

HAYWARD
SOUTHBANK
CENTRE
GALLERY

**A Spectral Path
in the Azure
or
Testimonies
about Tea**

Anuar Duisenbinov

Slavs and Tatars, *Samovar*, 2021 © Slavs and Tatars.
Installation view at Hayward Gallery. Photo: Robert Harris.



As part of Hayward Gallery's outdoor commissioning programme in partnership with the Bagri Foundation, art collective Slavs and Tatars presents a large-scale sculpture, *Samovar* (2021) that reflects on the multicultural and colonial histories of tea. Hayward Gallery invited poet Anuar Duisenbinov to develop a poetic response to the artwork, exploring the history and legacy of tea in Central Asia. To write *A Spectral Path in the Azure* or *Testimonies about Tea*, Duisenbinov invited members of the art community in Kazakhstan, which includes Kazakhs, Koreans, Tatars, Russians, Dungans and Uighurs among others, to share personal memories and traditions relating to tea culture. Using these stories as inspiration, he then crafted poetic retellings of the stories, each different in perspective, structure and tone.



Anuar Duisenbinov. Photo: Yura Matsiyun

Anuar Duisenbinov (born 1985) is a Kazakh poet, translator, member of the bULt art group, mediator of SteppeSpace, a project on Central Asian culture; manager of the publishing program of the “Tselinny” Center of Contemporary Culture. Published in *Polutona*, *textonly*, *Literatura*, *Soloneba*, *Helikopter*, *Esquire*, *Satori*, and *Satenai*; Duisenbinov co-authored the Spoken Word Project ‘[Balkhash Dreams](#)’.

A spectral path in the azure or testimonies about tea

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A summer kitchen or maybe an “as yï”
is what we call an outbuilding in the gardens next to private houses
our home in Sarkand had one too, in warm seasons
meals were cooked there on the white wood stove near the threstlebed
called topchan where men gathered to play preferans, a card game
while kids were running underfoot, in the garden
you feel the heat from fried dough, boursak, in your palms
the incarnation of human warmth
from heart to dough, and into one more tiny body
everything comes from it, from one enormous substance
the hot spring of miracles
here is one: the cream, kaimak, was skimmed
off the boiling milk and you dipped your boursak in it
and put it in your mouth while the water in the samovar is still whispering
while you feed the fire with wood chips
and wait for your keseshka, as we call a piala here, a tea bowl
the heat cycle is born at the low round table, dastarqan
touch each steaming piala
each cloudless heart
then grab a sweet sugar-dusted khvorost cookie off the table
carry it away in your teeth, sit under an apple tree but then see
right in the middle of the garden a rocky boulder grows from the ground
it blocks the garden, the topchan and the wood stove
the large bunches of grapes in the crystal bowl
the candy dish with your favorite Karakum chocolates
your dad’s pialas and him writing down the score
your mom who is rolling the dough for boursaki
a fairytale dough ball that rolled out from the house
laughter, dogs barking, birds chirping
the sky and the clouds
that black boulder is growing out of my chest
rocks crackling

crystalline shine
only the smoke from the samovar is visible above it
a thin thread, a spectral path in the azure
I dive into the azure and become translucent
and no one can any longer ask that question: "where am I?"

*

I wake up in the concealed Ishim's azure
in January when the river is in its cold and thick slumber
my pillow still remembers the shape of sleep
I get out of bed and open the fridge
bite into a cold dumpling, manta
get into the shower
mechanical electric heat
the water heated by coal
do not warm me
I transition from the carbonized plant life
to the daily compromise
of a cup of tea from a teabag

but then was ever a compromise like this offered to those from Southern China
in the first millennium AD
to those who first discovered tea
was ever a compromise like this offered to the Buddhists
who spread it to Tibet, Japan and all through China
was ever a compromise like this offered to the Mongolian conquerors
who drank tea with milk, fat and salt
was ever a compromise like this offered to the Indians
in whose country the British laid out tea plantations
and it was then perhaps that the sacrament of tea
stopped being manifest, it started to flicker
was it not by that flickering that the seas of that time lived
and so did the merchant ships that redrew the boundaries of the world
is it not that flickering that I now see in my cold cup of tea
in the tea bag on the bottom in the glow from an LED light bulb

