

# **NOMADIC LYRICS**

**translated from the Mongolian  
by Simon Wickham-Smith  
(unless otherwise indicated)**

## PARADISE AND SWALLOWS

A mirage on the blue steppe, like a heavenly city.  
My ancestors are forever and only in paradise, and  
Only the swallows, hanging above the lonely steppe,  
Welcome me into my father's land.  
A thick blue mist is draped over the sky, and  
The swallows alone lead the way with flapping wings.

## MY GENTLE LYRIC

I am a child of nomadic Mongolia. We would move at the break of dawn. As a child I used to sit in a basket on the loaded cart, greeting the morning sunshine at the even pace of the plodding camel; perhaps it was then that I felt the rhythm of my future poems. When we reached our new camp, everything – the blue cranes, the small trace of white fog, the cluster of boulders, the variegated hills – would seem new to me.

My father would sit me on his lap and hold his fiddle in front of me, then play a long clear melody – the “Jaakhan Sharga” of the Dariganga Mongols – and, as this song came neighing and whinnying out at me, the local mountains would be prouder, the water clearer, the song of the birds more melodious. . . . Thus my little body became the instrument and my father played on me. My poetry was tuned to the melody of the Morin Khuur across the sacred space of the steppe.

The nomadic child likes to watch things in the distance. When he sees a nomadic family on the move, in the midst of the blue mirage running along the horizon, he tells his mother. My mother and I greet the moving nomads, carrying a pot of tea and a plate full of clotted cream and dried curds. In my childhood I saw the appreciation of those who were thirsty from their long journey, and understood the sense of extending a hand to those who live worshipping the earth and who depend upon one another. I think this was absorbed into the essence of my future poems.

The hearth of the nomadic home is always like the center of the world. The Morin Khuur rests next to the altar, and then the “long song”. A horse neighs at the hitching post; a young camel bellows around the stake; the wind plays like a flute in the grass... A legend by the fire, and the Big Dipper arcing above the smoke-hole of the yurt...

It seems as though an unknown force descends through me, down from the heavens to the earth. Or else a gentle melody rises up from the earth and floats off towards the heavens. Like the stone man, standing alone in the middle of the steppe, contemplating the great centuries-long history of our nomadic ancestors. Even the immobile stone man travels with us into the next millennium, following the course of time... Nomadism is movement.

The beginning of the nomadic journey towards the horizon where the sky and the earth join together seems tiresome, but what of distance in this indefatigable desire to know the “long song”, the deep thought, and the lyrical life? I migrated here for the sake of knowledge. The years of my life spent as a nomad in town also seem to me like nomadism. I move in search of my nomadic origins in the sacred lines of books and verses, dreaming from the misty ivory tower in the city, longing for the steppe with its mirages. The basic nature of the nomad is slow, uninterrupted movement, the distant, streaming harmony, searching, presentiment, a curious character with a gentle and melodious heart that looks on everything from its good side.

I have long been absorbed by the fundamental nature of my nomadic ancestors, believing in them, favoring and cherishing their quiet, gentle melody. The gentle melody is the nature of my poetry. The wheels of the wooden cart which turn without harming the grass, the quiet character of the elders who avoid stepping on the flowers, the trust of the nomads who have no locks on their doors . . . it seems that the short road to purity lies here.

A nomad is coming . . . the living sacred images of childhood and the old folk together with the carts of the nomadic journey become clearer, the sacred epics that have become blurred over the course of time awaken, the blue birds of thought that entered the mind and were once forgotten, are now flying to me again.

Translated by S.Sumiya

## THE WHEEL OF TIME

*The time goes flying, flying by,  
The time is gone, is gone.*

Quite unexpectedly, the time flies rushing by.  
Earth mother swells, the ridges of her brown steppes frail.  
Roots of grass suck in the rain, grow saturated.  
A flock of birds threads through clouds,  
And hills and mountains pass through a vision of horses,  
And angry breath is obstinate.  
A thread of golden sunlight pierces the flowers on the southern slopes.  
Inconstant as time is, the time flies by and is gone.

The moon peeps out from behind a veil of clouds,  
And time bashfully steals through the stagnant water.  
Youth steps from the army into manhood.  
A trotting arrow, creamwhite steeds, the time goes flying, flying by.  
Nighttime lilies caress white beams of light.  
A voice's beautiful melody betrays no anger.  
A loving couple feasts upon the depths of their life.  
The neighbors send out wedding invitations, the time flies by and is gone.

