OPEN POEM TO PRESIDENT ISLAM KARIMOV

I continually think on the fate of Sobirjan,
a fine journalist but only a young man:
there he is in the Tashkent can,
we have to unite forces and do what we can.

Mr President of Uzbekistan,
in your fine residence, do you understand
what your regime’s doing in imprisoning this young man?
With all due respect, the process seems underhand.

You might say, Ashik Richard, you’re a Westerner –
you don’t understand Uzbekistan –
but I’ve lived in Afghanistan
and Turkey, know Russian and I am a swift learner.

And when it comes to human rights,
searching my conscience in long nights
after interpreting for torture survivors,
I can only say that Sobirjan’s freedom will revive us.

Sobirjan is at the sharp end of a pyramid
which your regime is forcing into his body.
His brave reporting of what Gorgonadze did
and how he was murdered is indeed a cautionary analogy.

You are at the top of a more Pharaonic pyramid,
but history might just invert it on your head,
bringing down on you the whole weight of the people you led and bled,
for eventually from real history nothing is hid.

But now I’ll see by the miracle of the Internet
the tiny real pyramids of a people’s tented village
opposite the American Embassy in Tashkent.
Do not deny man’s privilege
for peaceful protest. I lend
you these words, Uzbek friends, written in an English night –
yours are flimsy, canvas, individual pyramids,
but a Shakespearean Birnam wood in the midst
of Uzbekistan and I call up the spirit
of William Shakespeare who wrote against tyranny:
it’s only the Mac I share with MacBeth
and with you this farflung allegory
which Boris Pasternak translated.
Mr President, if you’d read Shakespeare you’d have been fated to rule with a different mentality, all I can wish your peoples is a vital morality.

For years you have ruled Uzbekistan with a steel hand but ‘gold rusts and steel decays’ (1) as Anna Akhmatova says, she who, in gratitude, knew Tashkent in forty one to forty four, when sent there by Fadeyev and Stalin into asylum. You might say, this is a polemic British writer turning a verse, but to the calling of Pushkin and his Prophet

I’m not averse. I write this dialogue for the Uzbek peoples’ profit and for the freedom and future of Sobirjan and the writers and journalists you have unjustly imprisoned, including Mamadali Makhmudov and Muhammed Bejkon, for none other than their fight for freedom of expression. You too remember Pushkin’s ‘Vo glubine ‘Uzbekskikh’ rud’ (2). I’m putting you into as tight a poet’s corner as I can, I’m putting it straight and not being rude: ultimately you are more of a prisoner of your conscience than Sobirjan.

Let your regime begin to uphold the spirit of freedom of expression in Uzbekistan, long awaited – while it still can!

Richard McKane  
1 May 2005

(1) ‘Gold rusts and steel decays’ Anna Akhmatova 1945

(2) Intentional mis quote of Pushkin’s poem to the imprisoned Decembrists: ‘In the depth of Siberian mines’ 1827

FOR SOBIRJAN YAKUBOV
HURRIYAT JOURNALIST IN CUSTODY IN UZBEKISTAN

Thousands are praying for you, others hope against hope angrily that you’re still on your everyday trolley despite the torture you’re going through.
This is not about me it's all for you,
in custody in Tashkent.
So young, you're not too young to know
and show a world corrupt and bent.

They'll be gunning for your confession now
with all their worst know how.
Ruslan worked for you all night
and I've had four hours sleep
and you can't see but feel
the tears your friends weep.
It's important that you're strong,
but body and mind are weak,
Sobirjan, it's your jan,
your soul they'll never break.
Be patient, soul, sobir jan,
we'll help free your body and mind whole -
and my jan, Sobirjan,
it'll never be captive, your soul.

Richard McKane
25 April 2005

Sobir – Patience
Jan – Soul

DON’T SAY THE ISTANS ARE DISTANT:
A ROCK TRIBUTE TO SOBIRJAN YAKUBOV

I hear the tyrant’s closed all the libraries in Turkmenistan,
ballet, opera, circus all under his ban
and hospitals in the provinces, idle they stand
and Sobirjan is imprisoned in Uzbekistan,
but they’ll harvest opium poppies in Afghanistan,
but they’re pumping oil in most of the Istans –
and don’t say the Istans are distant.

They say fundamentalists exist in all the Istans
and Bin Laden may be in hiding in Which Istan?
And the West has a stance and the US too –
and Sobirjan is imprisoned in Uzbekistan,
and don’t say the Istans are distant.

We bled your oil now you’ll bleed it too,
our blood may boil but we need it too,
after Iraq the countries queue –
and Sobirjan is imprisoned in Uzbekistan, 
and don’t say the Istans are distant.

Countries are made up of millions of jans and souls, 
they’re led by a few and terrorised by a few, 
but bombs, bullets and prisons make eternal holes –
and Sobirjan is imprisoned in Uzbekistan, 
and don’t say the Istans are distant.

25-26th April 2005

My work on Uzbekistan owes much to the trip to Uzbekistan in 2004 and support of my 
friends and colleagues in English PEN Writers in Prison Committee, Lucy Popescu and 
Ania Corless and to the indefatigable work of the fearless independent Uzbek Journalist 
Ruslan Sharipov.

On a sobering note: the tiny tented village demonstration mentioned in the ‘open poem’ 
was brutally put down by the authorities.