not merely writing poetry about social subjects, but writing poetry of society. For a long time, the only thing mentioned in poetry was social topics, which had no poetic quality, or even a poet of their own. The poet must grasp "poetry of society" personally, for in it his spirit billows, his personality is reflected, his pain cries out. If so, his poems cannot be confused with those of other poets; indeed, poems which are only about society, and are not stamped with the image of the poet's personality, are not by poets. Poetry must speak of the pain of its creator, and in his style alone. Poetry is an unrepeatable style. If a poet writes about his sorrows and joys, he must rely on his own joys and sorrows, and if he writes about someone else's, he must feel no distance between that person and himself, and not even realize that there is any difference between that person and himself. Likewise with time, because time is in him and he is in time.

In poetry, the joys and sorrows of time have no effect separate from the poet. We recognize the joys and sorrows of the poet as the joys and sorrows of the world, because we look to the poet in order to comprehend time by the state of his heart, not to a journalist or historian to be satisfied with just the news of the day. We open the ears of our heart, waiting to hear the voice of the heart. The voice of the heart that we have been hearing in these past three or four years is full of pain: "Not one bird of good omen is left in this nest. / No fortunate child is left upon this threshold. / All have left for the fields of their dear ones at Raft. / In the vale of paradise none but the watchman is left." Thus Mu'min Qano'at writes, referring to the tragedies that have dovetailed the Vakhsh region.

We now see the poet's view, albeit one poet's view in one period, of all kinds of people and various historical events. For us, in both of these states, the degree of the poet's sincerity and originality is important: he must speak of good and bad fortune with such joy and sorrow as to make the reader feel empathy with him. If his words are effective, he is right. Loyiq says, "O heart, my wretched heart, / My grieving and sorrowful heart, / My grief for this fragmented country / Will tear you to a hundred pieces," leaving his effect on the heart, the effect of pain and tragedy.

At the same time, poetry is not about the criticism, from the twofold point of view of the poet, of one topic, one person, or one historical event, because it cannot be disputed that the poet's point of view of life, historical events, and people might change for various reasons with the passage of time. Before perestroika, the eulogy of the age and its progressive powers formed a large part of our poetry, which did not have any poetic feeling as its basis; after perestroika, much poetry was written that was replete with denigration of the past and praise of perestroika, but it too was not rooted in our hearts.

Understanding the nature of the times is not an easy task. For this reason, it is not difficult to find fault with poets who praised perestroika from the first; however, at that time it was not easy either, because they did not have poetic talent, nor had they understood the poetry of society. Praise and vilification are but shouting slogans, not writing poetry. Some poets did grasp the character of those who took up perestroika with enthusiasm, making no distinction between right and wrong. For example, Qutbi Kirod wrote with painful allusions: "Perish this perestroika! / It has glossed over errors, / Toppled the respectable, / And crowned the accused."

The period of perestroika and independence in Tajikistan led into the tragedy of civil war. Tajik history was never so violent nor its pages so bloody. Now we are faced with writing elegies for bleeding hearts, although poems are already being written about the tragedy of the people, the ruin of the country, broken bridges and broken hearts, that have a place in the record of contemporary poetry. Bozor Sobir effectively describes the tragedy of Vakhsh and Külub with broken images of destroyed bridges.

Warm blood shed through love of blood relations,
Bridges of kinship broken
In the waters of orphans' eyes.
My Külub has heedlessly gone its way —
Gone, perhaps, until the day of Resurrection.
No bridge is left but that across the chasm of Hell,'
Alas, alas!

Askar Hakim (formerly Hakimov) was born in 1946 near Leninabad (now Khojand). After graduating from Tajikistan State University, he served as director of children's and youth broadcasting for Tajik Radio and Television. In 1974 he defended a doctoral dissertation on poetic innovation in Soviet multinational literature at Moscow University and became editor of the magazine Sadovy Sharq (Voice of the East). A prolific critic and poet, he has held a number of literary-administrative appointments; he was editor of the official literary weekly Adabiyot va San'at until 1991, when he was elected president of the Tajik Writers Union—the first to hold this office in independent Tajikistan.
Bridges breaking in the eyes of orphans are an image that has a wide range of meaning. In order to describe a bloody tragedy effectively, poets have modified the symbols, metaphors, and images that until today had fixed traditional meanings in our poetry. For example, if verdure is a symbol of life, growth, affection for the beloved, et cetera, A. Murodi, in his poem “Drunk on Blood,” likens it to being intoxicated. Thus, it would mean that if grass, which is the symbol of life and love, has taken to being drunk on blood—which is completely contrary to its nature—then something terrible indeed must have happened. The basic elements of life have lost their own validity and are completely in opposition to their nature, which is itself a tragedy: “In the weeping rain-filled air, / The blades of grass, like inebriated killers, / Dance drunkenly. / The grass this year is drunk on blood.”

Some poems that have been written about the frightful days of massacres have effective and laden images, as in this poem by Kamol Nasrulloh: “This year will never end, / This year is a scorpion, nurturing / Other scorpions in its belly.” Others work on the heart with feelings of intense pain, piling anxieties, sorrows, and privations one on top of the other.

Poets produce various effects from the time of tragedy: if one person writes with pain and blediction, another does so with anger and blame, and each has its value in its own place. For example, Siyovush writes, distraught:

O people! A beggarly people with kingly arrogance,
O pauper kings,
A people of unlawful loves,
And lovers of lawlessness.
O people who have only known themselves
As the servants of concupiscence,
Other than shamelessness in your godlessness,
How else can it be with you?!

Although the poet says, “How else can it be with you?!” his pain testifies that the meaning of the poem appears to be “How else can it be to you,” doubling the effect of his sorrow.

As for Gulnazar, he looks at a world of hope in the darkness of night with the eyes of dawn and calls people toward familiarity and light with his own summons to prayer: “O sun—whitebearded muezzin, / From the minarets of the Pamir Mountains / Call out the azon1 of light, / So we can lift our heads with bright hearts, / To hear the sermon of fidelity and friendship.” In the metaphor “O sun—whitebearded muezzin” there is a sky of hope for the light of the morrow.

