Mukhtar Shakhanov is a poet and public figure. He is well known for leading the commission on the Želtoķsan Tragedy (December ’86), the rigidly suppressed Kazakh youth upheaval against Soviet rulers in 1986, and for raising awareness on the need to protect the Aral Sea. After graduation from Šymkent Pedagogical Institute, he worked at local newspapers, subsequently becoming editor-in-chief of the major literary journal Žalyn in Almaty (1984–86). He has had numerous prominent roles as a political figure. He was elected deputy of the Supreme Council of the USSR (1986–90) and Kazakhstan (1991), chairman of the Committee on the Ecology of Kazakhstan (1992), ambassador to Kyrgyzstan (1993–2004), deputy of the Māžilis (Mazhilis) of Kazakhstan (2004–07). Today he is editor-in-chief of Žalyn and the leader of the Tāuelsizdikti ķorģau People’s Movement.

He has published almost twenty books, including Bakyt (Happiness, 1966), Balladalar (Ballads, 1968), Aj tүyp keledi (New Moon, 1970), Sejhundariā (Seihun Darya, 1975), Senim patšalygы (Kingdom of Trust, 1979) and Mahabbatty ķorģau (Protecting Love, 1982). His prose includes the essay-dialogue Kū z basyndagy aңşญң zary (Cry of a Hunter Over the Abyss, 1997) in collaboration with Chingiz Aitmatov and the documentary novel Želtoķsan èpopeāsy (The Epic of Želtoksan, 2004). Shakhanov also wrote plays, such as Sokratty eskeru tüni (The Night of Paying Respects to Socrates, 1997) and Šynğys hannنң pendlêk kőpiāsy (The Human Frailty of Genghis Khan, 2001). His works have been translated into some sixty foreign languages.

He is the People’s Writer of Kazakhstan (1996), People’s Poet of Kyrgyzstan (1999) and the recipient of a number of national and international awards.
The Fickleness of Himalayan Tigers
or the Ballad of Human Courage

Terrible to admit:
almost all of us
should be afraid
of ourselves above everything …
I remember
how a few years ago, 
staying in the Himalayas
I once met
a tiger hunter:
   ‘Just imagine
you are walking
along the side of a mountain
deep in the forest
and suddenly unexpectedly
out of nowhere
right in front of you
there is a striped tiger
with terrible predatory eyes.
What are you going to do?’
he asked me.
Somewhat taken aback,
I shrugged my shoulders.
   ‘The main thing,’ –
he continued,
   ‘is to stand firm
and to look him
straight in the eyes
and not to bend.
That’s your only chance.
For if you go on all fours
like an animal,
then that’s your lot –
you’ve had it!
He’ll be on you in a trice
like a coiled spring
with one powerful leap …’
And scientists are puzzled.
Why does the tiger hate it
when a man
takes on the look
of an animal?
Even God
created tigers
in such a noble form
to inspire humans
to be like them.
So when I see some
individual bowed down
and fawning,
I see red –
I want to jump on him
like a tiger.
In Almaty,
where I spent
my youth,
the wife
of a powerful businessman
from high society
was flaunting her
beautiful,
gold-striped fur coat,
bragging about the fact
that she was wearing
the pelt of
the very last tiger
of the Himalayan mountains.
I just didn’t want to believe
what she was saying.
The Himalayas are immense,
multi-faceted,
and mysteriously wise –
if there are no tigers left,
then the mountains have died.
You should read the thoughts of the creator
in the eyes of the tiger.
Ballad of Bright Pain

The poet Estaj1 created the popular folk song ‘Ķū sni Ķorlan’. At the age of seventy-two, sensing approaching death, he called his loyal friend Nūrlybek. Although he had recently suffered a fall from a horse, incurring broken legs, Nūrlybek spent two days rattling along in a cart to come to Estaj’s aid. When Nūrlybek arrived, Estaj lifted his trembling hand with its worn yet still-glittering ring and said to him: ‘Persuade the old people to let me keep this ring given to me by Ķorlan as a gift. I parted with her fifty-one years ago, so let his ring remain with me after my death.’ Then he broke into tears: ‘O my love, how could you find room for such great love in such a tiny ring!’

