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## Expensive Trips

By PANKAJ MISHRA

### GOD LIVES IN ST. PETERSBURG

And Other Stories.

By Tom Bissell.

212 pp. Pantheon Books. \$20.

IN his travel book, "Chasing the Sea" (2003), Tom Bissell described the extraordinary disappearance of Uzbekistan's Aral Sea: the Soviet Union, trying to divert water for cotton farming, had turned much of this large inland lake into a desert. Years earlier, Bissell had been a Peace Corps volunteer in Uzbekistan, but had returned home early for "emotional and complicated" reasons. A kind of helpless rage -- over both personal and national inadequacies -- drove "Chasing the Sea" and its detailing of the political and environmental devastation in the "jigsaw of polysyllabic, hostile-sounding nations" to the south of Russia. Bissell's first collection of short fiction, "God Lives in St. Petersburg," deals mostly with Americans adrift in Central Asia; it also seems suffused by what one of his characters describes as "the guilty futility one feels in countries less fortunate than America."

In "Aral," an American biologist named Amanda travels to the Aral Sea basin on behalf of the United Nations. She wishes to be as famous as Rachel Carson, Bissell writes, but "mostly she crunched numbers" and "ran computer simulations that posited what would happen with no Aral Sea at all." Amanda "e-mailed her findings to other biologists and tried to forget about the decades of pollution and insecticide and toxins in the Aral's exposed and windblown seabed." She also tried to forget about the thousands of children at risk for anemia.

The reader expects that this commonplace, career-obsessed academic, traveling with two colleagues she hates, will soon get her comeuppance in Uzbekistan. But it's still a bit surprising when a K.G.B. official, the father of children apparently blinded by the toxins of the Aral Sea, abducts her, ridicules her naïve nostrums for Uzbekistan -- charging citizens for water consumption -- and subjects her to an anti-American harangue. "The difference between us, Professor, is that we know what suffering is," he begins. The official then accuses American businessmen of treating "our women like cheap whores" before going on to attack "your corporations that take advantage of our workers while thinking we are too stupid to know the difference, your Peace Corps workers who castigate us as lazy and stinking. You have no tragedy and forget that such things exist, and if you know they do, you blame those whom the tragedy befalls. Americans are a people who've let their souls grow fat."

The K.G.B. man proceeds to strand her in the desert. But Amanda's ordeal is not nearly as harsh as that of an American journalist, Donk, in the long story "Death Defier." Donk, who "believed in and tried to think about very little," thrives on the "subterranean connections world media outlets had expertly tunneled beneath continents of human misery." His leg is blown off by an unexploded American bomb in Afghanistan.

In the title story, a tormented American missionary in a Central Asian city, who can't feel God anymore, "though he could still hear him, floating and distant, broadcasting a surflike static," degenerates swiftly and nastily. In two stories, "Expensive Trips Nowhere" and "Animals in Our Lives," relationships forged in America fail to survive exposure to foreign societies and cultures. Another story opens with the son of the American ambassador in a Central Asian country having sex with two Russian women as his mother walks into his room. ("Two chicks at once, Mom," he boasts before she kicks him out of his home.) He later kills a man during a drunken spree and, as the story ends, faces the prospect of prison.

Not since Paul Bowles, perhaps, has an American writer given his compatriots so hard a time in his fiction. None of Bissell's characters are very likable, and one feels relieved to have encountered them in a short story rather than a novel. As the Irish writer Frank O'Connor once pointed out, the short story accommodates misfits and outcasts -- people at the fringes of human society -- far better than novels do.

Pankaj Mishra's most recent book is "An End to Suffering: The Buddha in the World." He is currently a fellow at the Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers at the New York Public Library.