

MUKHTAR SHAKHANOV

(b. 2.07.1942)



Mukhtar Shakhanov is a poet and public figure. He is well known for leading the commission on the Želtoqsan 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 Mǎžilis (Mazhilis) of Kazakhstan (2004–07). Today he is editor-in-chief of *Žalyn* and the leader of the Tǎuelsizdikti qorǵau People's Movement.

He has published almost twenty books, including *Baқыt* (Happiness, 1966), *Balladalar* (Ballads, 1968), *Aj tuyp keledi* (New Moon, 1970), *Sejhundariâ* (Seihun Darya, 1975), *Senim patšalyǵy* (Kingdom of Trust, 1979) and *Mahabbatty qorǵau* (Protecting Love, 1982). His prose includes the essay-dialogue *Qú z basyndaqy ańšyńnyń zary* (Cry of a Hunter Over the Abyss, 1997) in collaboration with Chingiz Aitmatov and the documentary novel *Želtoqsan èpopeâsy* (The Epic of Želtoqsan, 2004). Shakhanov also wrote plays, such as *Sokratty eskeru tûni* (The Night of Paying Respects to Socrates, 1997) and *Šyńǵys hannyń pendelik kúpiâsy* (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 ‘*Ƙù sni Ƙorlan*’. At the age of seventy-two, sensing approaching death, he called his loyal friend Nürlybek. Although he had recently suffered a fall from a horse, incurring broken legs, Nürlybek spent two days rattling along in a cart to come to Estaj’s aid. When Nürlybek 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 Ƙorlan 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.

¹ Estaj Berkimbajü ly (1868–1946) – singer, composer and poet. His song ‘*Ƙorlan*’ turned him into a legend.

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*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

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 Қорлан, 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 Қорлан’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 K̇orlan'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 K̇orlan.
That is not a dream that can be achieved in life.
My dream is the sister of eternity,
K̇orlan always with me and me protecting her.'
Thus he closed his eyes.
Thus with one last breath he sighs: 'It's time ...'
When K̇orlan 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 Asan' li A' šimov

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 Šoқан Uálihanov³

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 Šoқан Uálihanov (Chokan Valikhanov, 1835–65) – Kazakh scholar, ethnographer and historian, a close friend of Dostoevsky. A descendant of high-ranking Kazakh nobility, Uálihanov 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.

So ... a cemetery for lasting memorials –
Altynevel's cemetery, of eternal night,
is where they buried Šoğan 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 ...
Šoğan 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 *tū lpar*⁵
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 *Tū lpar* – in Kazakh mythology and folklore, a winged or swift horse, corresponding to Pegasus. Every major hero of a Kazakh epic poem has a *tū lpar*, which grows fast and, through its supernatural powers, helps the hero to succeed in his quest. Nowadays, *tū lpar* 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,
depth,
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.⁶
The starlight eclipsed Û lyķbek.⁷
Incomprehension has always
been cursed, allowing
no pardon,
no mercy.

⁶ Biržan sal Җоғағұлұлы (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 Û lyķbek (Ulugbek; 1394–1449) – Mirza Muhammed Taraghay bin Shahrukh, a Timurid ruler, astronomer and mathematician. 'Ulugbek' is a moniker, loosely translated as 'Great Ruler'.

You whipped Abaj,⁸
your voice joined those people
who envied Ä uezov⁹ 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.’
Ä 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.

⁸ Abaj Qı nanbajı ly (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 Mü htar Ä 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).