A woman approached me once with her sad story, words filled with bitterness and anguish:
‘What can I do about my own dear daughter, now, like a candle, almost burnt out?
All my life, I was an invisible sail to her fate, fanning her hopes and dreams, so that her first love would find her, the paragon of beauty.
She grew up modest, with a bright mind and kind soul, standing out among her friends beautiful and pure, as a flower in spring.
But these joined birds of joy and grief, built a crowded nest in my soul, which was bound to lead to such trouble, to love wounded in the bud.
We knew no sadness until that wound lay on my heart.
Now I am the watchman to pain and grief, the moon of hopes never rising over our house.
Three years is an endless time to suffer while happiness seems as if free of time.

An actor who is carefree and happy
can find music and light in her soul,
even if he is married with a child in tow.
It is only me who suffers unbearably.
Year after year I suffer and weep.
She continues to say she is perfectly happy,
yet it is hard to explain how she could refuse Žigits\textsuperscript{2} with a smile on her lips,
like some mindless roe deer
seeking greenery in scorched meadows …
I try to tell myself that all is still possible,
that there will be life and happiness in the future,
but my soul has become a snowstorm
of longing and alarm in the breast,
while for her there is no one but him …
At night she weeps, sad as the moon,
at dawn she puts on a show of happiness.
Her soul is more tender than a primrose …
How can I save this decaying garden?
Give me advice in the language of the poet.
Give me words that speak from the heart …’
The mother walked away full of grief,
no surprise, given her misfortune.
Still her words struck me deeply,
and the story of her daughter
walked about in my mind, and I thought:
how a century had passed with so many
elevated by fate in this way. How is it,
that, so busy with our own lives, we don’t
notice life passing them by, or
the significance of what has occurred?
Only poets sing about lovers
so the people don’t forget their names.
Estaj’s poetry went to the heart of me.
Those who truly loved remembered it all.
As for declining Estaj, on hearing
the rustlings of death in the leaves

\textsuperscript{2} Žigit – generally denoting a 25- to 40-year-old male, the term can also be used as an honorific indicating bravery, endurance, fortitude and being true to one’s word.
he immediately called his only friend, and, the story goes, he went on to say: ‘Nürlybek, we have been together so many years. I am 72 years old, and my end is near. No one understands me better than you. I will not give up my life without a fight, but death is powerful, and I struggle to breathe. Only you were driven to understand the poet, so listen to him as he utters his dying words. Here, on the border of eternal darkness and light, remember, my friend, that I grasped this truth: life is nothing without days warmed by love, otherwise the people’s soul is dead. I grasped this even from “stupid” poets able to translate wise words. I knew the river’s language. I held my own with mountains. For half a century I spoke with them. For half a century, since our first meeting, I loved my own Қorlan, like an endless day. This meant that I lived. This meant my life was rich. Every moment, waking or sleeping, was filled with a dream of her. Every hour of every year I was happy. Every hour of every year I suffered. But because I was in love I could forget the world. My pain was beautiful and bright. All of you who are young or young in love, you should envy my tears … Even if fate has been hard on me, how much harder the pain of separation? Believe me when I say, if we were to part, I could still survive just thinking about her. For half a century Қorlan’s ring shone for me. I could conquer any storm. For half a century my wife fixed her eyes to where its light shone on my hand.
I go against the customs of our ancestors, in asking for Қorlan’s ring to travel with me on my long journey into the shadows. Though I am leaving I remain happy as before, shining with love at the point of death, with absolute faith in my single hope that all paths will lead to my Қorlan. That is not a dream that can be achieved in life. My dream is the sister of eternity, Қorlan always with me and me protecting her.’ Thus he closed his eyes. Thus with one last breath he sighs: ‘It’s time …’ When Қorlan heard about this, she cried: ‘From this I see he lived and died a true poet. He loved and sang even at the brink of death.’ The old woman began to keen, the shawl on her shoulders shining like the moon. In her words there was such strength drawn from the immense power of her love. Years passed … and, now giving way to death having healed for a moment the pain of hell, she suddenly asked for Estaj’s song to be sung, on the tenderness that shines in a lover’s eyes, and immediately we saw this tenderness in hers, as she whispered, breathlessly: ‘My love is boundless, as the sea … I am hurrying to you …’ Thus she died … her soul gave up … So do not condemn lovers for being in love. To love is to be faithful – an incredible feat. It’s much worse to be passed by, by love, like those who haven’t been given a heart to love. Oh mother, tell me why do we encourage those who are malicious already drunk with hate, and who don’t forgive human tenderness? Perhaps life’s path will not last forever, but love’s light is only for those who seek truth, for those who prayed to the light alone. I beg you, therefore, please – do not crush lovers.
Do not destroy them
with a tear or passionate word.
A wounded wing seeking happiness,
to protect their fragile souls, is sacred.
Wish them tenderness and passion.
Wish them strength over time in their pain,
where death itself will not separate
the owners of immortal love.
By the Laws of Retribution