The voice of hope of happy days, that must come after long black nights and winters of frozen hopes, is also heard in a series of poems by Gulrukhsor, but this hope has gone astray. Thus her mention of this voice of hope is also painful, which is appropriate.

In my head there is a parasol of snow and rain,
In my body a wounded soul is weeping.
The days of my life
Are cloistered nights,
The spring of my life
Is ever winter
— O God,
When will spring be here?

In the poems “Light in the Grave” and “The Extinguished Lamp” by Rahmat Naziri the conflict between darkness and light is depicted with novel words: if the bones of those who were deceived into sacrificing themselves for freedom shed light even in the grave, then “Your bones light up the grave / By remembering the extinguished lamp of freedom.”

The poet, however, is less optimistic that the darkness will soon turn to light. On the one hand, his eyes do not grow accustomed to the darkness; on the other, the night does not grow lighter.

In the ups and downs of today’s life, the history of the people has a clear role in society and people’s intellectual life. Especially since cracks have appeared in the stone walls separating peoples who share a history and culture, the question of the role of history in our times takes on greater importance. As a result of this, educated and cultured people are penetrating corners of their history not yet explored and discovering values which until now they have never mentioned, or at best in whispers. This question is investigated in various disciplines such as science, cultural history, literature, theology, and language. Poets who take a new look at the intellectual values of our people’s history are bringing their poetry closer to the domain of a unified Persian poetry, because they drink from the one and original fountainhead which serves their colinguals. We see this quest for the fountainhead especially in the creative efforts of Mu’min Qanoat, Loyiq, Qutbi Kirom, Bozor Sobir, Gulnazir, Rahmat Naziri, and Doro Najot, and in the younger generation in Farzona and Siyovush, who link their poetic mission to the authenticity of Persian poetry. Farzona’s ideas in this regard are delicate, daring, and ornately innovative. Intellectual values, which in the course of history are the real guides of the people, protect it from going astray. She alludes to this in a poem: “A people fallen in the blind path of night, / The wayfarer unfamiliar with the path will not reach the truth.”

Intellectual values are essentially universal because their essence is from goodness, justice, rectitude, friendship, and humaneness. Because of this, in our intellectual life too, pre-Islamic values, which lie chiefly in the eternal forms of light, sun, seed, and earth, have now become the object of poetic consideration. This tendency can be seen much more in the poems of Gulnazar, Farzona, Siyovush, and Ziyo Abdullo. Pre-Islamic values not only are
combined in the subject and content of the poems of these poets, but they are also present in the forms of their works, or the poets themselves insist that we pay attention to them. For example, Gulnazar publishes poems under the name of Khusravoni that diverge from the rhyme and meter of today's traditional poetry.

The attempt to convey the poem to its "origins"—i.e., to be original in poetry, to use emotionally moving meanings, arresting images, and profound, thought-provoking wisdom—sometimes moves poets to write verse without traditional rhyme and meter, and sometimes restrains them so that they again turn to the forms of the conventional gasida, ghazal, rubai, and dubayi. Some poets tread both these paths at the same time to take the poetry back to its origins.

In two cases, Tajik poetry is drawing closer to the single cultural domain in which the Persian poets of Iran and Afghanistan write. Basically, new poetry without traditional rhymes and meters established itself in the sixties and seventies, but poets engaged in this task in the nineties are raising it to a higher rung of imagery and creativity. Among our poets, Loyiq, Bozor, and Gulrukhsoor are dabbling in this kind of poetry, but Gulnazar, Farzona, Kamol Nasrullo, and Siyovush show greater dedication to it. Alimuhhammad Murodi writes miniatuuristic poems, in meter and without rhyme, that are outside the traditional genres. We mentioned a new meaning, a special point of view, a fresh style, which we see in one of Gulnazar's poems that has been cited above: "O sun—whitebearded muezzin, / From the minarets of the Pamir Mountains / Call out the azon / of light, / So we can lift our heads with bright hearts, / To hear the sermon of fidelity and friendship." The poet discovers new meanings in the sun, which in our poetry is a symbol of warmth, love, fortune, happiness, and light, but in this poem it is to be read as fidelity and friendship. He compares the sun to a white-bearded muezzin from which too he extracts new meanings: he sees him as delivering the summons to light and reading a sermon of fidelity and friendship, which is a particular viewpoint. The sun as muezzin, the mountains as minarets, the call to communal prayer as the invitation to light and friendship—these images announce a new style. Although this poem differs completely from traditional poetry, it accords with traditional prosody and is not completely unmetrical.

The chief characteristic of the so-called "white poetry" is new content, viewpoint, and diction. For example, in this line by Gulrukhsoor her poetic life is charmingly depicted as a Tajik woman: "I wash a black pot, and write white poetry." The image of the black pot is full of meaning, and everyone can appreciate it by way of intuition and personal experience. In "white poetry" it is important to depict...
iliar social and spiritual factors. If this contemplation is poetical and deeply personal, the poem will not be an imitation.

To continue to write traditional poetry (especially the qasida, the mukhammas,4 the ghazal, the rubai, and the dubayti), in my personal view, is very difficult, because usually the force of tradition overcomes the strength of originality and overpowers the poet. Probably the poet writes his poems without any difficulties, but does not realize that the force of tradition has derailed him unawares. Therefore, our poets do not succeed at most traditional forms. In these poems, original and poetic lines are occasionally encountered, but for the most part they are repetitious, jingly, derivative, and unattractive. In spite of the poet’s derailment, this does not mean that we should not give the traditional forms the chance to live, be rejuvenated, and change. If the poet does not master the form, this is the shortcoming of the poet, not the fault of the form; and if, for example, in a hundred years an outstanding ghazal is produced, this is proof that the ghazal is still alive and waiting for its poet.