is it not from that flickering light that the same question emerges
again

where am I
asks a good son
where am I
asks a beloved grandson
where am I
asks a righteous husband
where am I
asks a responsible father
where am I
asks a loyal brother
where am I
asks an obedient nephew
where am I
asks a talented student
where am I
asks an efficient office worker

who is this budding poet
who is this weariless party animal
why do they serve puer at this party
how do you tell a friend about your love
why do these clouds take the forms of happiness
where is this music taking me
why am I crying while kissing you
can my tears replace the words of love
can a kiss ever be replicated
what is this whisper inside me
your hands are feeding the fire
my inner blackness flares up, burns
how blind is this sparkling joy
how can I make out anything in this azure
it's all steam and the soaring

and a brittle sound of a final good-bye
which is ripening now in the auricle of silence
there is no one left to walk
only the spectral path in the azure
it walks itself

*

I see flickers of that path today
in a contrail or in the line of steam from a samovar
it seems I can follow it and return for a while
into teatime with grandma, before and after dinner
before and after supper, sometimes in the middle of the night
cheese curds, irimshik, fried sweet flour, talkan, dried apricots, nuts
are served on the table, and there is also my favorite, chak chak
which is so full of sweet honey that I once became allergic to it
I always drank my tea half-lying down, my head on my grandma's lap
or while hugging her, leaning against her
and people would joke that my scoliosis is from drinking tea
stop lying on your grandma, go run around in the garden

Oh I will go and run around, there will be lots of running yet
from myself and back, in circles and in spirals
on the ice of the frozen river, on the bridge leading from and to nowhere
on the steppe in endless defocus, on the forb meadows of trial and error
on minefields along some other borders and limits
through the enchanted twilight forest
where light ripens in the follicle of vague predictions
where on the other end of bad trips having tied myself in a knot
I lie in wait, emasculated
trying to rebuild myself into a builder of a new life
the shaper of a new shape
I really try to stay positive
really try to switch to listening to others
delve into their stories and leave myself alone
in this profound tender azure

with only a flickering thread of smoke
and no courage for a backstroke

*

So what if I delve into other stories
walk the spectral path
to other worlds
and using something simple and everyday
that unites us all
that warms us
I could ask about something important
complex and many-faced
an element of our root code
as tea drinking is
and collect testimonies
would it be possible to feel
less alone?
to stop to stop being
a black monolith of the steppe ?

Mesmerizing skills of kelins or daughters-in-law

“For my relatives from my wife’s side of the family
– this is what nağaşy means –
tea has a special relevance
they drink it in any weather
it’s especially amusing to see them do it
in plus 50 Celsius

they still use samovars there
and it is socially acceptable in their community
to consume 3-4 pots of strong tea concentrate
with lots of boiling water
by 3-4 people

kelins pour a wee bit, just to cover the bottom
It makes the cycle of keseshki
and the fact that the kelins remember which kese is whose
mesmerizing

some people toss in a hard candy
to mark their kese

as for my own kin, jÿrt,
we don't make a big deal about tea
we pour it into big mugs
drink it as a purely symbolic gesture
just to get that Gestalt closure."

Sweat and absolute happiness

"Tea is my most favorite thing in the world
your other interviewees will probably say this too
and they will probably also write
how closely our culture is linked to it
and mention the tradition of "and now let's
sit down and drink some tea by ourselves"
when the guests are finally gone
– "al endi özimiz otyryp şai işeiik" –
as well as the custom of kelin-şai, the kelin-tea
they might even remember
that the first wave of Kazakh intelligentsia
were criticized for frequenting teahouses
the same way hipsters are for their coffee
or maybe they will even mention the eternal dilemma:
do you first pour milk or the tea brew?
the tea brew!

