

Contemporary Kazakh Literature
Prose Anthology

AIGUL KEMELBAYEVA

(b. 21.03.1965)



Aigul Kemelbayeva is a writer, screenwriter and literary critic. She graduated from Kirov Kazakh State University (now Āl- Farabi Kazakh National University, 1987) before going on to study fiction writing at Maxim Gorky Literary Institute in Moscow (1989–94). She worked for newspapers before taking up the position of head of the Literary Department at Ҷalibek Ҷuanyšbaev (Qalibek Quanyshbayev) Kazakh State Academic Theatre.

Kemelbayeva is the author of a variety of prose works, including a short story for children, ‘Žetinši ҝu rlyққа saâhat’ (A Trip

to the Seventh Continent, 1986), a collection of short stories, *Tobyłgysaj* (2001), and a novel, *Munara* (The Tower, 2003), as well as essay collections: *Mă žnùn žürek* (Majnun-Heart, 2013) and *Söz-Hikmet* (Words of Wisdom, 2016). She has published more than two hundred literary articles and essays in major Kazakhstani papers, many of which reflect on Kazakh literature in a wider, world literature perspective. Her short stories have been collected in *Nezavisimyy Kazakhstan: Antologiya Sovremennoy Literatury* (Kazakhstan During the Years of Independence: An Anthology of Modern Literature) published in 2013 in Moscow and translated into Turkish, and in a German anthology of international prose, *Glückliche Wirkungen: Eine Literarische Reise in Bessere Welten* (Berlin, 2017). She adapted Mağžan Žumabaev’s (Magzhan Zhumabayev) short story ‘Šolpannyң künási’ (Šolpan’s Sin) into the film *Küná* (Sin, 2005; dir. by Bolat Šárip).

She is the recipient of the Daryn State Youth Award for Literature (2000), as well as nineteen other literary awards, including the Baubek Bülkyšev Literary Prize of the Kazakhstan’s Union of Journalists (1998). She has been a member of the Kazakhstan Writers’ Union since 2001 and won the Soros Foundation – Kazakhstan award for a debut novel with *Munara* (2000).

Kôkenaj and Ƙalkaman

Dedicated to the bright memory of Anuarbek Isahanu ly, the direct descendant of Kôkenaj batyr

Ƙalkaman escaped his tribe on account of love...¹

The events narrated in the poem ‘Ƙalkaman-Mamyr’ (1912), by the great poet and philosopher Ša kerim Ƙu dajberdiu ly, took place exactly two hundred years earlier by the River Syr.

Polaris, the guiding star of the north, was born on the sky.

In a dream, Ƙalkaman saw one of his very distant ancestors, from the seventh preceding generation. The old man was walking a wet, straight path through the mountains, towards the smoky horizon. A cloth sack covered his horse’s head. A second rider followed, astride one horse and leading another.

Near the banks of the Syrdariâ, Ƙalkaman had been for a stroll with his friend Itbaça. During troubled times, Itbaça had lost both his parents; in terms of kinship and community, therefore, this sorrowful son was counted among the dead. Itbaça was ready to die without any fear, believing in the old expression: ‘After death, there is no humiliation’. In one of the more brutal battles, Itbaça had made way for Kôkenaj, giving that great hero his own horse and thereby saving his life.

A messenger arrived with news of a terrible rumour: the forces of the Dzungar Khanate, like melted ice on the ocean, were preparing to raid the peaceful Arġyn and Najman tribes. Kazakhs had enjoyed a calm winter that year; however, with mid-spring, when the cuckoos began singing in the woods, the number of invaders had doubled. The messenger had also alerted the Ūjsin tribe of the Senior žûz² that the Kyrgyz inhabiting the wide, open mountains and the Žetiôgiz River with their myriad horses were supplying the Dzungar chief Tayiji with weapons and food; they also equipped their horses. The Kyrgyz were sympathetic to the Dzungar and Kalmyk Khanates, and promised to join their war against the Kazakhs.

¹ From ‘Ƙalkaman-Mamyr’ by Ša kerim Ƙu dajberdiu ly. Translated by the National Bureau of Translations.

² The žûz are ancient Kazakh tribal divisions. The Senior žûz inhabit the southern and south-eastern parts of Kazakhstan; the Middle žûz are found in the central, eastern and northern parts of the country; and the Junior žûz derive from the west and south-west.

By then, the clans inhabiting Žetisu and Қаратау were exhausted from moving back and forth, fleeing each invasion. All young Kazakhs, including Қалқаман and Итбақа, had become accustomed to sleeping with their scabbards and combat knives. In better days, they would roam the steppe freely, visiting any Kazakh dwellings they came across.

Someone – a warrior? No, a dervish – was walking along the road, hurrying beside the Syrdariâ and scaring the bustards flocked there like ants. The young men lying on the green grass, their horses tied up, raised their heads at once.

‘Greetings to you, young men!’ the dervish addressed them. ‘May God save your souls! Damned, rotten life!’

He settled down on the grass on his back, put his sack on his head and fell asleep immediately, snoring. He dozed a bit, woke up quickly and then stared at the steppe stretching into the distance.

‘Our ancients bore witness that this place, the Қарahan Hills, once was a virgin land ruled by Итбақа beg!’³ he said.

Итбақа flinched, surprised to hear his name spoken by the stranger.

‘I do not own a house or a hearth’, continued the dervish. ‘The leaves are my blanket, the ground is my bed. I’m as meek as a lamb. Dervishes often move to and fro, from one place to another, existing like that. You are always under threat on the battlefield, my lad, annihilator of Kalmyks. Your enemies will curse you, demanding: “A humiliating death for the Kazakh!” By the way, you will live long.’

‘I wouldn’t say that everywhere I go, I see Қорқыт’s grave’,⁴ replied Итбақа. ‘Probably, death more resembles a lightning bolt that strikes you suddenly.’