In the last decades of the twentieth century, Tajik poets such as Mu’min Qanoat, Loyiq, Gulnazar, Haqnazar Ghyoyib, Nizom Qosim, U. Rajab, Salimsho Halimsho, J. Karimzoda, Ashur Safar, N. Niyoz, S. Ma’mur, M. Ghyoyib, H. Shanbezoda, and Noriniso have paid comparatively more attention to the traditional forms mentioned. Although some of these poets manage to write new traditional poetry—e.g., complete ghazals—others have a novel hemistich or line in one ghazal, which is an achievement; but in most of this poetry, poets do not reach such proficiency. However, I believe that, of these traditional forms, the ghazal is particularly suited to the demands of our times, since its lines are independent in subject matter. For in a single, quite short poem, various subjects are taken up wholesale and expressed in a single wave of impressions, and can respond to an individual’s various spiritual and intellectual demands. Perhaps the reason why Western poets have turned to this form is that in one ghazal, whose lines are independent with respect to content, the poet can treat of love, gnosticism, society, philosophy—in short, any subject he desires. This form is very appropriate and concise for treating various topics in one poem.

For the poet, writing in rhyme and meter should be as routine as walking is for any healthy human being; there is no skill in that. Poetry’s place is on a much higher rung than mere rhyme and meter. But it is regrettable that our poets trip over this very lowest rung, not only the young ones, but even the masters. In the works of most of our contemporary poets, only a dozen of the many possible meters are used. The lyric poet, especially one who writes of various psychic situations, ought to be familiar with and employ several meters, so that his poems are not monotonous and tedious from the point of view of rhythm and harmony.

The Persian poet has to have assimilated the traditional meters. This, one might think, is beyond dispute, yet in recent times one hears that in an age of freedom, when literary molds are being broken and poets are writing prose poetry and verse without meter and rhyme, it is not necessary to acquire these two skills, especially since even medieval scholars such as Shams-i Râzi recognized poetry without rhyme and meter. Yes, they knew of poetry without rhyme and meter, but they never recognized anyone as a poet who did not use rhyme and meter.

Today, poets who write free verse have progressed past merely increasing or decreasing melodic components by varying the caesura; they have shortened or lengthened the lines, allowing themselves more freedom, so that in the end the rhythm in a particular poem assumes a form inseparable from that poem. Well-known Persian poets (of Iran) such as Nima Yushij and Ahmad Shamlu, who are skilled in writing free verse and prose poetry, have established a new poetry not by discarding traditional rhymes and meters they did not know, but through having assimilated and then gone beyond these to attain lyric originality. This should be a lesson for Tajik poets as well.

Dushanbe, Tajikistan

Translated from the Tajik
By Sunil Sharma & John R. Perry

1 Tajik siror: the bridge “finer than a hair and sharper than a sword” over which all must pass to the hereafter. The righteous will cross safely, the wicked will tumble into the infernal fires. A Muslim folk belief, from a Zoroastrian source (the bridge of chin- vat).
2 The call to public prayer.
3 The qasida is a long poem in monorhyme; the ghazal a shorter, lyrical form in monorhyme; the rubai an epigrammatic four-line piece rhyming a a b a; the dubayti is similar to the rubai, but in a different meter.
4 A strophic poem with five-line stanzas.
Destiny

By SATTOR TURNSUN

When autumn was coming to a close,
When the trees were dropping their last leaves —
moist, yellow ones — to the ground,
When the empty plain and the silent gardens
were filling with crows, at just that time . . .
He heard the breath of death.
This cool breath rose from his pillow.
No, one day, one day everything dies. One
should not fear mortality. Because no one lives for-
ever. But the motionless sick man lying stretched
out on the bed waited . . .
This is rotten,
This is painful torment!
And the old man was now gripped by pain. He
was nearly unconscious, sometimes he was almost
drowning in the darkness of another world, some-
times . . .
Like a woodchip spinning in a whirlpool,
He came out of it as though with a rough jolt.
The other world was wondrous and at the same
time full of torment. In order not to fall back into its
darkness, the old man sought help from his eyes
alone. Hence his wide-eyed stare . . .
Like the stare of a man thirsting for water . . .
Remained fixed on the crooked lamp.
He was afraid that if he should close his eyes, he
would immediately tumble into the abyss of that
unfamiliar world.

At a distance from him, his son and daughter had
gone to sleep. They had sat for many long nights at
the old man’s bedside. They were worn out, ex-
hausted . . .
Although his eyelids had grown very heavy, he
summoned all his strength and did not lift his eyes
from the lamp.
He would not give his body up to death . . .
People dressed in mourning clothes, staffs in
hand, are looking into the mouth of the grave. Then
they turn and fix their eyes on the old man. And
they quickly disappear. In their place only their eyes
remain. Many eyes . . . Like ants and locusts they
crawl from the windows toward the old man, they
rub against his forehead; his body suddenly be-
comes cold . . .
Startled, the old man opened his eyes. He
touched his neck with his hand and pressed his
carotid artery with the tip of his index finger, which
trembled violently. And the thought occurred to
him that any moment now his thin neck would be
separated from his shoulder. So Azrael, the Angel of
Death, is here . . .
The old man was in the grip of such thoughts
when the light of the lamp slipped from his gaze, as
if it had never existed.

