



# JOURNEY TO O'Z

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*Note:*

The country known in the West as *Uzbekistan* is called *O'zbekiston* in its official language. I have used O'zbek spellings for most cities, sites, and people, and provided annotations where they may prove helpful.



## AIR TRAVEL LIMINALITIES

The day between the one you left  
and the one when you will arrive.

The six meals you ate in twenty-four hours  
simply because they were set before you.

The plot of the audiobook that put you to sleep  
more than a dozen times.

The poorly sealed airport smoking terrace  
that almost bridges a cultural divide.

The visions of future pilgrimage you dreamed  
as you read departure board destinations.

The quiet words you spoke to a god you don't believe in  
each time your airplane left the earth.

## BLUE

“There was something about the glowing blue of the tablecloth, that inexhaustible Uzbek blue exploding in the sunlight, that prolonged in him yesterday’s mood of exploration and discovery.”

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn  
*Cancer Ward*

Sky blue flaps in the breeze with green,  
red and white, gentle signal to friend and foe,  
signifying a nation that flows between  
once-great glacier-blue rivers.

Dark royal blue speaks truths  
from the mouth of god.

A dozen more shades of blue commemorate victory,  
and celebrate the life of a beloved  
who has gone before.

Blue woven into brick is a seat of learning.  
Electric blue is an underground cosmonaut.

Green grass in the cracks of ribbed domes  
grows a foothold for gray doves to nest  
on slippery azure.

The eponymous hospital of **Cancer Ward** by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn is set in the capital of O'zbekiston. This edition was translated from the Russian by Nicholas Bethell and David Burg, published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux (1968).

## LEAKY VESSELS

The alphabet is a leaky vessel  
for the language we speak.  
Language is a crooked tube  
through which we force our thoughts.

When Turkic poets sought to trap  
their language on paper  
fifteen generations ago,  
great, great, greats like  
Alisher Navoiy looked south,  
bottling their words  
in flowing Arabic script.

When dialectical inevitabilities  
charged across the steppe,  
modernizers looked north  
and remade their thoughts  
in the blocky materialism  
of Cyrillic.

Then free-wheeling laissez-faire  
blew in like a sandstorm  
carrying Latin letters like heavy metals  
from the empty bed  
of the Aral Sea.

Who knows our minds better,  
the words we speak  
or the letters we use to tell them?

**Alisher Navoiy** (1441-1501 CE) was a poet, linguist, painter, and mystic who championed the use of Turkic languages over Persian. He is seen as a founder of O'zbek literature.

Once the fourth-largest lake in the world, the **Aral Sea** (*Orol dengizi* in O'zbek) has been shrunk since the 1960s to two separate lakes that, combined contain less than ten percent of its original 26,300 square miles, the result of Soviet-era irrigation projects that diverted water primarily for cotton growing. It is considered one of the world's worst environmental disasters.

## PRÊT À CONSTRUIRE

On the fifteen kilometer stretch from the Buxoro vokzal to the simurghs watching over Lyab-i Hauz they've abandoned rugged concrete khrushchevkas for slippery plastic and laminated kapitalizm.

A major center of trade and scholarship on the Silk Road, **Buxoro** (Bukhara) has been inhabited for thousands of years. The historic center of the city is a UNESCO World Heritage site.

The O'zbek word for *railway station*, **vokzal**, derives from the Russian "вокзал." The story has it that in 1837 the first Russian railway line was named for its destination, St. Petersburg's "Vokzal" Garden, itself named for London's Vauxhall Pleasure Garden, upon which it had been modeled. вокзал came to be the generic Russian word for *railway station*.

The image of a pair of **simurghs**, phoenix-like mythological birds, on the Nadir Divan-Beghi Madrasah in Buxoro is often paired with the tigers of the Sher-dor Madrasah in Samarqand as symbols of O'zbekistan and Central Asian architecture.

**Lyab-i Hauz** is one of the last remaining ponds in the center of Buxoro, beside the Nadir Divan-Beghi Madrasah. Most of the city's ponds were filled in during the 1920s and 30s for reasons of public health.

**Khrushchevkas** are apartment buildings made of pre-fabricated concrete panels that were constructed throughout the Soviet Union in the 1960s to provide affordable housing to the masses.

LADAS OF O'Z  
visual haiku



A Soviet automobile brand launched in partnership with Fiat in 1966, the **Lada** was designed to be rugged and easily maintained by owners. Today, Lada is a subsidiary of Groupe Renault.

## BIBI-XONIM

You will lose all sense of proportion  
at the Bibi-Xonim Mosque,  
grandest in the world  
at Temur's command.  
Tiles hang from iwan walls  
like the largest carpets ever woven,  
in Central Asian blue and brick.

Bibi-Xonim holds more shades of blue  
than the all the skies and seas.  
The Cow Surah encircles the tower  
in letters taller than the men who would later add them  
as they built a modern nation on the remains  
of empire.