‘I’m making my way to our forefather Қорқыт’s grave, in fact’, said the dervish. ‘Nomads will move from the Syrdariâ soon. You, brave men, have your targets. I know you’re mighty combatants, but be cautious – you are not quick to obey the elders, and this will cause you many troubles. You will bear the hard life of a warrior, making the woods your home, abandoning your clan against your will.’

He turned his bronze face to Қалқаман, and his eyes grew sharp. ‘My respectable young man’, he said to him, ‘you are the honourable son of a famous tribe. It is said that if a girl does not cast the first glance, a man will not see her at all. Your glory will be as bright as Қорқыт’s light, illuminating the years to come. Be careful with your sentiments and emotions!’

³ *Beg* – title for noblemen, more specifically, a lower military-administrative rank after khan.

⁴ Қорқыт was an eighth-/ninth-century philosopher, poet and musician. According to legend, he sought immortality as his life drew to a close. In lonely torment, he hollowed out a precursor to the *қобыз*, a classical Kazakh stringed instrument associated with shamanic healing. Playing its music, he staved off death – until he fell asleep and was bitten by a venomous snake. Thus the saying: ‘Wherever you go, there is Қорқыт’s grave’ (i.e. you can’t avoid death).

The dervish took out a flute and played a mournful melody, which sounded like a camel calf bewailing the loss of its mother. Then he started to ponder aloud: ‘When the mother Syr was named *Қызyl-Dariâ* and flowed across the gigantic *Қарақұм*, its channels never dried, by the power of Almighty; it flowed as if it wept from being thirsty in the wild sands. Since our ancestors dwelled in the *Қарahan Mountains*, the Syr flowed to the *Kerderi Sea*, which was renamed the *Ôgiz Sea*; I suppose people have forgotten about those years. *Қорқыт* was born during that peaceful time. A legend says that once upon a time, a slave from the Syr who was begging for his freedom had a prophetic dream: the Creator of the world, the Almighty, showed the rainbow to his beloved slave. Can you imagine this Absolute Power selecting stars with different colours of flowers, and joining them into a brilliant arc? Green, yellow, red and blue, shining... why was it hard to believe, then, that two great waters should stream into the sea? When the earth and sky merge, the soul of a man rises up. According to our ancestors’ premonition, the two waters which flowed into the *Khazar Sea* – the *Syrdariâ* and the *Âmudariâ* – changed direction and streamed towards the *Kerderi Sea*, a sacred area, enabling the *Noğaj*, a tribe rich with *batyrs*,⁵ to shelter from invasions and wars. Now it is your turn, and you must stand in defence... If you do not mind, let’s have our dinner here.’

They hunted for bustards, dug a triangular hearth and started the fire. The flames illuminated the rays of the sunset.

‘Since ancient times’, continued the dervish, ‘when they escaped from their enemies, my people acquired the habit of returning to the *Syrdariâ*, calling it “Great Mother”. The *Betpaқdala Desert* defends its saiga antelopes, and its *Kazakhs*, too. A silent desert is a shelter for a person; this truth is familiar only to dervishes and tumbleweeds. When people move from their lands, they lose their consciousness. The folk who are *alive* greet each other. Where are your casks as wide as lakes, full of *қымыз*⁶? Where is your *туырлық*⁷ made of mink fur? Were they left in the *Ertis* or *Esil* or *Nûra* rivers when we hastily abandoned our lands? A thief will die on the ride, as the saying goes. As the *Dzungars’* invasions of our lands are wrong, their guts will be eaten by dogs. Before the stars in the sky fade away and the first rays of the day arrive, I pray to the Almighty. Do not forget that *Türkistan* was the centre of spirituality for our prophet predecessors. A human being is mortal. Remember that all your noblemen will be buried there. I witnessed a hundred wild geese in flight, hit by sudden lightning; and I saw how seventy of them fell immediately from the sky, dropping on the ground. I was bewildered by the force of a golden

⁵ *Batyr* – originally term for ‘hero’ or ‘valiant warrior’, roughly equivalent to the European knight; nowadays the term signifies military or masculine prowess.

⁶ *Қымыз* – beverage of fermented mare’s milk highly esteemed for its refreshing qualities; it is the main drink for special occasions.

⁷ *Tuырлық* – a thick covering for the lower part of a yurt, typically made of felt.

arrow! Dzungars and Kalmyks will still attempt to destroy the Kazakhs. In forty years' time, even peaceful people are likely to see such a disaster.'

The dervish kept silent during dinner. Relaxing afterward, he settled down on the ground. In the morning, there was no sign of him. The two young men remembered only his last words.

Among the peoples who bear the eye-shaped insignia, the Tobyқты are particularly adept in moving on horseback and camelback; the Arġyn and Noġaj tribes had seen many invasions – generations of their people were brought up in cradles on horseback. The Dzungars and Kalmyks had defeated the Najmans and Kerejs and pushed them away from Altaj and Esil. When these tribes had been expelled from their lands, the legendary sage A'net Baba was seven years old. Since then, seventy-seven years had passed; by that time, the Dzungars in the east had become powerful. For Kazakhs, it was a matter of survival: the age of peace, food abundance and plentiful horses had long disappeared. The Arġyn-Қypшақs, Najman- Қоңырат and Kerej-Уақs could not find any rest along the banks of the Esil and Nūra rivers, in the fertile and rich steppes of Saryarқа. These tribes migrated to the Ūjsin Senior žūz and Junior žūz lands, escaping their enemies and moving nearer to Tūlkibas, Қazyġu rt, Židelibajsyn, Қozybasy, Šu, Žetisu and Ūš қiān in search of territory.

