

Baroque 'n' roll

Michael Freeman

SIDDHARTH DASGUPTA

A Moveable East
Red River: 2021

If the Afghan *landays*, laconic and aphoristic, carve into one end of the poetic spectrum, Siddharth Dasgupta's style—call it baroque 'n' roll—makes its play at the other end. Not that it doesn't have its serious overtones and undertows, but the energies of its imagery and diction veer in and out of sheer *sprezzatura*. It's a poetry of exuberant inclusivity, a mannered expansiveness that you can track across two axes in the poem 'Once Upon an Irani Café'. One axis is

In this confluence of characters, cities,
sorrows, and fragilities, find
a place that reminds you of
the melodies you've known ...

with the other, in 'Galata by the Sea', is where
observations and recollections are

marinated, spiced, grilled, and fried
To be wrapped in the incongruity of silver foil

Dasgupta's aesthetic is that of the kaleidoscope, which, shaken and stirred, highlights the sheer, fractal variousness of images, shapes and colours. It's a shape-shifting optic with impermanence as a permanent condition of the game being played, so it's no accident that this collection is entitled *A Moveable East*. It deploys what the Russian formalists picked out as defamiliarisation: orthodox perspectives and causalities are undermined by the poem's polysemy, metaphoric logic, word play.

These poems project scenes, particularly cityscapes, in a 'parade of resonances', where 'this city is an operatic carousel' and there are glimpses 'heightened by these giddy inebriations of the truth' but 'cocooned in beauty's narcoleptic lies' and a 'caravanserai of garlic, lime, rub and tahini'. The image of a caravanserai would be a good title for the collection: a stopover site for caravans, an arcaded safe haven for the night's interchange of news from the cities.

There are serious engagements with contemporary political and social issues, carefully refusing to totalise them, as in the poems 'Refugee Crisis' and 'Rogue Nations', and there are several love poems, as much wry and rueful as celebratory, but the most striking, inventive, multifaceted poems are Dasgupta's sequences on cities. There are two triptychs, 'Istanbul Unto Ephemera' and 'Calcutta Unto Chimera', plus 'Delhi with a Hint of Turmeric'. And the cities are a moveable feast too: 'What's to say that these cities we call / Our own, are ours to own at all?' They're cities like those in Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*: they start to unfold as variations on one city. For all the singularities of local detail and resurrected memories, they're refracted—the kaleidoscope again—through prisms of images and sounds, smells and tastes, herbs and spices, street cafés and corner stalls.

For all the elegies and paeans here, there's an insistent relativism, with a tone—throwaway or self-deprecatory—in lines like 'I'm prone to buying into / karma and ... I swallow a different truth / each day' alongside '[I] want to believe that the Vedas and the

Koran / Weren't mimicking a radio channel' alongside 'the disco-dance drizzle of valid enough reason'. The relativism has its polemical edge as he hammers it home in the poem 'Rogue Nations' with

The Buddhists aver mindfulness, the Hindus
intone destiny, the Muslims defer to jannah
while the Christians reminisce the Crusades,
each cocooned within the steeple-d, spire-d,
staple-d opera of devotion's rabid allegory.

Dasgupta applies this relativism to the nature of the poems themselves. The text is a product of 'typographic ruse', 'cursive couplets', 'shy calligraphy' and 'calligraphic wink' in which the poem is a self-reflexive disclosure. Skewering the heart of the collection, there's 'But for poetry, what would cities do?', prompting the converse: but for cities, what would poetry do, at least in this case? And 'The city arrives at me through foreign eyes'. Dasgupta curates his own *musée imaginaire*, 'Disgorging a litany / of literary tendencies'. Beside Baudelaire and Hemingway and Scott Fitzgerald in Paris, the iconography incorporates Orhan Pamuk and Rabindranath Tagore, Voltaire and Pablo Neruda, Duke Ellington and Dizzy Gillespie, Hayat Mahmud and Gauhar Jaan, Sylvia Plath, and Nina Simone, John Coltrane and Amjan Ali Khan, Leonard Cohen and Beyoncé, et al.

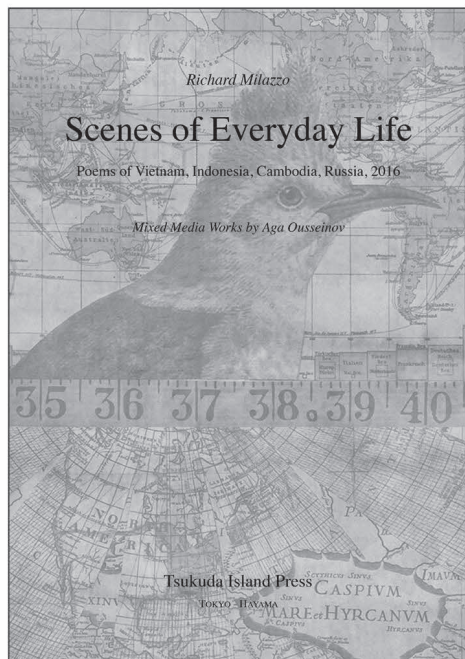
In among all the cross-cultural heterogeneity and intertextuality, Dasgupta is essentially, like Baudelaire again, a *flâneur* picking over and pondering what he finds, or imagines, in the city streets. In the poem 'Madras Café', drinking coconut milk is something 'You don't sip ... you slurp / This is noisy, earthy homage'. Perhaps this collection's optic isn't for an overly sceptical or too scrupulous reader, when bricolage is the order of many of the poems, and from time to time the kaleidoscope delivers the merely quirky trope or even the dull prosaic, as 'What is life but a glorious accumulation of the small / and the fabric of the small'. But usually the energy of the poems is, as he described one of his cities, 'an operatic carousel'.

'Exile on Every Street' is a keynote poem here in its style and tropes. The owner of a street-corner teahouse, Abdul Chacha

... drapes Kabul around him like a fable,
Pounding the dough and pouring his tears
Into vast vats of what only regret really knows.

That 'drapes' is ambiguous; it's an act of protective covering, but with also a sense of a dramatic flourish, in which case is it Abdul's or Dasgupta's? There's a porous membrane here. Many of the poems evoke a city draped around Dasgupta's catch-all imagination, with vats of the tears and regrets of the unsettled and the exiles. In just those three lines, the heavily alliterating consonants, the eye-rhyming triple diphthong and even 'Kabul' morphing into 'fable' are indicative of a recurrent stance in this collection. Where Abdul's own Afghan poetic tradition might encompass these themes in terse form, the *landays* again, Dasgupta prefers 'vast vats' for his inclusive sympathies, poems laminated with the strata of exiles, political and cultural, historic and recent. □

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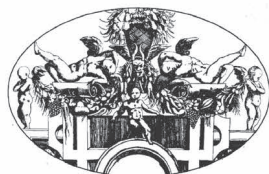
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