

## **Train to Tbilisi** *Opening*

*My modus operandi as a travel poet is firstly to say what I see—that is, present country and people according to the impression of place and time—and secondly, where possible, to capture the moment. This poem, the opening of Crossings, does use some poetic licence in the characters of the two British tourists (who are satirized) but crucially in the words of the young woman facing down a hostile carriage in the later part of the poem, as I did not understand a great deal of what she said, and was forced to substitute as best I could from imagination. The character of Silence here and, especially, later was inspired by Steinbeck's use of the same during the shooting of Candy's dog in Of Mice and Men. One particular difficulty arising beyond this passage was the heavy politics, which I've already been warned about; but this is far from being a political poem.*

In time-lapse brushes on a grey-wash ground  
The station's spectral canvas slowly yields  
Its changing compositions—cubist, jejune—  
Hung and framed by distracted thought:  
More sepia parcels hog-tied with string,  
The odd battered case or mystery crate,  
And people too—dark-clad, despairing,  
In clothes they snatched from a wardrobe's depths,  
Sometimes complaining, but more often fixed  
On windblown litter tumbling down the tracks.

As they cease to muse and focus once more  
On fading hues now resolved into clay  
That smears to vagueness each contour lost,  
The encroachment of night draws in the scale,  
And it is then they notice, with a start,  
How a woman, toothless, of indeterminate age,  
Has appeared beside them with a young girl.  
She stares, it seems, for minutes, then  
At last, in tones emboldened, her clear voice  
Resounds in peals around the station walls:  
*My daughter is learning English. Mozhna...*

*What are you called?* and the girl looks up.  
*My name is Maia,* then shyly turns her head.  
She hugs to her, so close, a plastic box,  
Perhaps for lunches or a pencil case,  
With Disney designs, unlicensed, ornate.  
Then with tender care she parts the zip  
Just enough for a theatrical *coup*:  
A beak at first and then a whole head,  
A pigeon not quite as big as its home.  
*And what is the name of your pet?* she asks.  
*Her name is Masha, and she is my friend.*  
From their bag of peanuts they proffer one,  
But Masha surprisingly refuses to eat.  
*She is not so hungry,* Maia concludes.  
*We go to Tbilisi,* her Mama says,  
Her bloodshot eyes heavily ringed with care,  
*To visit my dear sister who is ill.*

Hauled *ex machina* through a warp in time  
A Stadler KISS, a crate of light, arrives,  
A Blackpool tram bombastically recast  
As a UFO in B-movie style.  
Rising two storeys, it shares a glow  
That transforms to handsome each head it lifts.  
Its laid-back prow offers welcoming arms—  
A cowcatcher, perhaps, from engineers  
Considering homeland in the redesign  
Of reversed Swiss-cross in negative flair:  
A large one that streaks towards the train's tail,  
Four smaller ones, inlaid, framing the cab.

With hearts stoked and cheered they both leap aboard  
While little Maia, Mama and the bird

Climb into the next coach—and vanish.

The voice from the speaker assures them that  
This cutting edge technology is what  
Georgian Railways are seeking to put  
In service for a valued clientele  
And they are sure to provide what they need:  
A trip that rewards in leisure and speed.  
*But the rolling stock, a passenger adds—*  
Her bulging eyes roll too, her breath in shunts,  
A life sidelined at rusty points perhaps—  
*Is betrayed every time by worn-out tracks.*

Crossing now the Adjari border,  
All the carriage is still in order.  
No food on offer? Nor any water—  
Though they promised and really ought to  
Give refreshments on the train.  
Still, Scrabble's good to ease the pain  
Of the effects of hunger on the brain.  
Thoughts of Khatcho and Khatchapuri  
Shashlik, lobio and chakapuli,  
Tonis, shotis and mexuri puri  
Badrijani nigvzit and khinkali:  
How it seems the best cuisine  
Of all the countries they have seen.

They take up bag and racks to play,  
To speed them swiftly on their way.  
—*Let's start the feast with C-A-N-A-P-E*  
Begins he, once the board's laid out.  
*That's twenty points, please, but why the doubt?*  
—*It's a French word, accented, not allowed.*

—*It's in the Collins, ripostes he, unbowed.*

The words of victory speaking glory

Patriotism at its most loony—

The Cha-cha Fountain at Batumi—

Cha-cha-cha, cha-cha-cha, cha-cha-cha, cha—

Gamajoba, gamajoba, gama...

The rolling stock, the rolling stock, the roll...

Worn-out tracks, worn out tracks, worn out tracks, worn out...

Worn out tracks...

Worn out...

Gradually they become aware

The train has unwontedly halted

At a place as blank and dark and gloomily inturned

As the windows reflecting passengers, forlorn,

Their death-mask faces daubed in ghastly pigments.

The platform bears no sign, bar an iron cross

Corroded, of Andrew and not St George.

And no sign or hint of life

In the bleakness of these mirrors,

Blank of meaning within and without,

Which permeate the body's cells;

Which turn these coaches into holding cells

For an unspecifiable term;

And suddenly the British feel

Trapped in a gravitational pull

Towards the bottomless featureless hades

In the dead hollow of something collapsed,

Which blinds the eyes;

Which darkens the mood;

Which poisons the blood.

Blind...

Dark...

Poised...

It's then that he clocks the Coke-bottle plonk—  
A Georgian *picrate* from a roadside stall—  
Being passed hand to hand, mouth to mouth  
Along the row just behind the one *en face*.  
Its provenance is a rough-looking pair  
Who hoik the contraband to an old man.  
The woman's coarse-featured, her dress low-cut,  
Patterned with flowers and spotted in brown,  
On her shoulder tattooed a kanji—*Strength*.  
Her partner's ruddy-faced and broken-nosed,  
Hands all crinkled, callused, two ready claws  
That grasp the bottle then slowly ungrip  
The sherbet for the old man next to him.  
The *goimi*, gaze fixed, now licks his top lip,  
White-whiskered dewlaps bright-shining with spit,  
He lingers on the teasing fumes, nods his head  
And fingers, as it were to choke, the throat,  
In smiles at such an unexpected boon.  
Lips to mouth, too sensuous, he necks the booze  
Then rubs his moustache ends, dries his chops  
With a filthy kerchief from who knows where,  
The greasy bottle clutched so close to heart.  
The woman holds her pose of classic pride,  
A rising Venus toggled in peasant rags,  
And—yes—her smile does linger in the hope  
Of recognition of her sullied charms  
By this creased and gnarled, time-worn leather bag, .

The liquored air drives Silence from the coach,  
Who, in distance ironic, slams the door  
That offers passage to a sleepy town.  
A demon rises in her stead, makes choice

Of the weakest soul, possesses it, gives voice.

Once from his scraggy throat his catarrh clears

The old man speaks from a suit a size too big

In tongues inflamed by spirit set to burn:

*You know, I've been thinking about the last war...*