Since the seasonal birds had flown over Tyrnauz and crossed over Mount Қап, reaching the Syrdariā, Bajġazy's daughter Mamyр had changed. In the lakes, rich in thickets of reeds, swans would not leave their cygnets until the first cold. Beautiful Mamyр, Bajġazy's single daughter – herself like a cygnet (for *mamyр* means 'cygnet', as well as the month of May) – had not been engaged to anyone yet. She was living with her parents, as was said, 'on the right side' – a reference to the traditional place in the yurt where daughters who had not yet been married resided. Although it was high time for her to get married, no one dared to send matchmakers to Bajġazy, a wealthy and respectable man. They did not wish to embarrass him – he who had raised his daughter like a boy – by reminding him, implicitly, that he did not have an heir. The Kazakh tribes had settled and grazed horses in the steppes since the time of Alaša Khan, their common ancestor. Beautiful Mamyр also grazed horses, and carried a bow with arrows. The neighbours pitied Bajġazy for not having an heir – but nobody would say so out loud.

Mamyр gathered the horses, left the mares to the stallion and returned to her *ayyl*.⁸ On her way home, she met two young men. She recognised A'jtek's youngest son and Olžaj *batyr*'s brother, Қалқаман. Mamyр had been a rider

⁸ *Ayyl* – socio-economic formation considered to constitute the heartland of the nation and a basis for an ethnic and cultural union of the nomadic community. Consisting of 50–70 yurts in the eighteenth century, it developed into its current permanent state of 'rural settlement' (of a minimum of 100 dwellers) when Kazakhs adopted a settled mode of life in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. *Ayyl* can also be used as a synonym for 'native land' and 'homeland', concepts revered by the Kazakhs.

since birth, and Ғалғаман had achieved the same level as she had – he boasted of his speedy horse and proposed a race. The noise from his horses' hooves summoned the other two, and the three riders galloped along the steppe, racing like birds flying in the sky.

When the elders attended a dinner elsewhere, the young people of the *auyl* organised a traditional party for young people – a *bastanғы*. Having exchanged her 'male' clothes for a woman's garments, Mamyр appeared as slender and striking as a falcon. She wore a bird-beak ring on her finger, moon-shaped *şolpy* – ringing pendants – in her braids and chained silver earrings. Thus did everyone observe her wearing such an outfit for the first time, and no one could hide their surprise at registering her beauty. Mamyр had never made use of ornaments, but that night she also wore an embroidered *taқиâ* cap, to which her mother had affixed owl feathers from her own parents' collection – they had once been famous in the district for collecting them. Ғалғаман and Mamyр had splendid matching headgear: hers the feathered *taқиâ*, his a *bôrik*, a round, fur-trimmed cap.

After midnight, while playing *aқsùjek*,⁹ Ғалғаман exclaimed: 'How lovely you are, like a tender duckling, girl in the feathered hat! Alas! You are my clan sister, darling Mamyр, Bajғazy's Mamyр!

Mamyр smiled proudly and replied: 'I'm not the one for you, Ғалғаман; we are forbidden to each other...' The young man's heart was set aflame upon hearing this response. Mamyр noticed his look of passion, and a sudden idea struck her. (Its source was the epic poetry of love, and she cast Ғалғаман in the role of the prophet Yusuf, who was said to have fallen so in love with Zulaikha.) Consumed with desire, the girl said: 'I would be grateful to the Creator if you were to become mine. We are not the first ones who shall break the law of the steppe, which does not allow us to be engaged to co-descendants until the seventh generation. I won't turn away from you, even if they kill me tomorrow. What do you respond to this, my love?'

When Ғалғаман realised the world would be dark without Mamyр, he shivered from the horror of losing his love; however, he understood that he was committing a transgression. The two lovers met each other near the *auyl* at dusk. Although he was sure of his love for Mamyр, Ғалғаман confessed his doubts to her.

'Duckling, Mamyрған, Bajғazy's favourite', he said, sitting astride his horse and looking straight into the girl's eyes. 'A stallion – the leader of the herd – will send away the fillies. The leader never touches them, because they all belong to a single herd. One drop of poison infects a whole cauldron of wine. Our ancestors were afraid of mixing the blood of kin. How can we hide the fact that we both belong to the same clan?'

⁹ *Aқsùjek* – lit. 'white bone', a game played by adolescents in the summer; participants throw a cow's long shinbone into the woods and run searching for it. The objective is both to exercise attention and have a framework for socialising with the opposite sex.

‘Қалқаман, those words do not mean anything to me. I have made my choice, my darling! I met you with the help of the Almighty. I fell in love with you; I see how noble you are. Though I was born a girl, I took the role of a son for my father. How long shall I reign as Bajgazy’s golden falcon? I am fifteen now, and you haven’t been engaged yet. We are not able to break the rules governing marriage. In the worst case, we shall wait and see!’

The clouds travelled along the dark sky, and thunder raged with bright flashes of blue lightning, frightening the earth. Hail came down with fury alongside the rain. Yet Mamyр felt nothing but passion for her lover, and would have felt this way even if the lightning had struck her.

At last, the gentle summer season found the Middle žüz tribes that settled around the Қаратау Mountains extending to the Šu River. Cuckoos began their mating calls – the males were relentless. In the lakes overgrown with cattails and marshes were many nests of crows, grey herons, ibises and bitterns. Birds did not cease their noisemaking all night.

The lovers met again in the place called Bôriojnaқ.

It was soft with thick cattails and bulrushes. Mamyр entrusted her horses to the stallion and arrived to see her man.

‘I understand you’, she said. ‘It’s true that no one ever heard of a man from the Tobyқты marrying a girl from his own clan.’ Her eyes shone brightly. ‘My fourth ancestor in the Tobyқты, great-grandfather Sary, had four sons: Mămbetej, Ûmbetej, Mămbetsopy and Kişik. From Mămbetej, my father, Bajgazy, was born. From Kişik, your father, Aјtek, was born. If they are brothers, we are their grandchildren. Do not blame me for describing the family tree. I suffer much from the fact that both of us are co-descendants. Today a rider from the Najman steppes visited us to make a match and hung his silver-topped whip, unfolding it. My father did not return the whip. This means I’m engaged now. You cannot ask a girl’s hand who has been engaged. Do you agree, Қалқаман?’

