

# IN LADAKH

## A Poem



Gautam Verma

First published in the United Kingdom in 2005 by  
Shearsman Books Ltd  
58 Velwell Road  
Exeter EX4 4LD

at [www.shearsman.com/pages/books/ebooks/ebooks\\_home.html](http://www.shearsman.com/pages/books/ebooks/ebooks_home.html)

Copyright © Gautam Verma, 2005.

100 miles trailed the river

stones beige, gray  
flat as flying saucers

each day coming or going

*where no photographs allowed*

to keep the car safe  
& us

on roads as these

*better by far for your cellulites  
than all electric devices in Italy*



cows (first the noun and then the verb, presumably) saunter  
no – theirs a more purposeful  
walking, plod

the wide street across  
and will not be rushed

to make a thing swift and serious  
as the river

bellies forth the carcass of a buffalo

from the world afield news  
the Pareechu dam will burst  
has sent residents of **R** & residents of **L**  
from their homes

behind closed doors: grains, cloth, furnitures

a point above the river  
a wide berth, a green  
pasture

3 black stone stupas  
testify

to what was once the town of **B**



at 10,000 feet: sheet rock, shale rock, scrub  
at 7,000 feet apple orchards in the valley

lone stones in the road

a hundred versions of the same

eg.        SPEED THRILLS BUT KILLS  
             NO HURRY NO WORRY  
             BE GENTLE ON MY CURVES  
             ON THE BEND GO SLOW FRIEND  
             FAST WON'T LAST  
             OVERTAKER BEWARE THE UNDERTAKER  
             BETTER TO BE MR. LATE THAN LATE MR.    etc.

in the window of the moving car the mountain framed

as though its image had detached itself  
and would not be moved

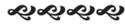
from here too  
the river is slate  
a channel in stone

and nothing moving

little white pea flowers  
little red stalks of healing

another sign, another slogan: *WORK THE WORKMAN MAKES*

sore in body and mind  
the driver's head  
for a night of drinking



the river is a great gray clayey mass  
and sometimes moves against itself  
to make the thick white scum or foam



in pre-dawn light  
following the river through mountain folds

a convoy of trucks  
a truck at a time

on roads as these

occasionally  
a river crossing  
where a mountain stream has breached its channel

dawn: through clouds  
broadening bands of light  
across stony mountain side

and a silence  
ready to overtake  
the rattling of this ride

the route though there  
is nothing given  
stretch by stretch            a thing in making

at Baralacha we are equal in height  
to the highest peak in Europe



rock striations: layered or swirl

jutting outcrops

a tunnel arch  
a circle arch

between two crags  
a crescent

at Pang strange  
formations of sand and stone (not adobe not abode)

across the mountain face

at Lachlang La  
small stone stacks  
to mark the place



at 15,000 feet  
the Mori plains

for 15 miles nothing living  
but a pale green grass

the weather at Rohtang was fierce  
but here at Tanglang La the wind  
flutters and snaps the prayer flags

blows off the glacier

*this handwriting you will not read  
bespeaks  
a person secretive and meticulous*

but in this wind  
will be no secrets

in gulps of air  
is barely a breath



3,000 feet below  
again the river

light green, almost  
transparent

purple hills, horses  
wheat cultivation

chortens, small &  
large, white

by the roadside

the roadworker's faces  
black as the cooking tar

no river will rinse away



outside the prayer hall  
at Tikse

Yama holds  
between his teeth (& taloned feet)  
the wheel of life

and ringed round  
human figures

from death to delivery  
& again

some Buddhas:

Avalokiteshvara, Buddha of compassion  
(of whom Dalai lama is incarnate)  
Tsonkhapa, founder of the Gelupa  
Manjushri, Buddha of wisdom  
Sakyamuni, the Buddha himself (as himself)  
Maitreya Buddha, the Coming One

in clay  
three storey's tall  
gold gilded

also to be found  
at Tikse



MahaKala who dispersed  
the Boni gods and brought  
Buddhism to Ladakh

has in Tibetan representation  
a rather demonic aspect

but in the depiction  
of the 11th century Kashmiri artist  
above the door  
of the temple shrine at Alchi

she is shown – riding  
a blue horse in a robe  
of peacock feathers holding  
a conch shell aloft – to be

delicate and blue and beautiful



prayer hall at Lamayuru

low long benches, red-carpeted  
from the rafters white silks, banners – red yellow green orange pink blue

the monks in their red robes (the little ones too)

a slow steady chanting  
rhythmic twirl of bell and dorjey

and then – horns, bells, cymbals, conch shells – at intervals

the great drum roll (vibration  
that's right through you)

like no music & no noise  
either

some other listening  
than the ear's



a dry bowl between mountains

green plots: Khardung

the village scraped  
from dust and rock

by the dusty roadside

small yellow wildflowers  
tufts of wild lavender



flower-born, the second Buddha  
Padmasambhava

*(has a pencil line mustache)*

and at his feet

two small rats  
drinking

from the water bowls



dark in the room of oracles

*where no photographs allowed*

grain-carpet on the floor

*first seeds of any harvest*

and prayers daily from 4 to 7

*to keep the village crop safe*

*& the villagers*



Yama – in the inner  
sanctum of the mandala at Diskit

five monks, kneeling or seated,  
about the stone slab

and a fine stone dust in a steady  
stream from the metal pipettes

four days in the making