To Asanā li ʾĀšimov

I am explaining to you without ceremony, that I loved you. I have never felt as strongly for my own brother as I do for you and God knows, how this came about?

– Letter from Fyodor Dostoevsky to Šoḵan Uālihanov

My Fyodor, my friend,
here, as I take my last breath,
it is to you I look towards
with my final thoughts.
Scandals have turned to stone.
White and black are one.
Everything is clear.
Finally my devastated people
carry me into the grave’s dark.

My people may be horrified
that in spite of all hopes,
I go to my grave
still believing in God’s judgement.
There are still those who believe.
When you read these lines,
the turf will already be lifted to bury me …
I owe a lot to today’s laws
that seem to rush like an avalanche down a slope.
You were the principal source of my love.
You are the last to whom I send my spirit and words.
It is impossible to smash the turbulent will
of these rivers of the world,
as they travel vast countries
with their wealth and blueness.

3 Šoḵan Uālihanov (Chokan Valikhanov, 1835–65) – Kazakh scholar, ethnographer and historian, a close friend of Dostoevsky. A descendant of high-ranking Kazakh nobility, Uālihanov was one of the first Kazakhs to be accepted at the Russian Geographical Society. The excerpt from Dostoevsky’s letter has been translated by the National Bureau of Translations.
Even the smartest princes
lose themselves in them.
Life’s angry pride can be restless
causing the head to spin as it
hurtes towards us –
yet our better selves are like rivers.
Who would dream of treating a great person lightly?
Great river –
who would dare to compete with you?
In your waves all thoughts are born.
We who are just passing through,
can we really understand your depths?
On whom should we pin the blame?
My dear friend. No one can contain you.
 Everywhere envy exposes those who try …
Your thoughts are the cradle of the world.
You are both my shield and goal.
How much I would like the Kazakh people
to love you with the same brotherly love as I.
And now I have stood up with a smile,
handfuls of light in my hand.
I would like to flower alongside you,
but my brief past is like a joke …
and I have carried away many daydreams from you.
The Moon grows scarlet from behind Mount Mataj.4
The morning is crystal clear, but the simple star quivers,
as though seeing evil itself.
Šokan is no more. A torn letter.

But didn’t he fight with this chosen age?
Or maybe the age struggled with him.
In the prime of life, strength is all-giving.
At twenty-nine he moves into the afterlife.
A small star quivers in the innocent sky,
and runs from itself into the darkness.
As time passes,
Dostoevsky, the prisoner in Omsk,
goes on to greater fame.

4 Mount Mataj – part of the Alatau range of mountains near Almaty. It looks down over Lake Balkaš (Balkash).
So … a cemetery for lasting memorials –
Altyinemel’s cemetery, of eternal night,
is where they buried Šoĥan in glory.
One might place some marker here
were it not that the weight of sudden affairs,
that burden which hangs over time,
causes the thought to be carried away
through the years, so you glance briefly
and the thought slips through your fingers …
Šoĥan is worthy of a monument.
His Russian friends agreed about that.
They transported rock from Taškent
and set to with a chisel.
But petty human squabbling
soon brought all sorts of lowlifes
out of the woodwork—
a scoundrel decides to split the rock in two
to cut down on materials and labour.
Not letting on to his customers,
he thought he’d make a killing.
‘All these suckers are blind as a bat.’
No sooner had he started chiselling the stone,
than a fragment hit him in the eye,
and he fell down in unbearable pain.
This pain rose to the sky,
while he staggered below on the earth,
biting the dust and chewing the carpet –
leaving future ages to look on his actions,
and judge them as they will.
And in that spring over the hills of Mataj
the flock gathered, and the circle closed in.
All his loyal friends were there
to send news to Petersburg:
the tear-stained grieving face of a friend
felt justice has been done.
There is punishment and the laws of retribution
and friendship is stronger than evil.
Seventh Sense

So you got married.
I’m happy for you.
But it’s not only people –
wolves and she-wolves
join their fates,
in order
to avoid loneliness
and provide
lifelong support
to one another.
To marry like everyone does,
and produce a child,
doesn’t require
great intelligence.
The question in all of this,
is how will the face that
now looks you in the mirror
be judged tomorrow?