‘My darling, my swan, I’m ready to sacrifice myself for your sake!’ replied Қалқаман in a halting voice. ‘Tell me you are mine; the rest is in vain. The Prophet also never knew his future.’

That day, old Anet Baba had a nightmare. An attendant flung open the doors of the white yurt, and, without kneeling, entered and announced: ‘Tăte,¹⁰ I have terrible news. Kôkenaj batyr has sent me to inform you that two wrongdoers of our tribe have sinned and brought shame on us by breaking the great law that has existed since Žănibek Khan’s time. Kôkenaj is outraged and furious. He seeks to kill these two lunatics. The brothers Olžaj and Bajbôri are grief-stricken; they are asking if Қалқаман should take the girl and escape from the ауыл...’

‘Do not rush, my son; tell me these things without haste.’

¹⁰ *Tăte* – depending on the region, a form of address to an older woman, or man, meaning ‘aunt’, ‘sister’, ‘uncle’, may also signify ‘mother’ or ‘father’.

‘Қалқаман and Mamyр have married secretly! Kôkenaj *batyr* is saying that Mámбетej and Ûmbетej will punish the wrongdoers by themselves, and if the girl’s side consider their honour, they must do as he has ordered. I come to tell you this, *táte*. If I am misspeaking, please forgive me!’

In early years – when Táuke Khan’s grandfather, Esim Khan, the Brave Giant, conquered Túrsyn Khan in Taškent – one of his daughters, Қоңырbike, was given to Sary. Kişik and Mámбетсopy were born to her; Mámбетej and Ûmbетej were born from Sary’s first wife.

A’net Baba, who was eighty years old at this time, sat on the *tekemet*, the ornate felt mat covering the floor of the yurt, with his eyes shut. He swayed from side to side, deeply affected by the news. Hard times had arrived. If Қалқаман and Mamyр had indeed left the *auyl* hand in hand, this would be a heavy blow for the tribe.

From Aјtek’s first wife, Olžaj was born; from his second wife, Bajbôri and Қалқаман. Қалқаман had now reached his sixteenth year. By that time, Kôkenaj, who descended from Ûmbетej, was about sixty years old and the leading *batyr* of the Arğyn tribe. He considered the Kalmyks his permanent enemies – he could raid them forty times during a night, like a wolf. He was not only famous in Tobyқты, but also among wider Arğyn and the Middle žüz. Kôkenaj had lived his entire life waging bloody battles, having his meals on horseback and sleeping with his spear next to him.

He was a powerful man who was used to selecting the best horses, and had a very stubborn, unforgiving character. A’net Baba, leader of the Middle žüz, was visited by a young advisor of the Senior žüz, Tôle. Tôle *bi*¹¹ hailed from Ûјsin territory. He had studied religion in Taškent, and had good knowledge of the secrets of the natural world, and of geography. The pale face of the wise old man, once radiant with wisdom, was now sunk in confusion. ‘Oh, dear’, he said, ‘the elders used to say that nobody hears how owls fly, and nobody blames young men for their sins. Қалқаман, my son, will bear many curses and suffer much! What should I do? Hares may pull dead lions by their beards.’

He wanted to speak with his nephew Kôkenaj face to face and come to an understanding. Yet Kôkenaj did not accept the old man’s proposal to give Mámбетej a dowry and double the fine for the wrongdoing.

‘I’ll ask the *bies* to adjudicate Қалқаман’s shameful behaviour at trial’, Kôkenaj replied. ‘As for Bajğazy’s daughter, I’ll kill her myself – and no one can stop me, no mercy for her. I’m not going to forgive them, although they are of my own clan. To break the rules of the ancestors is a great sin; it is the beginning of a malady... The cause of any event, any disaster, any crime is a woman! It must be you who takes responsibility for stopping this nonsense... those two have brought shame on us! Our tribes have suffered many losses from the red-headed Kalmyk invasions; it is outrageous when we destroy ourselves

¹¹ Tôle (1663–1756) was the head *bi* (judge) of the Kazakh Senior žüz, as well as an orator and poet.

by neglecting the codes of the steppe.’ He said all this as if making a vow, gripping his scabbard firmly in his hand.

‘Kôkenaj, be patient; the Qur’an and the *shari’ah* permit the marriage of two grandchildren. All human beings emerged from two pairs and a drop of blood. It is regretful that the race of Adam and Eve occasionally make errors. And mixing blood is not a crime for other nations of the Earth, only Kazakhs. However, Kazakhs... I agree completely with the point that our blood is pure because of men’s honour’, said A’net Baba, looking down.

‘*Táte!* You are encouraging those jealous kin around us to assume that the Tobyқты are insane. They knew the fact that it is abnormal to marry until the seventh generation! I am not Kôkenaj if I allow anyone to break such a tradition, which has existed from Žá’ nibek Khan’s time, or if I am not able to stop the acts of perverts!’

‘Do not blame the innocent – and don’t make vows! They are not horses to sacrifice... both of them are of your own blood...’

‘You are wrong, *ta’te!* Marrying his own clan sister is a big crime. This behaviour can’t be compared with a childish cousin’s tricks. If he wanted to marry, there are many girls about! Қалқаман has trampled on the traditions of the folk.’

A’net Baba realised that, for Kôkenaj, Қалқаман and Mamyр had become severed limbs. He was ready to murder them. A’net Baba decided to save the young couple, no matter their crime.

‘Although Tobyқты is a small community, it isn’t degenerating’, Kôkenaj continued. ‘*Táte*, no one knows the *shari’ah* as well as you do. But the Qur’an teaches us not to marry our mothers, sisters or daughters. If anyone commits this shameful act, he is an unbeliever.’