all of this has a place in my life too
I've always needed tea for survival

it has been a marker of normality
a guide like a beacon
like road markings
a street light

even when everything around me crumbled
I knew I could grab a hold of my keseshka
or a mug
and wait it out

having collected enough empty bottles in several days
with the money we got
my sister and I would buy first the cheapest package of loose tea
you might still remember those packages, the square ones

when we were left for several years and stayed
with one horrid woman
permission to take our tea at the common table meant
that we would be beaten less that day
or not at all

bread and, if you are lucky, a slice of meat and tea –
there is nothing better at 4 am
when everyone in the house is finally asleep
and you can stay up, maybe read
before the morning hubbub starts again

when I come home after a difficult day
when I am sick
crying
laughing –
I always make myself some tea

milk must always be in the house
whatever happens

milk is what I buy and bring to my friend's house –
she has tasty, expensive tea
that her students give her
but there's never milk

while we sit and chat in her kitchen
I drink the entire tea pot
I sweat and feel absolutely happy
and peaceful.”

Teatime as meditation

“My grandma used to tell me
that some people like their tea to be served super-hot
and just enough poured to cover the bottom
otherwise, a guest might think
that he is not respected

but that's not how I've always done it
I pour it when it's not hot
(because drinking boiling water is not good for you)
and make the cup full but not strong
I use a big pot
in which I premix
for convenience
water, milk and tea brew

and I've always thought it strange
that some people drink boiling water
also why would you want to pour so little

but my ex-husband's family
was exactly like this: they drank boiling water
on the bottom of the piala

and that's why you had to pour often
and periodically heat the kettle
to get the water boiling

this is a much more patriarchal
way of drinking tea
when the woman who pours it
is maximally tied to the process

another thing: you had to dump the tea
that remained in the kese into a separate bowl
and the milk had to be strained through a sieve

so there were all those additional procedures
not to mention that boiling water is bad for your esophagus

I didn't mind it too much though
I even thought there was some
meditative aspect to it
that idea that you should be present more
and keep track of your surroundings
as opposed to when you have premixed the tea

and this way of serving tea also allows
you to customize each cup
to make it stronger, weaker.”

Colonizers' tea

“I read in primary sources that explorers and military commanders
of the Russian Empire
advised those who go to the Kazakh lands to bring along tea and a samovar
so that they (the Kazakhs) would make tea drinking their tradition

somehow, I stopped drinking it

I almost never brew it

my parents back in Kokshetau often go out to the forest to have tea
they have dinner, then they sit around and go:

let's go to the forest and have some tea

they load their entire family into a minivan

and then they go there and heat their samovar with birchbark

they always keep a samovar in the van

I bet their love for the samovar comes from the village, their aul."

Tea bags against tradition

"Our family must have lost the tea drinking tradition
when tea bags arrived on the market

when I was little my father taught me to make tea as his mother taught him:

take a teapot, fill it with boiling water, then dump it

and only then put in the same number of teaspoons of loose tea

as the number of people who will drink it

pour boiling water over it

set aside to brew

but we haven't done this in a while

we do not own a teapot

we have a box of Greenfield tea bags

lately my daughter

started brewing tea for herself

she only drinks loose Turkish tea

she takes a sip and utters pensively "teeaaa"

I prefer coffee

tea is too boring."

Tea as a link to identity

“For me, personally, ever since I was a child it meant a lot to spend time in the kitchen with my family drinking tea

most often, it was tea with milk
(my mom prefers condensed milk made in Shadrinsk)

we almost never drank green tea
just for variety’s sake
but never together as a family

we never had coffee together
but since I started living on my own, in the past 5 years, I began to drink it at home, during the day, and brewing it more often than tea

but I haven’t stopped drinking tea
and it’s imperative to me that I brew loose tea
and not use tea bags
(I’ve always avoided them as the “lesser” tea)

when I was little, I often visited my Uyghur relatives from my father’s side (we did not grow up together) and at their place I was treated to tea with milk and salt people spell it differently but they called it “atkenshai” and it was served with dried flat bread and khvorost cookies

and I just couldn’t see why people drank that

but after I had lived in Petersburg and came back I understood that taste

for me, this tea became a sort of a connection with the other part of my complicated identity

and 3 years ago, I must have been the only one

who got high on that tea in Mongolia
(that's the only thing they drink there)

here's another detail – when I lived in Petersburg
and during my trip to Canada
I was the only one
who got obsessed with wanting to brew tea

they mostly just buy tea bags there
(it depends of course where you end up)

but there is almost no good tea at the store

so my mom mailed packages of “Piala” and “Jambo”
to Petersburg.”