. . . And he saw a vast, parched, flat plain. He
was asking for water. Working under the scorching
sun, he wanted to eat the feeble plants in order to
draw a little sustenance from the water of their bod-
ies, however little there was of it . . . The old man is
plowing. But from the intensity of the thirst his
throat is so dry that he faints, he can no longer hold
on to the handles of the plow. The oxen too are so
thirsty that they haven’t the strength to move; they
lower their lips to the earth and smell its moistness,
as though trying to relieve their thirst. He can stand
it no longer, involuntarily he lets go the handles of
the plow and
In the middle of the plain . . .
He falls upon the plow.
And the plain burns him and turns him to
ashes . . .
. . . The light of the lamp brought the old man
out of unconsciousness, away from the chasm of
that strange and unfamiliar world.
“I died of thirst several times in that plain. It
seems the Dear Lord has not forgotten.”
And again he lost consciousness.
. . . Mother is sitting in a corner of the bare hut,
on her knees is a length of white cloth, Needle and
thread in hand, she is humming softly. And that
mournful song now spreads throughout the space of
the house until it reaches the old man’s ear. A song
that in his childhood days his mother had sung just
for him . . . The old man weeps, his sore heart
aches, with the palm of his hand he wipes away his
streaming tears. As for the mother . . .
Her song finds its way to the very core of her
son’s heart. And all the sick man’s pain weeps to-
gether with the song . . .
He is drowned in tears.
Now Mother goes to the doorway.

SATTOR TURNSUN (formerly Tursunov), born on a collective farm
in the Surkhondaryo district of Uzbekistan in 1946, studied Ara-
bic at Tajikistan State University and began writing as a student.
His oeuvre includes a variety of prose fiction on rural and social
themes, some set during World War II, and has been widely
translated for distribution in the Soviet Union and abroad. His
popular novella Rustam’s Bow (1976, 1982) has also appeared in
Russian and in Uzbek. He himself has translated works by Arab
and Turkish writers into Tajik. He was awarded Tajikistan’s
Lenin Komsomol Prize in 1985.
And all at once all the pain and torment that fill
the old man’s broken heart go out through the door
with that mournful song.
... The crooked lamp once again burns brightly.
“My mother has come from the other world to
weep at the death of her child. Perhaps the Merciful
God gave her permission...."
And the old man’s feet go cold.
His feet ached.
He wanted to pull up another quilt. But his heavy
eyelids had once again closed.
— The sound of a hammer striking on stone
reaches the old man’s ear. Now the stone is
smashed to bits, and they are pouring gravel onto
his bed. It hits him on the head in several places,
and blood oozes out onto his face and pillow. His
four or five remaining teeth are broken...
They fall out of his mouth.
They fall upon his sunken chest.
... The old man opened his eyes. His eyes...
Jumped out of their sockets
In horror!
“I meant to place a marble stone on my mother’s
grave. But years passed and poverty made it impos-
sible. Or perhaps I was unkind... Lord, o Lord,
forgive my sin! After all, you are the Merciful One!”
He said this and once again fell into the chasm of
darkness.
... From up above him, thousands of stalks of
wheat are being poured upon his head.
Sometimes in sheaves... They are pouring down and burying him.
Their sharp tips scratch his body, They enter his mouth, his throat...
Finally they enter his rib cage from inside, like
countless red-hot needles...
They riddle his lungs, and finally from all direc-
tions they pierce his heart.
... The old man opened his eyes, which were
now completely dim, and were dying yet again.

“Qironbek drove the oxen with me one spring. I
promised him two bags of wheat, and in the autumn
... I didn’t give it to him. Now all the wheat is
killing me.”
The old man exerted himself, he tried to produce
a sound in order to wake his daughter and son, to
tell them that — before his death, if they could, or
at least after he was buried — they should give
Qironbek two bags of wheat.
But the sound could not come out of his throat; instead it spread throughout the old man’s body like
molten lead.
He stuck out his black tongue and put his fingers
in his mouth,
so that he could pull his voice out of his throat.
But his jaw was stuck tight and clamped his fin-
gers like a vise.
His eyelids, like the lid of a chest... seemed to
be creaking shut!
The window opens. And in the space around the
old man the white cloth appears and flutters up; it
waves and twists — finally there is no white cloth.
The house is lit up by its rays, as by the light of the
sun. Then the cloth floats down on top of the man.
First it wraps up his feet, then his hands, his shoul-
ders... wraps them tightly! But this does not seem
to bother him.
Then the cloth reaches his head and gently ca-
resses the old man’s skull.
It takes possession of every sinew and gently cov-
ers them all. And finally, the cloth winds around his
neck, gradually getting tighter...
Like a fresh wind that gently rustles the leaves of
the trees together, all around spreads a low noise,
pleasant but at the same time mysterious, and the
white cloth wraps around and around the old man’s
neck...

Translated by Judith M. Wilks
Mother

By ÚRUN KÜHZOD

Every morning she and the radio awoke before everyone else in the house, and every evening she and the radio went to sleep after everyone else.

And so today she got up before everyone else. She awoke wearing the same smock she had worn to bed, she got up from her sleeping mat, and she put on her clothes without shuffling her feet, so as not to disturb her sleeping children. All of them — five boys and girls from five to sixteen years old and their mother — slept on the carpet in one room. Their sleeping mats were arranged from one end of the room to the other, and the place near the door was Father's. She drew up the quilt of her youngest son, which had slipped off, placed it over him properly, and left the room, likewise without shuffling her feet. As she passed through the door she turned on the little radio that hung from a nail on the wall. From that moment, from six in the morning until nightfall, the radio played constantly, and for the same length of time Mother was constantly busy. One could know in advance what task she would be busy with at what time by what was on the radio.

In the courtyard she washed her hands and face with cold water and mused, “The days have grown shorter.” And she picked up a bucket and went toward the animal pens. Into the stable she threw a handful of straw, and kneeling down, she began milking the cow. The cow gave half a bucket of milk. She brought the milk and put it in the house, picked up two other buckets, and went to the stream to get water. There wasn't much water in the stream: nearby they were building a canal, and the stream water was drying up. The village had no other place to get water. So until spring, when the gardens and fields would need water, people would get by on well water. A diesel pump would draw water from the river, and every drop of it would be precious to the people. There would be fights among the men for a bucket of water. Bucket battles. Worry filled her heart at the memory of the years they had endured, searching for water and ob-

taining water, and also worry about the days not far in the future. Worry about the trouble and danger of wondering whether or not the water would arrive.