Kôkenaj’s harsh censure forced old A’net Baba to weep with regret; the fierce words made his old bones ache. Kôkenaj *batyr*’s mother had been a Kalmyk, and people concluded that his strict character was his blood inheritance from her. The Kalmyk beg Ulaly beheaded the Middle žüz leader Қожаберген in 1647; Қожаберген’s wife, still pregnant, was enslaved by the raiders. His two brothers, Suyрbas’s sons Ali and Sary, were young. Thirteen years later, accompanied by Olžas *batyr*, Sary exacted vengeance for his brother’s death, defeating Ulaly in battle. Ulaly had had a Kazakh wife, and their beautiful daughter was given to Ûmbetej. Kôkenaj was born from this marriage. His mother named him ‘Kuknai’ in Kalmyk, which meant ‘Green Poppy’. He became the commander of Táuke Khan’s force, and was famed as a courageous warrior, hard as an iron, who knew no mercy for Kalmyks or anyone else. He would go on to cross the thousand bridges of Hell, fighting for months and years on the borders of his land.

A month after his argument with A’net Baba, a terrible rumour spread among the humble Najman and Kerej tribes that Kôkenaj had murdered Mamyр, shooting her in the heart with an arrow. Thus Mamyр was killed by her brutal clan brother: she had not been able to utter her last word – ‘*apa*’

– ‘mother’ before dying, like a swan, blinking her tender eyes. Not long after that, half of the twelve clans of the Arġyn (the arakesek, the anzyġaly, the Bsentiin, the Atyġaj, the arauyl and the Tobyty) held a meeting, at which people shared their great grief and marked the event.

The renowned anzyġaly orator Ipek *bi* made a declaration, as loudly and clearly as a wild goose: ‘*Bies* and *begs*, listen to me! Oh, Anet Baba, wise man, righteous man! alkaman is too young, and has shamed Kkenaj *batyr*.

We are noblemen; we have sprung from an honest nation; we were not born from slaves. Rumour, like a downwind, spreads far. Our people are gentle, like lambs. I cannot say that this great tragedy will not pass to the ypa, Najman, oņyrat, Kerej and Noġaj, as well as the jsin, Alban and Dulat, anly, Ysty, anyyly, Alim’s Kete-Smekej, etiru’s Tabyn-Tama, Baj ly – all sons of Alyn, even to those Adajs who dwell in the sands neighbouring the Turkmen, Karakalpak and Bashkir. This crime, and our shame, will be known to all.

‘We’ve maintained our honourable name and pride, and have been highly respected since the time of Oġyz. A daughter is but a guest in a house. Through marriage, our daughters belong to other tribes, is this not so? We witnessed the shame when a brother married his own clan sister. Our ancestors decreed that no man among us may marry a girl until the seventh generation, because a weak and nondescript thing may be born from them. Our predecessors preached this in order to maintain the purity of the race.

‘This great disaster is beyond enduring. I do not blame the kinship. We all descend from anzyġaly and Tobyty, two related tribes. Wise Anet Baba, you are the seed of great nomads, our spiritual guide. Please, give us your answer; do not mystify these people! The nation’s power is in its heroes; a hero’s power is in the nation. Do not become involved with undesirables. These troublemakers are to blame. What would we do if tiny Tobyty separated into two because of them? We were born from Kazakhs who had abandoned places when they took offence. Our brother committed a crime – that is why the folk are waiting for the elder’s decision. It is intolerable to behave as slaves, and forget the ancestors’ blessings. This conflict is not the conflict over widows; it is to avoid future maladies! We grow because our blood is clean. If the clans mix their own blood, we are certain to beget monsters. Say your piece, even if the sinner is of your blood! A bad example is infectious. Say your piece, if you are a faithful *bi*. Think of your folk!’

‘alkaman, my dear boy, apple of my eye, how could I blame you?’ said the *baba*, his eyes full of tears. ‘I shall not kill this child myself!’

‘Better a glorious death than a shameful flight!’ said Ipek *bi*. ‘They say an eagle on the rocks pushes out one of its own eaglets. Kkenaj killed his clan sister because the pride of his tribe was offended, and the kinship of Mmbetej and mbetej agreed. Otherwise, they would not want to keep relationship ties. Do you want the family of Sary *bi* to become foes after this? Even if it were so difficult to decide the matter, releasing alkaman without any punishment would be a blow to the clan. Sacrifice the ears, keep the head!’

Although *Ānet Baba* was exhausted from the debates, he insisted on protecting the young man: ‘My people’s hearts are merciful, and their wills are heavenly strong. They never wish for anyone to die young. Be kind to your kinfolk. The Almighty favours forgiveness and kindness. The resentment of the innocent will cause us many troubles... Do you wish for me to kill this child, stoning him? Who hasn’t gone mad from falling in love with a woman? Did you forget that you were once ready to die for them? Are you willing to break my wings and pull off my tail? A man learns everything from Nature. Birds have thick feathers in winter and change in summer, acquiring lightones. Nature is in opposition to cruelty. When birds want babies, they begin to nest. The thick forests bloom with the help of birds; our land thrives with the help of the younger generation. If the young commit errors while young, this is not an enormity... May God the Great Redeemer forgive their sins! A sin is a gate that leads to sincere repentance.’

The crowd listening to the *baba* was against executing *Ḳalkaman*, and hoped he would fight out this debate. But the two sides could not come to any concord. In the end, *Ānet Baba* declared that the punishment should be what is called *oḳ bajlau*. According to the ancient tradition, a person sentenced to death would ride through a gauntlet of archers, who would let their arrows fly as he galloped by. Survival meant innocence, and death meant guilt. While *Ḳalkaman* rode on a speedy horse, *Kôkenaj* would be among those drawing their bows at him. Everyone knew well that *Kôkenaj* was a highly skilled archer. In one battle with the Kalmyk *Khoren*, warriors witnessed him catch an arrow speeding toward him and return it in kind to his enemy. This time, if the arrow reached the victim, it would be considered just. *Ḳalkaman* would be blamed for his true, passionate love. ‘Oh, Creator, Almighty, you are the judge of what is white or black, you provide the answer’, concluded the old man in grief.