A solitary man in a green haze, sleeping,  
Flings stones into the wind.  
Why do men's hearts beat in this world?  
We're working through this riddle, and the time goes flying, flying by.  
They laugh and string their beads.  
Their eyes, their skilful golden words, have no time to rest.  
They make friends with scholars who traverse the centuries and,  
Across the ages still to come, the time flies by and is gone.

*The time goes flying, flying by,  
The time is gone, is gone.*

Quite unexpectedly, the time flies rushing by.  
The smell of horses hangs upon a pale blue mist,  
And butterflies chase their brawn through flower's honey,  
And swans and cranes dance out their native rituals.  
Fruit multiplies like stars over the far away mountains.  
White horses take a roll and rise up red.  
Good fortune spreads, insatiate, through our homeland.  
And happiness is infinite, the time flies by and is gone.

Children knock together pebbles to make percussion.  
A clash of steel pans, and the seasons fall silent.

We listen to our dear bodies, resonating to a thousand years of song.  
The tune of earthmother's stones, the time goes flying, flying by.  
Along the roseate ridges of the still mountains of evening,  
The swallows fly up with wings of flame.  
Weaving ancient stories to kindle joy and good fortune,  
We're thinking like the older generation, the time flies by and is gone.

Ancient heroes gallop through my story.  
Old and young smile upon the shining screen.  
Face faces face when self meets self,  
The Vajradhara is reflected in the present, and the time goes flying, flying by.  
The heart beats out the peace of the world, and  
We check the hidden nature in the movement of the stars.  
Mindful of the map of stations spanning the infinite cosmos,  
We hurry towards the future time, the time flies by and is gone.

*The time goes flying, flying by,  
The time is gone, is gone.*

Quite unexpectedly, the time flies rushing by.  
While the stars are dozing, the white hoarfrost falls.  
The highest price is caught, shimmering at the end of a telescope.  
Crops are sown in rows and swell in the sunshine.  
Two fledglings flap away the summer on the edge of the dry saltmarsh.  
A siege of cranes circles the dried up saltmarsh.  
Alongside the returning birds, swirling in the sky,  
Raising the misty blue curtain, the time flies by and is gone.

The larks sing, they praise the morning's rays.  
In waters of desire, floating unprotected from the sun,  
We sense the rhythm of original mind.  
The heart's reply grows stronger, the time goes flying, flying by.  
The birds call gently, summoning their young.  
They leave the frozen mandala in swirling flocks.  
We sadly take to heart how, in the revolving world,  
Our mother's getting old - the time flies by and is gone.

The story of the passing world lies,  
Hidden beneath the wings of years; the years leap high,  
And a single finger piles the earth over the old as they sleep.  
Frost builds up on the tips of grasses, the time goes flying, flying by.  
Thick stacks of corpses watch the time go round.  
Ancient grasses ripple, untrodden.  
We take refuge in unbridled joy, we  
Grab onto life, the time flies by and is gone.

*The time goes flying, flying by,  
The time is gone, is gone.*

Quite unexpectedly, the time flies, rushing by.  
The sun's eyelids freeze in the endless mandala.  
The piercing cold is tamed beneath the best fur hats.  
The birds fly off, abandoning the skies.  
The sun's rays burnish the silver steppes.  
Frozen lanterns, glistening in the camp,  
Sway with Orion, hanging in the high heavens.  
Earth's satellites flash and fade away, the time flies by and is gone.

The heat from the winter campsite rises up and freezes in the clear sky.  
The turning tentpole shows the hand of night.  
Around the children, covered by mother's *deel*, listening to stories  
Of *Once upon a time*, the time goes flying, flying by.  
The horses whinny, echoing their bodies between the hills and mountains.  
Sound flows, absorbed into snowflakes, and  
The spine of the world relaxes in the four directions.  
And, *Happily ever after*, the time flies by and is gone.

The moon's rays ask the way of sunlight,  
Traditions are assumed, then age and wither away.  
The world's at peace because of what you've got and,  
As you follow your dreams, the time goes flying, flying by.  
You take the life you're given and the sands keep running through,  
A constant round of joys and destinies and gifts.  
Throughout a hundred aeons, bearing witness now  
To honest labor and compassion, the time flies by and is gone.

*The time goes flying, flying by,  
The time is gone, is gone.*

## WHEN THE SORROWFUL HORSE FIGHTS AGAINST ITS HOMELAND...

Winter days, with hoary grasses, fade away...  
From feather pillows, we keep watch over the eastern skies...  
A mirage running through the plains, a horse running through the mirage.

In the fields, short tufts of grass seem trodden underfoot.  
In this place of bitter, moonless nights, livestock rustle along the tracks,  
And leaves are dreaming from the elms.

Loading up to cross three scrubby passes,  
They say that moving far away brings trouble.  
We passed the whole night in a dream, humidity seeping through the windows.