She filled each of the buckets in turn, breaking the surface scum and dipping them to half-fill them. Then she picked up the “fresh water,” and by the time she got it to the house both sides of her skirt were wet from the sloshing. She tied up the skirts of her garment at her waist and she opened the door of the stove and emptied out the ashes. She broke the fresh branches and bent them and threw them in. Under them she put several dried pieces of kindling and lit it. The dry kindling immediately caught fire, and the moist twigs began to smoke. The smoke blew in her face and burned her eyes. Tears appeared on the tips of her eyelashes like a string of pearls. This was all she had of feminine ornamentation!

She closed the stove door. She woke up the children so they wouldn’t be late for school. The flames flickered, the chimney puffed out smoke, and she put two cow chips over the fire so it would burn more slowly, so its heat would last longer. She put the teakettle full of water and the pail of milk on the stove. The children reluctantly rubbed their eyes and got up from their sleeping mats. In the courtyard they washed their hands and faces like kittens in the water from the ewer, then they came and sat on the floor around the tablecloth to eat breakfast.

A concert was playing on the radio.

“Eat quickly now,” she said as she put the bowls of milk on the tablecloth. “It’s time for school.”

The children moved drowsily, and she was annoyed at their sluggishness. She broke bread into pieces and tossed the little bits of bread crusts into the bowls from where she sat.

“Eat and get to school,” she told them, and from the passageway she took the broom and went out. Then she swept the courtyard. It was in bad shape. The walls had cracks in them, the entrance gate was nearly broken, the mortar was chipping. On one side was the pile of rubbish and dung, on the other side was the place where they kept the goats and the sheep, surrounded by a brushwood fence. And over there was the pile of cotton stalks — the basic and ever-present fuel of the village — and over there on the roof of the animal pens was a pile of grass . . .

This not very attractive scene after a thorough sweeping acquired a sort of freshness, as though a certain beauty had been added to its surroundings. While she was sweeping outside the gate, the children filed out, their schoolbags in their hands and

ÚRUN KÜHZOD (pseudonym of Úrunboy Jumayer) was born into a farming family in the Panjakent district, northwest of Dushanbe, in 1937. His first stories and essays were published in the early 1960s and were widely translated into Russian and other languages of the former USSR and Eastern Europe. In 1985 he published his first novel, Ham Küh Baland, Ham Shahri Azim (Both a High Mountain and a Great City), about the new Tajik intelligentsia.
on their backs, and went off in the direction of the school. This was a cooperative school for three villages and it was far away from all the villages, of course. And she worried about the travel distance, although she couldn’t bring it any closer.

She finished the sweeping. She straightened up, broom in hand. She tossed back her thin strands of hair.

“Mother, your tea has boiled and it’s steaming,” said her husband, and he leaned his damp pitchfork against the cracked wall so that it wouldn’t fall.

She steeped the tea and set up the breakfast tablecloth for her husband. With him she dunked some bread into the tea and ate it.

“I’m off to work at the kolkhoz.” Her husband said “amen” to conclude the breakfast and got up from his place. He tied up his clothes at his waist and went off to the fields.

Mother went into the bedroom. Her littlest daughter was sleeping sweetly. She couldn’t bear to wake her. She picked up the other four sleeping mats. She shook out the quilts and blankets and arranged them on the shelf. The radio was announcing the latest news. It was time to let out the animals and take them out to pasture. She let out two goats, two ewes, one lamb, and the cow and drove them in front of her. In the days of her youth the village had a goatherd, a shepherd, and a cowherd. They would not take the smaller animals and the cow to the same place to pasture. Each type of animal had its own pasture and its own herder.

The world had an order to it. Now there were few animals left, and no herders. They take the cows and sheep to pasture in one place. They take turns going — one family one day, another family another day . . . Even if one had no animals, he still went. For this same reason there was no fat in the sheep’s tails, no meat on the goats’ bodies, and no milk in the cows’ udders. All of them had become unprofitable. There is no blessing in a chore done out of obligation and by force. It is as though the people in this place don’t live here, they’re just here temporarily. Next week, Tuesday is our turn to go to the pasture. If it were on Sunday, the children would take the animals. Because she constantly had to take the animals to pasture, the house was in such a bad state that it looked as though no one had touched it for a month. Life was not worth living with not one moment of rest.

Upon returning, she hadn’t even reached the door when she heard the sound of crying. She hastened her steps. Her little son was sitting bare-legged on the ground in the courtyard crying, wiping his eyes with the backs of both his hands.

“Mommy’s little darling, what happened to you? Oh, my sweetheart, why are you crying?” And she picked up the little boy in her arms, dirty fists and all.

“I wet my bed,” said her son tearfully.

“That’s all right. That’s no reason to cry! Your mommy would die for you, don’t cry. That’s all right.”

The little boy calmed down in his mother’s warm embrace. Mother brought him into the house, changed his clothes, sat him in front of the stove, and wiped away his tears with the palm of her hand:

“Now I’ll get you some milk.”

Mother and son crumbled bread into a bowl of milk and ate. Then she took the quilt outside, poured water over the spot that the little boy had wet, and hung it on the line. She gathered up the unwashed clothes in the courtyard. There was a heap of them. She fetched water in three trips with two buckets. She brought the water, poured it into a wash tub, and went again and fetched more water. She broke some firewood, lit it, and put on the water to heat it up. She threw about half the pile of laundry into the basin, wet it, and rubbed soap powder over it. The radio on the porch played non-stop. Now someone in a loud, not very pleasant voice was finding fault with village life. “The standard of living in the villages is very much behind the requirements of today,” he was saying. “The people are very neglectful of modern conveniences. The homes are very dark. The furnishings in the homes are thrown about in a very haphazard way. The low standard of living in the villages becomes very obvious in their care of the children. They can’t even be bothered to buy tables and chairs so their own children can prepare their lessons . . .”

“He says ‘very, very’ so much, this carefree person.” She shifted resentfully as she squatted over the basin and scrubbed the laundry. “How many children does he have? How much is his salary? In village houses the children sleep on top of each other, and here he is talking about tables and chairs, the carefree one!”