Constructed on the orders of Amir Temur in 1399-1405 CE in Samarqand and said to be named for his favorite wife, the style and scope of **Bibi-Xonim Mosque** influenced architecture throughout Central Asia. Still one of the largest mosques in the Muslim world, it has been restored and reconstructed several times in its history, with varying levels of fidelity to the original.

Better known the West as *Tamerlane*, **Amir Temur** (1336-1405 CE) founded the Timurid Empire, which at its height stretched from Aleppo in Syria to Kashgar in China. A ruthless conqueror who sacked cities and massacred entire populations, Temur has been embraced in the post-Soviet era as a father of the O'zbek nation.

An **iwan** is three-sided hall or entryway common in Islamic architecture, where the fourth side is entirely open.

The second and longest surah (chapter) in the Koran is Al-Baqarah (عُرْفِيلَا), the Heifer or **Cow Surah**.

RAIN

Is it the same  
to know old bricks in rain  
as it is to know them in sunshine?

## WELCOME THE PRESIDENT OF SOUTH KOREA

The son et lumière show at the Registon  
has been previewed by the mayor.  
Red carpet has been rolled out  
despite the rain.

The streets have been cleared of vehicles.  
The historic sites have been closed.  
The shops have been shuttered.  
The crowd a shopkeeper  
keeps chained to a railing  
on the boulevard that links  
the Registon to Amir Temur  
has been disappeared.

Creamy potemkin aluminum siding  
has been erected along Bo'stonsaroy ko'chasi,  
the street that links Amir Temur  
to Olimpia Stadium.  
National flags have been raised  
in pairs, attesting to the eternal friendship  
of two great nations.

Grass has been mowed,  
trimmed at the base of small trees  
by women's hands.  
Tree trunks have been refreshed  
with white paint.  
Cement gutters lining the pedestrian path  
that links the Registon to Bibi-Xonim  
and onward to the final resting place of  
first secretary  
first president  
hajji  
have been painted slate gray.

The **Registon** is an assembly of  
three immense madrasahs  
(Islamic schools) around a  
central plaza that was once the  
main square of Samarqand.

**Bo'stonsaroy ko'chasi** is a  
major street in Samarqand.

A black granite monument  
four feet tall  
has been erected before the  
dusted, wiped, and mopped  
Afrosiyob Archeology Museum.

At Ulug'bek Observatory,  
where a man once reached for the stars  
with science and poetry,  
soldiers in khaki topped with jaunty red berets  
guard the steps, turning away busloads  
from abroad.  
A tall blond in blue camouflage  
patrols the perimeter,  
German shepherd chained to his arm.

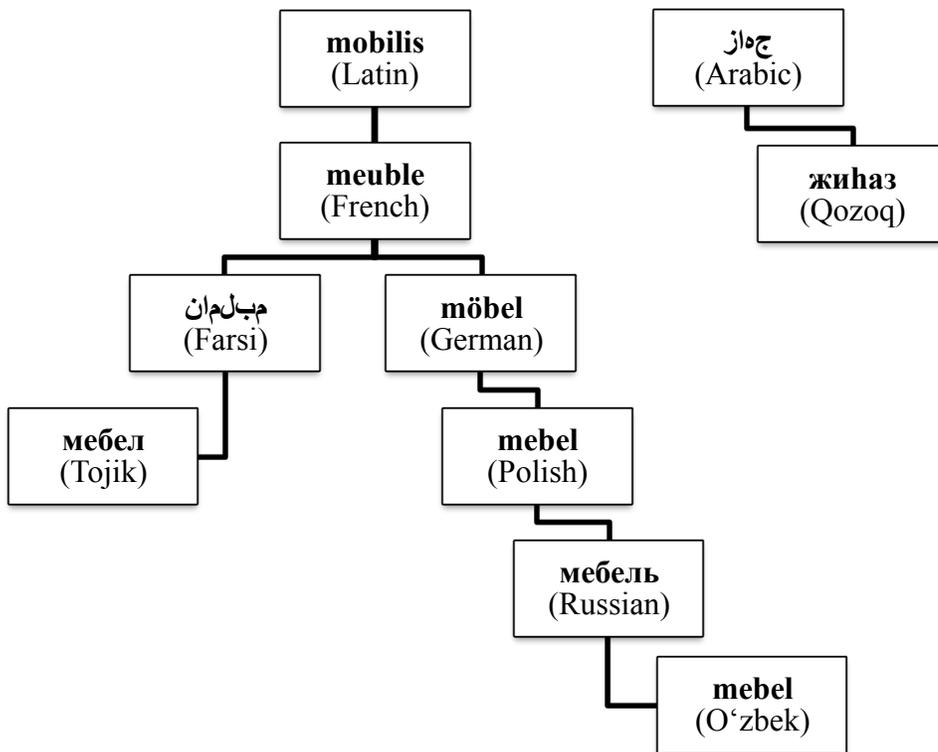
The internet has been shut down  
across the entire city.  
Men in dark suits have been posted  
every two hundred meters  
along the boulevards  
and at critical junctures  
in the swirling back streets.  
They direct stragglers  
who dare to walk on smooth asphalt  
back onto broken brick sidewalks.