The slope of the *Bôriojnaḳ Pass*, suffused with the aromatic flavour of wormwood, was crowded with warriors who had arrived to watch the *oḳ bajlau* carried out. Several great warriors were selected to carry out the cruel ritual. Most of them were noted *batyrs* who had been raised on battlefields and ridden hundreds of miles on horseback in darkness, cold or heat, ready to drink their enemies’ blood.

When *Kôkenaj batyr*, on his dappled white horse, joined the line of archers, a warrior from the group blocked his way. *Kôkenaj* remembered this young man, who had saved his life by giving him his horse during one battle. He was a relative of *Mamyr’s* mother.

‘*Kôkenaj aḡa*,¹² may I have a word?’ said the young man. ‘I am from the *Najman* tribe and wish to speak. A wolf cannot eat its pup! To witness two deaths of your own blood will be difficult for you. Your folk is against the young man’s death. My ancestor and hero *Kiṣilik* fought against *Genghis Khan*, and was a mighty warrior. I beg you, give your turn to me! I’ll aim to

¹² *Aḡa* – form of address to an older man, which can be translated as ‘brother’, ‘uncle’.

miss Ғалқаман deliberately. *Аға*, do not let a future warrior be killed because of a girl! Ғалқаман is not your ancient foe. He is not a duck in the woods, to kill him in such a way.'

Ғалқаман did not beg for his life. *Анет* Baba opened his hands to give his blessings. The old *baba* pleaded with the deities for mercy for this child; he played his *қобыз* and entered into a trance, attempting to dispel the excessive negative energy from the spirit world. Ғалқаман reflected on his carefree days, when he was as unimpeded as the wind on the steppe, drinking the water of youth. He decided to wear his hauberk and meet his death on the field as a target. As he prepared, *Анет* Baba encouraged him: 'If you are a real man, then be one! If you are to die, you shall; if you are to live, you shall restore your honour.'

The territories of the Ғосарал River, since the time of Ormanbet *bi*'s death and the deaths of many of the Ноғаж, had become an eternal, silent tomb. They could be seen from the horizon. Ғалқаман rode through this land as nine arrows were loosed in a single instant, as wild as birds, before failing: the archers had not dared to kill the youth. *Кôкенaj* became violent; his cruel eyes were fierce, and even his grey beard looked furious. He had called horseback 'home'; now he drew back his bow and shot. The arrow nearly knocked Ғалқаман off his horse, but he proved fortunate. He clung to the animal's head and galloped away.

Ғалқаман's sister had disguised herself as a man, and watched the scene unfold from the crowd. She had had an upsetting dream in recent nights, and had prepared herself for the worst. 'Кôкенaj did not listen to the young warrior of the *Најман*, whose ancestor had battled the fearsome Genghis Khan. What does he have in his mind?' whispered one of the witnesses to the other. 'See, how bravely that young man claimed. If *Кôкенaj* gave his turn to this warrior, I was sure this man would shoot a failed arrow. What a man!'

The *Тобықты* side roared, '*Ақ зол! Маâбоz!*'¹³ Then its riders galloped after the injured Ғалқаман. The arrow had broken the silver side of the saddle and hit the young man's leg, nearly breaking the bone. Yet he rode as fast as a wolf. His pursuers could not catch up: he was beyond reach. When he saw he was clear, he stopped and cut the tail off his horse, which signified that he was leaving his clan forever and halted his pursuers. His childhood friends from the *Најман* and *Ғанзығалы* tribes did not stop chasing after him, however, and in the end they reached him.

Kazakh men usually took two horses with them – one for riding, and another tethered to the first, with which to alternate during a long trip. Knowing that, Ғалқаман's sister sent a horse bearing two sacks of provisions after her brother: some *қурт* – salty cheese; dried horsemeat; two flagons of water; and flint and firewood. Thus, the young man had two horses with him, the second tethered to the first, and he alternated them during the long journey. *Итбақа*

¹³ *Ақ зол!* – Godspeed! *Маâбоz!* – battle cry of the *Тобықты*.

jumped astride his brown stallion and rode out to Қалқаман, who was bent double and bandaging his broken leg tightly with the sleeves of his garment. Tears streamed from the eyes of his stallion.

‘Don’t do this... stop!’ said Itbaқа abruptly. For it was he who had asked Кôkenaj *batyr* for permission to aim at Қалқаман and shoot to miss. ‘If you leave, the other tribes will think the Tobyқты are cruel and wicked. Although you harbor a grudge against your people, do not forget that we descend from Alaš!’

‘Unfortunately, I’m dead to Tobyқты’, replied Қалқаман. ‘I cut my horse’s tail. It is a final sign of my departure, Itbaқа. They shall count me among the dead. So please ask them to bury me – ask them to push my spear into the ground and put a black banner on it! I cannot say they are my clan. I am not desperate; however, my soul is burning! How can I forget what torture I endured? Tell them not to look for me after this!’

He fastened his silver belt to his hip and led one of his horses to the shimmering horizon, like the ancient Bashkir and Oğyz. Then he disappeared. As he rode from one slope to another, the road widened. The grass grew green and thick. Tulips bloomed. Summer arrived on the fragrances of numerous flowers.

Back in the *auyl*, one of Қалқаман’s *žeңge*, sisters-in-law, shed tears and recited some burial verses she had composed:

If a horse longs for its herd, it will twitch its head and ears.
If a warrior longs for his tribe, he will saddle his horse and ride!

Have you ever seen a land dearer than the Syrdariâ?
Do you know a tribe closer-knit than the Tobyқты?