She washed the clothes in the basin. The water first turned gray, then black. She threw out the water and put in fresh water. Once again she filled it with clothes and she sprinkled them with soap powder.

She washed the clothes in three cycles, wrung them out, and placed them on the fence. She rinsed out the basin. She put the clothes in the basin and put it on her head and took them to the stream and rinsed them in the streamwater. Her knuckles turned red and she put the clothes back into the basin, put it on her head, and came and hung them out on a line in the courtyard.

“Mommy, I’m hungry,” said her little boy.

“I’m hungry, too, Mommy’s darling.”

And they spread out a small cloth in the courtyard and set a table. They dunked bread into sweetened tea and ate it.
These few minutes of having bread and tea were her only moments of leisure. She still had to go to the stream and fetch water and brew more tea, because the children were coming home from school. When they came she would have to tell them to clean out the dung from the animal pens and to keep an eye on their little brother while she went to the riverbed and brought a load of firewood. They had cotton stalks for fire, but that burned quickly and didn't last. If there were a few sticks of firewood, it would last longer.

One after another the children came from school. Taking a crust of bread in their hands, they bolted it down, said that they were going to pick cotton, and threw their old smocks over their shoulders. Mother knows that it's like this everywhere — after lessons the children go to pick cotton. If they don't go, they will be criticized in the classroom, in the komsomol meeting, and in the wall newspaper. The children are shamed into going, they are put under an obligation. But for running the household firewood is also necessary; without firewood there will be no bread in the house.

"Today you don't go to pick cotton," she said to her daughter, who was in the sixth grade. "Let them go, you look after your little brother, I'm going to fetch firewood."

"The teacher will scold me," the little girl whined.

"He won't scold you, I'll speak to him."

And she left her daughter and little son at home and went herself to gather firewood. She went to the riverbed, passing the canal, passing the neighboring village and its planted fields. She went to the cotton field. She gathered as much dry firewood as she could, the thickest she could find, so that her fire would last. From bush to bush, from one cluster of plants uprooted by the torrent to another, from sandy patches to stony patches she passed, gathering armfuls of dead wood, breaking off the yellow wood that was still growing, and she dumped it all together on a grassy clearing, and tied it all into a bundle to carry on her back. The thorns and thistles bit and scratched her knuckles. From all the bending and straightening up her knees and waist started to ache, and her back stiffened up. On the way back she sweated, her sinews relaxed, she got used to it, and the pain in her knees and back seemed not to bother her any more. With the firewood on her back and a long branch in her hand by way of a walking stick, on a road sometimes smooth, sometimes rough, sometimes sandy and sometimes dirt, sometimes through the woods and sometimes along the valley, sometimes holding her head up high and sometimes bending over, trying to lighten her load, she walked and walked... until she came to the motor road. There were few vehicles on the road. And whenever one did appear, it would shoot past in this or that direction like the wind, so that she couldn't even see the forms of the people inside very well, nor they her as they drove past.

"Everyone is occupied with his own business in this world!"

At the entrance to the village the official car of the collective-farm chairman appeared, drew up next to her, and stopped.

"Hey, Auntie!" The car door opened and the chairman greeted her from his seat. "Couldn't you find a donkey or something, that you're carrying firewood on your back?"

"Fetching firewood with a donkey is men's work," she said.

"Well, your husband should fetch the firewood!"

"He should fetch the firewood, you should go from banquet to banquet, and who's to run the kolkhoz?"

The chairman smiled:

"Next year we'll put you in charge."

And the car went on its way and she went on hers...

At home she leaned her back against the wall and drank a glass of tea. Her perspiration had dripped. Her thirst was quenched. She caught her breath. From her change-purse she took out three rubles, gave them to her daughter, and sent her to the store, telling her that if any sugar or cube sugar had arrived, she should buy it. She herself put flour in an earthenware bowl and mixed dough and wrapped the bowl of dough in a quilt so that it would rise faster in the warmth and she could get her bread baked before darkness fell. She went to the hearth, lit the fire, put on the kettle and filled it with water. She took meat out of the covered pot where it was kept, cut it and broke the bones, and threw enough to feed each of them into the kettle. She went outside, cut two armfuls of cotton stalks and set them near the oven. She sat in the courtyard and peeled onions, potatoes, and vegetables. She put the peelings in an old pail and left it near the door of the animal pens — in the evening she would give it to the cow. She chopped the onion, brought it in the house and put it in the pot. She washed the potatoes and vegetables in a dish, picked them up and brought them to the pot. That done, she swept the ashes from the stove that had fallen on the floor. She went back into the house and took off the quilt from the bowl of dough. The dough hadn't risen very well, it was only half risen, it would blister in baking; but there wasn't any time left, she had to make and bake the bread, because she had to get all these things done by evening. She opened up the sufra, the tanned sheepskin that functioned as her kitchen table. She shaped the dough into loaf-sized lumps and spread them out on the sufra. She kneaded the bread and kneaded it some more. Her two arms from shoulder to wrist were constantly in mo-
tion, her body moved and moved so that in the evening and tomorrow morning her children's mouths could move in chewing the bread.

Now she had to start a fire in the bread oven so it would warm up. She broke and doubled up the cotton stalks and stuffed them into the oven. Under them she pushed some crumpled old paper and lit it. Tongues of flame and thick smoke belched from the mouth of the oven and licked at the hairs of her eyebrows and eyelashes, singeing them here and there. On the radio a village leader from some village or other was answering a reporter's questions. The reporter asked, "What are the living conditions of the people like?" The village leader answered, "The living conditions of our people are not much different from those of people living in the cities. In order to lighten the work of the women, we've built laundromats in our kolkhoz and installed gas..."