Three men in orange overalls  
patrol the empty streets in a truck,  
stopping at each pair of flags,  
untwisting them with a long stick  
to set them flapping free.

**Afrosiyob** was an ancient Central Asian region occupied from 500 BCE until it was sacked by the Mongols in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century CE. The museum on the Afrosiyob archeological site in Samarqand was established in the 1970s.

**Ulug'bek Observatory** was built in the 1420s by a scholar, poet, and unpopular political leader who was the grandson of Temur. Ulug'bek accurately measured the length of the year and catalogued more than a thousand stars.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF FURNITURE IN CENTRAL ASIA



**Qozoq** (Kazakh) is a Turkic language spoken by an estimated 800,000 people living in O'zbekistan.

**Tojik** (Tajik) is a variant of Persian (Farsi) spoken by an estimated 10 to 15 percent of people living in O'zbekistan.

## SOFT DIPLOMACY

In the shade of a mulberry tree  
by the towering words of Allah  
Andijon ladies in gold-plated smiles,  
bright colored ikat and knockoff Chanel  
asked a question with gestures and signs.

We held hands as they murmured my country  
to me. With our cellphones we captured  
each others' souls. "California," I said.  
"Television!" they cried. My nation  
sparked whispers, my home kindled smiles.

**Andijon** is the fourth largest city in O'zbekistan by population, a major commercial and manufacturing center in the Fergana Valley near the border with Qirg'iziston (Kyrgyzstan).

**Ikat** is a type of traditional cloth where the threads are dyed before being hand-woven on a loom.



## 229 KILOMETERS PER HOUR

Undulating carpet of red-orange poppies.  
Cows graze among the poppies.  
Man on horseback among the cows.

Poppies along the tracks  
rush us past graves to the vokzal,  
stones scattered among the poppies.

Electricity for the vokzal  
flies between steel towers  
above the red-orange carpet.

## FOLLOWED BY DOGS

What do we smell like to an O'zbek mutt?  
The green tea and plov we ate for lunch?  
Soggy denim and nylon hiking boots?  
The ragged tomcat who curled up in your lap  
at Job's well?

The national dish of O'zbekistan, **plov** starts with rice and is most often made with mutton, carrots and spices. Many restaurants cook it on an industrial scale in giant woks big enough for an adult to bathe in.

The Chashma-Ayub Mausoleum in Buxoro marks the place where the biblical **Job** (Ayub) is said to have made a well by striking his staff on the ground. Pilgrims still visit the site for the healing qualities of the water.

## ORDINARY

When travel goes well  
you find yourself eating  
parcels of fatty mutton  
wrapped in flaky pastry  
studded with black sesame seeds,  
sharing a single teabag  
in a white pot.

Sipping from chipped bowls  
at a wobbly formica table  
beside a cash machine  
that talks in alphabets  
unknown to you  
and is already out of money  
at noon.

The Russian woman at the counter  
breaks off her order,  
turns to the young man  
helping you and says  
in a teasing voice,  
“Oh, so you speak  
English now?”

Licking sesame seeds from your fingers  
you already know this  
will be one of the fondest  
memories of your journey,  
slaking hunger and fatigue  
in an ordinary shop on a Toshkent  
corner.

The brown rotary phone plugged in  
with a bright blue cable.  
The man at the next table  
wiping his face in prayer  
when he finishes  
his meal.

**Toshkent** is the capitol of  
O'zbekistan, population 2.4  
million.

Your delight when they hand you  
change in two-hundred so‘m notes,  
the ones you have looked for every day  
since you learned of their existence.  
Tiger and rising Zoroastrian sun  
of Samarqand’s Sher-dor Madrasah  
nestle sweetly in the palm  
of your hand.

One of the oldest continually-inhabited cities in Central Asia, and a major point on the historic Silk Road that ran between China and the Mediterranean Sea, **Samarqand** is today the second-most populous city in O‘zbekistan and one of the country’s most popular tourist destinations.

The second of three madrasahs built on the square now known as the Registon. **Sher-dor** is famous for its tile images of two tigers with anthropomorphized suns rising above their backs.

## ARCHITECT

Airport architects travel.  
Duty-free molds memories.  
Couture spangles empire.  
Grammar delimits knowledge.  
Diagnosis triggers symptoms.  
Anxiety fabricates gods.  
Invention begets necessity.  
Strong men build weak nations.  
Pie charts feed false certainty.  
Charity is capitalism failing upward.  
Asylum tells truths too hard to speak.  
Journey is the place I rediscover myself.



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