It is not surprising that,
from time immemorial,
people have often confused
their hot and stormy,
passing emotions
with love,
since both can cause
the lightning to flash.

But not everyone
is capable of understanding
that in our human,
all-too-oblivious world,
love – is the highest peak.
The ability to climb up
has been given to only a few happy people.
And possibly unfortunately,
of the ten thousand,
only two
manage to be successful, 
on the sharp edge 
of this amazing 
imprisoning, stormy, 
happy holiday, 
this eternal holiday 
of unceasing delight.

To get physically 
but not spiritually close, 
is the ultimate sadness. 
That’s why 
there are so many 
lonely people in the world – 
the wingless tedium 
of a single-sided coin.

For them no 
one-off flights, 
or holidays out of the blue. 
 Totally deprived 
of a happy fate 
they smile to your face, 
bitterly weeping in secret.

And at any crossroads 
of life’s path 
you are always met 
with the inexorable question – 
Has your spouse become 
a sensitive friend to your soul, 
a friend of 
your innermost desires, 
one who feels 
your happiness and torment 
with a seventh sense?
If not, then all your striving will be like trying to light a fire on a windy day. And it means that you end up too far away from the goals fate has assigned you, too, too far … That’s just how inaccessible, difficult, and secret this multi-faceted, willfully-choosy love is.
Call to Courage

(A reply to a žigit who feels that he is unhappy)

You wept žigit,
recalling the hardship of the road
regretting kindness for which
you were never repaid.
You wept žigit,
your sons on your knees,
for a violent youth
that can’t be put right.
You wept žigit,
about friends, who gave the gift
of betrayal,
considering past mistakes,
cursing transient successes,
your eyes, resentfully scaling
those impossibly high pinnacles.
You wept žigit …
only I didn’t approve of your weeping.
I know fate
treated you well.
I remember how
you held the road’s lashes in contempt.
But who did you become
if you ended up in tears?
What’s that on your head:
a hat or a woman’s headscarf?
And if it’s a hat
cock it jauntily once more.
Wipe away this defeatist melancholy,
like soot from your face.
Your son should not see you cry.
Remember the sons
who look amazed and silent
at the tears in the eyes
and the weak-willed hands of their fathers.
What will they become?
You wept žigit …
What has become of your exalted pride?
Where is your generosity
having laid low your trembling enemies?
Courage and cowardice go hand in hand,
just one step between them.
And who told you:
all failure – means unhappiness?
That түлпар⁵
never stumbled on a difficult path?
That the white shirt
never became dirty in bad weather?
That goats’ teeth
can’t destroy the wild plane tree?
Who told you
that all people are good and fine?
That scorched malice
is like an old woman in a harvested field?
That everyone lives by a single truth,
protecting innocent honesty
like a child from lies?
If there are offended people,
it means there are also those who offend.
If there are humble people,
it means those who humiliate are thriving.
Pull yourself together, žigit!
To remain on the sidelines is worse.
Insults are just a rusty dagger
thrown into the water.
There is much work on this earth
for the courageous to do.
Forget your tears
and drive longing from your breast.
How can you let trouble
allow your dream to overtake you?
The žigit’s dream
cannot gallop behind,
and life’s failures
may lead us to happiness.