"Shame on you for telling such lies!" she said to the radio and went back inside. She pushed aside the browned things from the bottom of the pot, put the potatoes and vegetables into the pot, and put the prepared dough on the table into a bowl and brought it to the oven. She went back and brought a rolling pin, a baking board, and a bowl of water. The oven was hot and she put in the unrisen bread. Every time she rolled out the dough on the baking board and stretched her arm into the oven to stick the dough onto the sides, both sides of her hand would nearly catch fire from the heat...

She baked two ovenloads of bread. She baked a basketful of bread. And before pulling out each loaf, she would sprinkle it with sugar-water. She would put her hand in the bowl of water, catch some drops in her fist, and sprinkle it over the bread so that it would look nice.

Evening fell. And the bread-eaters arrived one after the other. First the children came home from cotton-picking, then Father came from the fields.

All of them ate the fresh soup with the warm bread around the tablecloth. The girls washed the dishes and the kettle. They also gathered the clothes off the line and brought them into the house. The cow, the sheep, and the goat, as usual, came right into the courtyard when they returned from the pasture. Father herded the goat and sheep inside the fence. Mother picked up a pail and went to milk the cow.

A song was playing on the radio.

The children, the boys and girls who were in school, took their books and notebooks and stretched out on their stomachs in each corner to prepare their lessons. Father went to see how his lemons were doing. The little son was trying to ride the dog on the threshold.

She milked the cow. She brought in the milk, put it in an earthenware vessel, and hung it in the alcove so that it would not go sour by morning. And she picked up the laundered clothes one at a time and looked at them: the seam of one garment was unraveled, the button on another one was falling off, the collar of a third one was torn... And she brought out a needle and a spool of thread. She began sewing. First she mended the seam. She would finish an item of clothing in one hand, bite off the thread with her teeth, and pick up another item with her other hand. When she was sewing the unraveled seam on the old suit, there arose in the core of her body a knot of pain and sorrow and longing and grief. It entered her stomach, turned and twisted, gained strength, and worked its way up to fill the space of her chest. It came and stuck in her throat, and from the heat of her wounded heart it melted and ran flowing from her eyes. This was the suit of her eldest son; they took him for military service. Now her middle son wears this suit. She hasn't seen her son in the military again in fourteen months—he is in cold places on the other side of the world. Another of her sons is in Turkmenistan. The one writes and complains to her about the cold, says that his toes are frostbitten; the other grumbles that it is so hot that if you touch the ground with your hand, your handburns...

Darkness enveloped her eyes, she could no longer see the needle and thread. She wiped away her tears, but they wouldn't stop coming. Her eyes were still full of tears. She rolled up the seam she had been sewing, put it aside, and went outside. She poured some water from the ewer and washed her hands and face. She came back to continue her work, and now she saw that the children had fallen asleep in every corner in every possible position, their notebooks and books scattered around, some closed, some opened. She woke each of them, shaking them gently and calling them by name; she unrolled their sleeping mats in turn and put each one to bed in his or her own place.

Father came in from the lemon orchard with dirty hands, stood in the doorway and said: "Mother, wake me up with the radio in the morning. Get my bed ready now. Tomorrow I have to go to the fields before the dawn prayer."

The house went to sleep. But she was awake, she was sewing the torn seam, and a concert was playing on the radio. And at the moment when the radio at the end of the program wished its listeners good-night, she finished her work and lay down under her quilt, still dressed.

Her day — the day of a mother in a Tajik village— as every day of her life, passed just like this. She laid her head on the pillow and fell asleep, unaware that in the government's account books she was included among the ranks of the unemployed.

Translated from the Tajik
By Judith M. Wilks
The Woman and the Mirror

By BAHMANYOR

The mirror was in its normal place — standing firm on the mud wall, next to the bed, facing the bed¬ding. The woman looked at the mirror as if she only wanted to know whether it was alone or not. After glancing out the window and seeing the courtyard empty, she came up to the mirror. Pointing a finger menacingly at her reflection in the mirror, she sang these lines: “Dark lady, what a trickster you are, / You have cast a spell, I thought you were a snake! / Even Satan is not as deceitful as you, / I say wheat and you plant barley!”

A smile blossomed on her face. A distinct wrinkle appeared and stretched the corners of her lips; next to it another wrinkle appeared; a third wrinkle, like a bee’s sting, quivering and troubled, formed a blackness and vanished as soon as she perceived it.

The smile left the woman’s lips, but the two wrinkles remained. They must have been there before, but she hadn’t seen them, although she looked into the mirror every day, two or three or more times. This wrinkle was the effect of the passing of time, though she told herself it was from smiling too much. However she reassured herself, she was upset the whole day and she wouldn’t look into the mirror any more. She was surprised that not even the desire to look into the mirror arose in her heart. For her, who in her husband’s words had been converted to her mother’s religion of “mirror worship,” this was unexpected.

Her mother used to consider the mirror as a holy object like water, fire, and flour. Rising every morning, before doing anything else, she used to look into the mirror and say, It’s for luck, the day will go well. If she went anywhere, she took her locket mirror along: It would bring luck, the journey would be safe. She would never look into the mirror at night: there is no luck in it, it will decrease our daily bread. She would insistently tell new brides that on their wedding nights, before anything else, they should look into the mirror: Your lives will be bright and shining like the mirror. If there was a bereavement in the village, she would not look into the mirror, eight days for a stranger, twenty for a distant relative, forty for a close relative: It would be wrong!

She always insisted that the young girls be wary and not look into a mirror at night, otherwise when they married they would have a rival for their husband’s attention . . . In short, her mother had had a special relationship with the mirror that was not to be seen with the other old women of the village. Before she died she even requested that a mirror be placed in her coffin . . .

Her mother had a velvet bag, on which was embroidered a violet in gold, and inside it was everything, like a vial of perfume. “Stealing” the bag, spreading its contents in her lap, putting on the large earrings that weighed one pud according to her mother, and a necklace of carnelians, tying her hair in short curls, putting kohl around her eyes, and then looking at herself in the locket mirror — this was her happiest childhood pastime.