Fast tea and slow tea

“We love tea in my family

tea is about long conversations after dinner
about warm evenings and hosting guests

quality time in the evenings with friends
means a few pots of tea brew

mornings also start with tea
but this tea is different
it is strong
black
quick
you can drink it without sitting down
or sometimes forget about it at all

evening teatime is slow

the day fades in the cup
over tea, you talk about the events of the day
about joys and worries
fragments of your life

in my family, we also drink green tea during hot spells in the summer –
it is an Uzbek tradition
it's amazing how it saves you during the insane month of July

tea for me is about human contact and people
with whom you share a pot of tea brew
and a good conversation.”

Vegan tea

“Our teatime was most special when guests arrived
or when they were leaving

we would drink our tea black, kara shai, or with milk, sütün
it is much tastier when milk comes from your own cows

we drank tea at breakfast
at lunch
and at 5 pm
when our mother got back from work
and then at dinner
and before bedtime
about 6 times a day

tea tastes much better if you drink it from kese (pialas) than from mugs

now we share a house with friends but
everything I just mentioned stays the same

except we are vegans now

and we drink tea without milk

our mother also taught us to make kese about 40% full
that is, to pour less than a half

this is so that tea has time to cool
and to show that you won't get tired pouring more tea."

Fried tea

"All the cool things in my childhood happened with tea
and that was because my grandma made lots of varieties of tea with milk
one of them was my favorite
it was called kuurma-tea, fried tea
I am not sure what it's called in Kazakh
it's salted slightly and it's made with wheat flakes
it's a type of grain
when you put it in milk, it forms clumps
and it was cool to fish for those clumps, to chew them to pieces, etc.
they were so soft, awesome, and loose inside

tea was an integral part of any meal

I remember that my grandma from the father's side had that habit
of accompanying every sip of tea with a sound, even if it wasn't hot
she would take a sip and exhale loudly "aaakh"
she would always do it

in time

when I moved out

the tradition to have meals together with the family somewhat faded
family teatime faded away too

now it feels more like a special ritual when someone comes

it does not happen very often

nowadays I prefer regular green tea."

Tea instead of coke

“I am not such a big fan of tea now
as I have used to be seven or so years ago
when I would shop for lots of special teas
like the Chinese teas at the Yelyan market
I would just brew it all the time

I just loved the taste
works as hair of the dog, wets your throat

but to say that I have ever felt the effect of the tea?
not at all, never

but this might be because of my generally messed up biochemical make-up

I know quite a few tea-oholics
people who cannot live without tea at all

in our family, tea was drunk with milk and without

in the 90s, we drank extremely strong tea, more like tea concentrate
and you had to add milk to it

later, tea bags arrived
and that tea could already be drunk without milk

my mom and dad separated
mom worked

and for me, tea was that sweetened beverage
like nowadays kids love all those carbonated drinks
It's important to kids to have something sweet to drink
but in my childhood the only sweet beverage
was tea with sugar

and we did not have those family gatherings
when tea is used to bring people closer together at the table
it only existed at my grandma's, in the village
when everyone got together to have tea

but in the Pavlodar city environment
in our neighborhood called Pavlodar-2
I do not think tea brought many people together

I'd say strong tea brew brought people together in prison camps
or koknar, poppy tea, could do it too."

Tea as a conversation starter

"We did not treat tea as a ceremony in our family
the one that has "special" cups
or the required steps for brewing it

tea drinking was rather a synonym for having a conversation
than for hedonism

let's have some tea = let's have a chat

but!

we had to serve something tasty with it
even if it were simple croutons."