⁵ Түлпар – in Kazakh mythology and folklore, a winged or swift horse, corresponding to Pegasus. Every major hero of a Kazakh epic poem has a түлпар, which grows fast and, through its supernatural powers, helps the hero to succeed in his quest. Nowadays, түлпар is used as an honorific term for a horse.
Shared Understanding

Black from grief in this simple room
shrunken and done for with aging sickness,
here Leo Tolstoy is dying.
His wife walks in,
bends down over the bedstead.
‘Forgive me, forgive me!
I am so guilty.’
But he remains silent.
He thinks: ‘My dear friend, don’t weep,
my sadness is no less than yours.
No matter how many tears may fall,
I am at the edge of the grave.
Truly I loved you,
but there was such trouble between us.
I was tormented by your deafness.
You couldn’t understand …
I know to be the wife of Tolstoy
is a heavy cross, and all the heavier
for me was the burden of
your incomprehension.
You know you could have understood,
but you didn’t want to.
It was a long century for us,
but here is our parting at last.
I forgive you, and ask you to forgive me …’
And he shut his eyes, his tragedy,
the ability to expose a hundred evils,
yet with a wife unable to understand him.
TOLSTOY IS NO MORE.
He has gone to his rest.
How unhappy you were,
the wisest of people.
Where can we find tenderness
that is biased towards us?
Who refreshes us in the intense heat, 
shelters us in the fold?
The three measures of life are – 
heights, 
deepth, 
spaciousness. 
Failing to understand them 
leads to the heart of 
darkness and deafness. 
After all, there are no paths 
between one torrential soul and another. 
There is no worse curse 
than a lack of understanding. 
The path from one soul to another is like a duel. 
What a steep ascent, 
a road in a circle of people. 
Incomprehension, what are you, 
the misfortune of the innocent? 
But to not want to understand 
carries a heavy burden of guilt. 
O, how many paths I only half-know, 
O, how many springs have turned to sludge. 
Incomprehension is a traitor and a murderer, 
the hangman torturing in the midst of darkness and deafness. 
Giordano’s fire swirls behind you. 
Galileo’s trial is also you. 
Incomprehension, you lasso the damned Biržan sal. 
The starlight eclipsed Ü lyķbek. 
Incomprehension has always 
been cursed, allowing 
no pardon, 
no mercy.

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6. Biržan sal Kožağululy (1831–94) – traditional Kazakh composer and singer. He belonged to a special category of artists in Kazakh society known as sal, who usually functioned as part of a group that included those skilled in wrestling, horse-racing, music or storytelling.

7. Ü lyķbek (Ulughbek; 1394–1449) – Mirza Muhammed Taraghay bin Shahrukh, a Timurid ruler, astronomer and mathematician. ‘Ulughbek’ is a moniker, loosely translated as ‘Great Ruler’.
You whipped Abaj, your voice joined those people who envied Á’uezov’s success, your jealous eyes not out of your sight for a moment: he picks up the whisper: ‘His novel has no truth, it fails to reach true heights.’ Á’uezov just smiled bitterly: The people will JUDGE. The people will GRASP IT. Yes it really was like that. What blindness to see yet not to discover. If the one who fails to understand is not to blame, it is certainly a crime not to wish to understand. Incomprehension is the fog of dank humdrum days. It covers the horizon. It extinguishes the sun in the daytime. So – I am concerned about what happens when a young poet achieves fame. He may be misunderstood. Let’s pray for mutual understanding.

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8 Abaj Künanbajuly (1845–1904) – the most influential of all Kazakh poets, also a composer and philosopher. He is considered to be a reformer of Kazakh literature on the basis of enlightened Islam; his works also reflected the European and Russian cultures.

9 Mūhtar Á’uezov (1897–1961) – Kazakh writer, social activist and philologist. The poem is referring to the extreme popularity of his novel The Path of Abaj (1942–52).
Four Mothers

On life’s long and difficult path
make sure you don’t forget who you are.
If you always recall that your mother gave birth to you, not forgetting that
there are actually Four Mothers fanning out like wings:

OUR NATIVE HOME – our fate and the essence of our
essence,

OUR NATIVE LANGUAGE: brought to us from our
fathers,

RICHES OF THE SOUL and CUSTOMS – our sacred
rock, burning for us through

the darkness of generations and

years, OUR NATIVE

HISTORY – its degree of bitterness and sadness, tormenting us and
weighing us down … No deity is more significant than these Four
Mothers. Without them your head is like tumbleweed.

Anyone unable to love, or take care of his own dear mother, is unable to
understand the greatness of the Four Mothers.

Anyone who forgets about his Four Mothers will be blown into
oblivion by a forgetful wind. A people who cannot protect the Four
Shrines, will never be fated for happiness.

The Four Mothers are like the fate of our dear ones. To live means to live
only for them.

If you are dying, you are dying for them.

Translated by Belinda Cooke