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Crossing the Caspian

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move. It will have to be good. Something had come between us. So this is love, I thought.

James walked into the bar. I saw him, sitting down. He was drinking a Brandy Alexander. Sour milk. James says brandy has ambience. He struggled to cross his legs under the bar. It was only an act. I decided to take the initiative. Things can't go on like this, I said. I walked up to him like a friend. The bartender said my motives were transparent.

I'm doing collaborations with several women now. It's a way to get back into the swing of writing, I guess . . . (from a letter to the editor)

Crossing the Caspian / James Mechem and Sydney Martin

Crossing the Caspian on the ferry, we devoured caviar shamelessly and drank Wyborowa vodka straight from tall glasses.

We had crossed the Kirghiz steppes and were on our way home.

Naturally we were drunk as lords by the time we got across.

I liked Sydney the first time I ever saw her. I have described that meeting. Now we were on the Caspian, drunk as lords.

Passengers ask the conductor, What place is this? Where are we now? We were about to debark in Baku.

The movies would show our debarkation better than I. Don't you see us throbbing into the bay, the crescent city in front of us, a statue on the hill coming closer and clearer?

I put my arm around Sydney's waist. We were standing at the rail three sheets to the wind. Everything was spinning round and round us. The movies are right. It's exciting to land in a foreign seaport.

Stuffed with caviar and awash with vodka. Whipped by the salt air. Yes, the movies are right. Snow lay over the city. Deeper into her furs. Sydney ducked her chin. Deeper into her furs.

The crowd of people was waiting for us somewhere. Cheering and waving. So this is it. I put my glasses in my pocket. James looked hazy, an impressionist painting. It is like this when you finish a long voyage. James was leaning with one hand on the railing. A skinny Humphrey Bogart. I started to give him one of my cigars. Everyone knows James. James is a big shot. I have described to you many times what a big shot he is.

James was standing beside me. His hand almost frozen to the railing. We didn't speak of it. He was wearing blue moccasins. His toes curled up inside. Bunched up like kittens in a sack. It's a good thing we were drunk. Drunk on the very best vodka.

I remember the night. The moon. We bought the moccasins in Texas. It was a buttery Texas moon. James found the love of his life. We had crossed Texas six times in a touring car. She was standing in the auditorium. We all had high hopes. It didn't work out. She was a tall Marge Piercy. Or a short Carolyn Kizer. James said, this thing is bigger than both of us.

Now we were crossing the Caspian. It was like a symbolist poem. James pulled his hand off the railing. Sighed. He was being very cosmopolitan. James stroked his cashmere vest. I think it smelled like moth balls. I have described that vest before. His little moustache twitched. We heard the waves slapping together below us. We had The Best of Everything. Everything.

Three Poems from *Slices* / James Mechem and Ann Menebroker

please send me one telegram
was written in lipstick across her pillow

it reminded her to sheet the bed
and buy a pillowcase

the breakfast code was broken in two
he was wearing jockey shorts
a bit of corvée if you must know
he told himself
hearing her spit on the iron

she unbuttoned her white blouse
he smoked one cigarette
all his life one thing had led to another
now at the age of fifty
he was turning over a new leaf