After that she became a mirror worshiper like her mother. This became apparent when her father bought a large gold-framed mirror from the city. Every day, whenever she found the house empty, five or six times she would look into the mirror to break her depression — indeed, if she did not see herself often in the mirror, she felt depressed. Sometimes, hiding from the others, especially her mother, she looked into the mirror at night. Her mother was herself responsible for this: by forbidding her to do it, she had poured oil over the fire of curiosity. Yes, something stirred in the bottom of her heart and bit by bit made an appearance; seducing her willpower and casting aside her good sense, it led her into this action. She imagined that she was seeing someone else in the mirror. Her eyes widened in shock, her heart sank, she looked more closely: she recognized herself. Although she sighed with relief, a corner of her heart darkened and she regretted having looked. She was certain that in that one moment she had not seen her own reflection in the mirror but her enemy’s. For a few days she was upset with herself and the mirror, then she forgot that fleeting vision . . . Today she again remembered it.

Suddenly the thought occurred to her that an enmity existed between herself and the mirror. The mirror was no longer a feminine accessory for her, but a living creature that could disturb her daily peace of mind.

The mirror caused a fluttering in her heart; she did not know whether the fluttering was fleeting or serious. Her religion of mirror-worship had evidently been just copper on the outside and brass inside, otherwise her insides would not be so agitated.

But the enmity between her and the mirror had arisen two days ago — in any case, now, it appeared

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so to the woman. Two days before, the woman had taken down the mirror from the wall to fix its hook. She easily fixed the gold frame’s hook; she needed a rag to polish it, but she either did not have the patience or unwittingly spat on the mirror and polished it. At that moment it seemed to her that the mirror suddenly became dark and her reflection disappeared. All this happened in an instant, in the blink of an eye. For this reason, the woman thought it was a trick of the eye and did not consider it important.

But today, all those visions of that instant vividly flashed before her eyes; they did not appear to be a trick of the eye and imagination any more, but a mysterious and sinister reality.

The woman became agitated. She could not sit still the whole day. At night, it appeared to her that something or someone from the mirror was looking at her. She felt this with her whole being; she drew close to her sleeping husband, but she could not find release from that vague feeling. She felt with her entire being that the something or someone in the mirror was sneering at her actions.

Something like this had happened to her before.

It was because of the color picture of her father-in-law that stood next to the mirror in another gold frame. The first nights after her wedding it appeared to her that her father-in-law was watching the intimacies of the newlyweds. This feeling did not leave her until she hid the picture of her father-in-law in the trunk with her trousseau. Her husband did not notice anything, or perhaps he had become so accustomed to it that he saw his father’s picture even on the empty wall.

The next day the woman wanted to check the mirror. When her husband had eaten his lunch and had gone to work, she again came up to the mirror. She looked at her reflection. She saw her face fresh and clear as before. Even the wrinkle from yesterday was smoothed out, only a bare trace of it remained in her shining eyes. A fresh breeze blew over her body, she could not help herself and out of habit hummed: “O nine-hearted and ten-hearted, open every tenth, / Be your own moneychanger, make yourself true. / One night let me grasp you in the embrace of love, / I will not grant your desire — go and complain!”

Reciting verses to the mirror in front of her had also become a habit. At first, her husband did not pay attention to his wife’s reciting to herself; later he listened to the content of the verses and became incensed, forbidding her to recite the lines shamelessly to herself. Later, alone in the house, the woman would look at her reflection and sing the lines, not understanding why she would only hum the lines her husband disapproved of...

That whole day long, the woman did not think of the mirror any more, but as soon as night fell and the thought of dreaming had to be faced, doubts again entered her heart. Carefully, so that her husband should not notice, she covered the mirror with a kerchief. In the middle of the night, something stirred behind the kerchief. She became frightened of the secret looks of the something or someone. The scuffle behind the kerchief subsided and rose again. The woman bit the corner of the quilt, so as not to cry out and wake her husband. Then the stirring behind the kerchief stopped as suddenly as it had started. A silence fell, in which the woman heard only her own and her husband’s breathing. Her husband was breathing gently and evenly, and she hard and deeply. She had not thought that she would find such a quiet and easy escape from the mirror’s spell. She regarded the mirror gravely. In the light of the full moon, the mirror behind the kerchief appeared as a bride behind a veil, secretly hidden from curious eyes...

At dawn, the woman slept a little and fearfully awoke; half-asleep, she felt something pulling her by the sleeve to wake her up. In the darkness of the house, the woman could not make out any object or human form but sensed its presence near herself. She felt that the creature was tiny and cold, it had certainly come out of the mirror. Certainly it had come out of the mirror...

The mere thought awoke and alerted the woman.

But her terror did not give her the strength to jump up or say anything. With a great effort she tore her thoughts and mind away from the mirror and the humanlike creature and tried to move her right hand; first the fingers of her hand, then her whole arm obeyed her. The woman raised her arm to wake her husband. It seemed as if the creature was waiting for this move and ran to the mirror — the woman saw it climbing the wall like an ant.

Before the creature disappeared into the mirror, it picked up the kerchief over it and threw it at the woman. The woman screamed. Her husband woke up, said “What is it? What happened?” and switched on the lamp. Seeing the color drained from his wife’s face, he asked her, “Did you have a nightmare?” The woman looked now at her husband, now at the mirror — the kerchief was in its place over the mirror. The woman saw herself unable to explain the situation and answered her husband with a “Yes.” Her husband brought a cup of water from the pail in the doorway and made her drink it, then made to extinguish the lamp, but the woman stopped him; he acquiesced.

In the morning, seeing his wife feverish, the man went to get the doctor. The woman rose from her place with difficulty, took the mirror down from the wall, not looking at it even once, carried it and threw it into the pit behind their house. The mirror wailed — screamed, it seemed to the woman and, falling to the bottom of the pit, shattered into a thousand pieces — and the woman thought she saw a river of blood flowing from it.

Translated from the Tajik
By Sunil Sharma