Champion tea and herbs from the Karatau mountains

"In my family – we come from the south of Kazakhstan
we drink tea minimum 3–4 times a day
we get together and drink tea from pialas
and this is our conversation of the day
our family time

or serious conversations with parents
also happen over tea

day in and day out we drink one kind of tea
“Champion,” a Ceylon tea
large leaf

but we also gather wild herbs
in the Karatau mountains
and steep those as well

this tradition was transposed into my life
I love tea
it’s very important to me
specifically drinking it from the piala tea bowls

for me the best gift probably
is a piala or loose tea”

Tea for all occasions

“Like in nearly every country in the world
There is no truly acceptable tea in Kazakhstan

my favorite kinds of Chinese red tea
(high grade Keemun, such as Keemun Ha Ya)
and good green tea
(high grade of the Dragonwell Supreme
and even such cheaper and more ubiquitous varieties
as Emperor’s Clouds and Mist)
I have to buy either in Russia
or in the US.

I know of only a few decent stores in Almaty

there's nothing in Astana, so to speak

I mostly drink tea
rarely coffee

5-7 cups of tea a day

I brew my tea
using mostly a gold-plated filter
occasionally filter bags
or a small Chinese clay Yixing teapot

I only drink elite varieties
preferably from known plantations

I do not drink tea from tea bags or tea with flavorings -
just out of courtesy when visiting someone
or out of necessity when travelling

as they say, I'm hooked

tea is the day's source of caffeine
and life energy for me

if I haven't had some good Keemun
or decent Ceylon tea -
the day starts off rusty

if, instead of tea, they give me coffee
it's torture

after coffee, I must drink some tea
because coffee does not give me the right kick
I drink tea at work during the day
for relaxation

to boost my confidence
for concentration

or when I do not know
what to do next

if I travel somewhere
I always bring my own tea
depending on what's available there

when I make a hotel reservation
I specially request a tea kettle

when I travel home to the States
I order tea to be delivered to the address
where I will be staying,

when I am in St. Petersburg
I go to my favorite shops right away and buy tea.”

Tea as a rite of abundance and a cultural phenomenon

“For our family, tea has been an important part of life

it was a family tradition.

we have always loved tea in our family
I remember this since I was very little
I spent a part of my childhood in the village
at my grandma's and grandpa's house
in the far end of Kazakhstan, in Kustanay region

our house was on the edge of the village
beyond it, there were fields and forests

apart from our regular meals: breakfast, dinner, supper
we also had teatime

there was an abundance of dishes on the table
even if we weren't having a breakfast, dinner or supper
there was always butter on the table
honey, cheese, sausage, a lot of stuff

a table for tea implied abundance

it was very important for my grandma
because when she was little she had lived through the famine
during the war
and this is why it was always very important to her
that there was always everything
and that we could use it for food
enjoy it
and share it with everyone who came to visit

teatime was a ritual meeting of all family members
everyone has his chores in the village
when we were children we had our games
and fun
we also helped with some things
there was a lot of space
we often left the house, took walks or rode our bikes
then we came back
and those were the occasions for meetings and conversations
and for warmth of course

the ritual role of tea is well known
it unites people inside the family
those regular meetings
conversation, the spirit of trust and love

and with people from outside the family, when someone visits
it also unites people, makes them closer

you need to feed the guest
because teatime, I repeat
implied butter, sour cream, often pancakes
other baked goods
some ham, honey
jam, candy

it was a feast of abundance

in some sense it was a rite of abundance

a ritual of prosperity

this was very important especially for that generation
the members of which lived through very hard times
the times of the famine

as children, we did not understand all of those shades of meaning
but we felt them

now as a grown-up person, a researcher
I understand everything

this beverage gives energy
and the ritual itself gives energy

it conditions us for something kind and good
I would say that tea creates a space for people

the space of interaction
the space of trust
the space of harmony

this beverage and everything that is connected to it:
traditions, associations
is very important

without a doubt, tea is a cultural phenomenon

that is, it is not just a phenomenon of eating and drinking

it is much more a phenomenon of culture

a symbolic one

I have always felt this fully in my family.”