Қалқаман, you were a leader! Қалқаман, you won’t be back; you won’t forgive your kin. You won’t live with us any more. You’ll not see your land any more. We’ll not find our noble man, wherever we may search for him, whenever we try to spot his traces, even in the Milky Way!

I am a sorrowful one. I lost my *kajny*, my brother-in-law. I lost my wings!
He will be back during the rains of March; he will be back during April
the beautiful!

He will arrive from distant lands. Then the steppe will flower. The dead can’t be resurrected, but the living will return!

Қалқаман headed from the west to the south-east, orienting himself by the Polar Star to the land where his mother, Қалдықыз, had been born. Қалдықыз was of the Ыјsin, and married into the Tobyқты according to Kazakh tradition

when she reached marriageable age. Her brother, Šapyrašty Ajkym, resided in the northern part of the Alatau Mountains.

Қалқаман passed countless gazelles grazing on the steppe. Then it rained a deluge; the sky thundered, and lightning crashed upon the earth. The young man was now sick, with a high temperature, and found himself losing consciousness. He could barely open his eyes, but when he did, someone in a white turban was turning to him. Is this a dream? Қалқаман wondered. He remembered his tethered horses and raised his head – and came face-to-face with the old dervish who had once approached him on the banks of the Syrdariâ. The man picked some sorrel with arrow-shaped leaves and applied them to Қалқаман’s wound. Kneeling, he untied his turban, which looked for all the world to Қалқаман like a burial shroud.

‘I swear by the name of the Prophet Muhammad, my white turban is indeed my burial shroud! May God bless you. As they say, among any forty people you meet, one might be Қыдыр, who will bless you. A saint is God’s favourite servant. Baba Tùkti Šašty Aziz, my spiritual guide, gave me the vision. Here, this plant is for treatment of wounds, it will cure you. So... what are you doing alone on the steppe?’

‘A dead hero never chooses the ground upon which to die. I am dead; I hope my tomb will not be among my tribe!’

The old man said: ‘Are you from the Syr, or Sauran, like an ancient Kete? The wings of a falcon become stronger when it flies.’ He noted his tribal insignia. ‘Let us wish for good. Food for both the young man and the wolf is on its way, they say. If you cross over that slope, you’ll come to an *auyl*; a bonesetter will set your broken leg.’

Қалқаман still took long to recover his senses, and his feelings were as vague as fog. However, he was ready to see everything on his way, and to trust anyone he met. After sunset, the pair ate some salted, grilled meat and drank some *қымыз* from a leather dish.

‘In the north, in the dense forests, a yellow-headed, unfamiliar tribe dwells’, said the dervish. When the Pole Star appears in the sky and falls into the blue eyes of those inhabitants, there is night on that side; however, at this very time you’ll find your Senior žüz relatives.’ When Қалқаман recovered, he caught wild animals on the steppe and grilled their meat, preparing further provisions for the long journey. When he was thirsty, he had his *torsyқ* filled with water. The Alatau Mountains had streams, and were full of wild goats and their kids, and wild argali sheep and deer, which frolicked on the rocks. There was no border between land and sky. The air was fresh and cool, fragrant with the scents of different grasses and flowers. The young man hadn’t experienced such delights of the senses before. How on the Earth could such a pleasant place exist, like Eve’s garden? The flavours and aromas of hundreds of fruits on the trees reached him, like stars in the expanse of night sky.

At last, he entered into a region of thick woods and gardens of apple trees, which covered the slopes like a newborn’s swaddling. Here, wild bears foraged

and birds picked fruit from the trees until the end of autumn. When the Pole Star reached the horizon, Қалқаман navigated the millions of stars in the Milky Way and finally came to his maternal uncle's *auyl*.

Twelve years passed. The Tobyқты had sought Қалқаман, but a great famine interrupted their plans. The following summer, the Tobyқты resolved to try again, but new Dzungar raids saw many of them killed off. The survivors faced one of the most terrible events in Kazakh history, the *Ақтабан Шұбырынды* – the ‘Years of Great Disaster’. The armies of Galdan Tseren, the eldest son of the Kalmyk Khan Tsewang Rabtan, invaded Kazakh lands like seven-headed dragons, and annihilated two-thirds of the inhabitants. They cut the bellies of pregnant women; they skewered toddlers on spears. In the days when all warriors used spears and swords, Kazakh warriors could face their foes with ease; however, the Dzungars were first to possess firearms, with which their numerous forces unleashed lead bullets as though they were raindrops. The Kazakhs became refugees, fleeing from steppe to steppe and eating dried fruit, grass – anything they found growing on the land. They escaped barefoot, covering themselves with deerskins instead of blankets and living in little shelters formed from spears. For these refugees, camel milk was food and drink alike; to avoid dying from thirst, they drank the sap of birch trees, later giving rise to the expression *Қажың сауған* (‘milking the birch tree’). The events of this tragic time have been commemorated in the ballad *Elim-aj* (‘My People’), sung about the children deprived of their parents, who were as defenceless as orphaned fawns.

During the Great Northern War between Russia and Sweden, the Russian Empire prospected for gold in the east to offset war expenses. Before building military fortifications on the borders inhabited by nomads, Russia deployed spies to the deserted territories by order of Peter the Great. Russia captured the northern lands, and the Dzungar Khanate, the eastern parts. The densely populated khanate began to fight for more land, moving west into Kazakh territories. Hundreds of thousands of Dzungars raided Kazakh lands along the banks of the Ertis and Esil rivers, thus denying even the birds any chance of inhabiting these places. Secret caravans from the khanates of Kokand, Khiva and Bukhara transported armour to the Dzungars; the Russian Empire provided them with guns, and they obtained bullets from the Swedes. Enemies from all parts raided Kazakh territories. There was a real threat to the existence of the tribes descended from Alaš.¹⁴ Galdan Tseren had strengthened his kingdom and military force after his father's death; the seven rivers nourishing the fertile valley of the Blue Sea attracted the Dzungar tribes, and they added to their conquests. Alakôl, Bejne Sea, Keң Uaқ and Sasyққôl were invaded by the Kalmyks. The Black Ertis flowed with blood and bodies.