Grandma, Japanese garden and tangerine peels

“My grandmother preferred herbal tea to black tea
there was no green tea at home
it appeared much later
when I first went to China
and from there brought as a gift to older relatives
terracotta teapots and green tea

nobody liked the taste

I remember very clearly when green tea came
and everyone groaned

because all my life in every house
there was only black tea, of two kinds
the first was a very strong black tea
and the second was a very strong black tea with milk

sometimes we'd have tea with jam
because I am from the a Russian family

the jam never ran out
on any of the branches of our family tree

my grandmother lived by the first Almaty train station
that entire family cluster of railroad workers lived close
to the railroad depot
where my grandfather fixed locomotives
and my grandmother did her own simpler tasks
they lived in that neighborhood where everyone went to the depot in the morning

they had a perfectly tiny garden
I called it the Japanese garden
there, on a ten square meter plot every crop grew in bits
but more than anything else there were different kinds of flowers

and so grandmother collected rose petals, some kind of herbs
unfortunately, since all those recipes are lost, I don't know what kind they were

and also there were always these tangerine peels
this I remember very, very well

my grandmother was from the generation that had to deal with the war
they lived modestly, had to save on everything

and that turned into an awesome kind of eco-living
as I understood later

these were the people who washed plastic bags

grandmother, when she went to the bazaar
tried to buy a little bit from each vendor
she used to say, this way the entire bazaar gets a little bit of her money

and so the tangerines, that we ate in the winter
their peels could not simply be discarded

these peels were laid on the radiators to dry

because first of all the essential oils were released into the house
and it smelled fantastic

second of all, this was supposed to prevent viral infections

and all the peels ended up in this tea

it was nearly colorless

but amazingly delicious

after grandmother passed away

I really miss this taste”

The Green Bazaar, herbs from Alatau and foreign friends

“and in order to somehow support and restore my own self
when I miss her I go to the Green Bazaar

the herbalists there have a regular kind of herbal blend
called the “energy blend”

it contains herbs, petals, rose hips

(I think grandmother also used rose hips)

the only thing missing are the tangerine peels

I really like to brew this tea

I always send it in care packages

and take it with me when I go abroad

as part of Almaty

as the taste of Almaty

because these herbs are gathered in the Almaty foothills

rosehips from roadside bushes
Alatau scents and tastes
it's my favorite present to give to my foreigner friends
and I think by now it's their favorite present as well"

To levitate within the smell of apples

"and also when I was a child we lived in the Far East
deep in the taiga, in a military town
because dad was in the military, that's where he was posted

every summer we would return to Almaty
and leaving Almaty we would bring with us apples in wooden crates
these apples would then lay under the bed, in darkness
we would eat them bit by bit almost until the New Year's

I remember sleeping in my bed
as though levitating within the smell of apples

this is why the smell of apples became for me the smell of Almaty
this is very cliché, of course, but it is how it was

every Saturday
in order for everyone to have a wash in the limited circumstances of our
taiga lifestyle
my dad needed to fire up the wood-burning broiler "Titan" in our bathroom
and we'd take turns washing

when we would leave the bath dad made tea with apples
it was a big mug of tea with cut up Almaty apples
and red ribbons of peel

it was such an aromatic and delicious tea
I'm sure it had black tea for its base
but I only remember the apples"

Astronomer's tea

“here's a story about astronomers
at some point I became friends with the guard
of the Tien Shan astronomy station
which I visited every weekend
to make a film about it

the film didn't pan out
what did pan out was a great friendship
and that's where they taught to make astronomer's tea

this is how you brew astronomer's tea
you have to gather up every kind of tea that you have
mix them and brew a very strong tea

you can't make it from just black tea
at the very least you have to find
at least three granules of green tea

this is why when I went there
through the Almarasan gorge
to the very Almaty Lake
and even higher, and to the right – to the observatory
I always carried with me bags of different teas
it was very important

when we would get there, we'd drink cognac, of course
the guard would say “for the driver who got you here”
and then, at night, we would drink the astronomer's tea between shots

I suppose they drink it to stay awake
during nighttime observations.”

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