¹⁴ ‘Alaš’ – another name for the Kazakh people.

‘Warriors! Unbelievers have captured your lands!’ called an old *žyrau*¹⁵ to his people in the war against the Dzungars. ‘The motherland is dearer than gold; when the people stand, they can reach the sky!’ The Kazakh armies lifted their clubs, spears and hammers against the invaders, and fired arrows into them. The Dzungar forces, countless though they were, never tended to their wounded or buried their dead: according to their beliefs, the law of the battlefield held that all casualties must be left behind.

In 1723, along the Syrdariâ and its two longest branches, the Aqtal and Ķaratal, Kôkenaj confronted the Dzungars with five thousand warriors, attacking them for a month until Kazakh clans moved west to the Ķaratau Mountains and the ŽajyĶ River, nearer to the Russian Empire. During this battle, Kôkenaj lost his six sons and Aʻnet Baba lost five.

The Dzungars’ tactics, in response, consisted not of stealing livestock but killing more Kazakhs. Women hid their sons under cauldrons in their hearths, where they had gathered the corpses; in so doing, they saved the next generation. The vengeful Dzungars ordered the extermination of the families of Kôkenaj and Aʻnet Baba. They intended to take Kôkenaj’s grandchildren and play with their bodies as if in a game of *kôkpar*.¹⁶ One of Aʻnet Baba’s sons, ŠaĶabaj, survived, as did his wife, who gave a birth to a son – the last grandson, whom they called BaĶaj. Kôkenaj’s six-year-old son, Žămeŋke, also survived, and his grandson TüâĶ would later continue the line.

When the Great Disaster struck, many Kazakhs vowed to die rather than leave their land, and Aʻnet Baba, then ninety-seven years old, was among them. He wept like a baby in the cradle after his clan abandoned the territories. Long-necked cranes migrated in the sky above his head that summer.¹⁷ During a brief interval between wars, Kôkenaj took the *baba*’s bones from ĶoŝĶar Ata to the city of Tŭrkistan, to inter in the mausoleum of the great Ķoža Ahmet Âssau.

The Kazakh refugees from the great war moved near the city of Sauran, on the right side of the Syrdariâ. Many were taken into slavery. In the two hundred years since this calamity, the members of several Kazakh generations joined Dzungar tribes; in turn, some Kalmyk and Dzungar widows, with their children, joined Kazakh families. Many captive women and girls became mothers to both tribes, and did not stop shaking their cradles. Kazakhs and Kalmyks struggled until the collapse of the Dzungar Khanate in 1758. The heaps of bones littering the steppes became tombs. Then the time of Abylaj Khan arrived, and Kazakh power was resurgent.

In the land of Ŭjsin, and in the clan of AĶsiyĶ Elibaj, ĶalĶaman’s uncle Šapyrašty AĶĶym welcomed him warmly and adopted his nephew into the clan.

¹⁵ *Žyrau* – poet, performing his topical verses to music, but also an epic storyteller, military commander and counsellor to the rulers.

¹⁶ *Kôkpar* – sport in which a headless goat carcass is advanced by players on horseback towards the opposing team’s goal.

¹⁷ This expression signifies the death of a person.

The uncle married Ғалқаман to three wives: the first was his widowed sister-in-law; the second, a widow captured in a battle; and the last, a young girl. The clan elders insisted that they themselves pay the price for Ғалқаман's marriage to the girl, out of respect for his courage in battle.

From then onward, Ғалқаман's descendants adopted the five-pointed insignia of the Ғапырасты Ајқым sub-clan. When asked, 'What's your bone?', referring to their lineage, they would answer: 'Ғалқаман Тобықты'. The expression also arose, among people, '... as in Ғалқаман and Мамыр's conflict'. Nor did the Ғанзығалы, Тобықты and Күрлеуит forget Ғалқаман. Although the Күрлеуит belonged to the Ғыпсақ tribe, Тобықты's father Кензесопы adopted him. During a festive occasion, in fact, when the Senior *žüz* Ғасқарай's horse took first place in a race, the Тобықты side enquired about Ғалқаман.

The Тобықты had moved from the Сырдария. From Ајтек's first wife, Олжай was born. Олжай had three sons, Ајдос, Ғајдос and Ғандос. Ајдос's own four sons survived the wars. A Тобықты clan numbering forty people crossed the Oral Mountains and reached Ор, Елек and Ојыл. Further on, they stopped at the Муғалзар Hills. They searched for better lands in the deltas of the Ғрғыз and Торғай rivers. Ајдос's four sons (Ғрғызбай, Кеңіргібай, Торғай and Топай) were born from his young wife during the seasonal migrations. In the waters of Көтімтал, Көтібақ was born. During eventful periods of famine or war, Kazakhs would name their children Боқты ('Shitty'), Битти ('Lousy'), Қуірты ('Wormy') or Қылшық ('Tiny'), in order to save them from misfortune and the Evil Eye.

When Көкенай died from an arrow in 1728, his thirteen-year-old son Мамай wept over him, his arms around his neck. He became Мамай *батыр*, the khan of the Junior *žüz* during the reign of Нұралы Хан, and participated in the wars to defend Edil and Ғажық, the Алтай and Тарбағатай Mountains and the Бејне Sea from the invaders. Fifty years later, he led his clan to eight rivers in the mountains: his own ancestors' land. Kindиктау was inhabited by Аргын-Найманы, who had moved earlier. Кеңіргібай *би*, Олжай's son, strengthened the minor five-*bolys*¹⁸ Тобықты.

Translated by Mitchell Albert

¹⁸ *Bolys* – administrative term adopted in the nineteenth century; it consisted of 10–15 *auyls*, each made up of 50–70 families.