It's like years spent getting used to a noisy city,  
It's like I'm all alone in a band of seven,  
It's like our group of lucky and inspired poets.

Only in the warm breeze of early spring, coming through the windows,  
Like colorful shrubs stirring, we've moved away from mother.  
Ancient pain recurs in this dear homeland.

Standing upright in the life of city and country,  
They sail their ships to catch the world,  
But fail to catch the clans amid the isolated hills.

When they came, flapping down here,  
Inside the cured nets covering our palace,  
We flew upwards, we had no chance to leave.

Miserable nomads whipped by the gravelly earth,  
The cart's wheels run downhill through the spring.  
They're busy feasting, hobbled in their palaces like lonely horses.

Passing round fresh *tarag* when the times are peaceful,  
Dismantling their brightly colored tent before it wears out -  
This is how it is with townspeople nowadays.

When the sorrowful horse fights against its homeland,  
When the dark mirage runs away towards the plain,  
Then, even the human child's freedom is hindered.

## MOTHER'S WAITING

In morning's blue tinge I saw it floating, the  
Tumbleweed rolling in the first light of dawn.  
This wind of yours, this friendly hand, no longer slaps my cheek.  
For years I have not visited the steppe, or my mother.

Looking through binoculars at the landscape,  
A single *ger* stands out amid the autumn feathergrass.  
I shield my eyes against the thick blue mist.  
An old woman and a man crouch there, facing me.

Oh, my poor mother, in her eighty years eternity,  
I remember how she stood too, shading her eyes.  
She donned a coat against the northern rains,  
As she gently reined us in with fables!

My mother's waiting, glacial, like a snowy mountain,  
She's patching a *deel*, burnt while making tea.  
My devoted mother's watching the seasons' road,  
Catching the clanking of stirrups.

Now she's gone, I'm always thinking of Mother,  
Gently stepping, lifting the hem of her *deel*.  
She's waiting for me, amid the falling leaves.  
But Mother's life has moved beyond the pass!

We come, from time to time, to a place of peace.  
What can I do for my mother, my protector?  
Without concern, not thinking of our health,  
What real work is there for us?

In winter, freezing dawns repayed my mother.  
She gathered sheep's dung in her skirts, she stoked the fire and,  
In the warming pleasure of feather bedding and cushions,  
She snuggled down like a cradled child.

We climbed onto the lion-throne cushion of comfort,  
We moved from one place to another.  
So that your days might again shine bright,  
Mothers alone remain alive.

The site of the *ger* is blackened, like a gaping hole,  
The calico rotted by the vinegar of time.  
Like glass under the sun, trapping an unstable demon,  
Mother alone is like a hobbled horse.

Livestock, spreading out beyond the stupa,  
The old grey ones move in loose groups.  
We loaded the felt walls of the holy ones  
Onto the cart of the world.

She took the twisting path, kept character in check,  
She tuned the twinned strings of the land.  
With the peaceful long song, she surely finds holiness,  
Dwelling on the steppe upon the deep blue stone.

Mother kept moving, carrying baskets of dung,  
Her turned-up boots kissing colored blooms,  
Her legs grazed by the woodcart's wheels,  
And the years rolled by along the Mongol steppe.

The steppe has turned to desert.  
Nearly all is flattened, like dung in a sheepfold.  
In this cruel borderland, the scapegoat feels despair -  
My poor mother's turning blue with waiting!

Now I'm back, I don't meet with Mother -  
I've certainly returned for no-one else.  
No doubt that Mother was broken by waiting -  
It seems that I've returned just for my dear homeland.

And she calls on the one she suckled, saying, "Come back to me" -  
And they claim the present Buddha's in Gandhara.  
Is this a man who can leave his palace?  
Remember - many more stars remain by day.

Like eyes swollen from crying, the steppe is  
Dazed in the iron-grey mist.  
Is this the nest we have all abandoned?  
We should shade our eyes and see a few small *gers*!

## A FOAL HEADS HOME

A poor orphaned foal trotted despondently over the hills. He had been bright and full of energy when his mother was around but, now that she was gone, oh, how he suffered! In front of him, swallows were diving through the air. The poor creature had no idea where he was going, led as he was in all directions by mysterious and invisible omens. Deprived of his mother, the strong sun made him feel weak. A fine dust built up on his scraggy backbone, flies and midges covered his face and eyes, and suffering piled upon suffering. Overcome by the dust, he came to where a herd of horses had gathered around a lake of pungent water. He trotted towards a pale colored horse and, although he was afraid and hung back, the other horse wouldn't let him approach, laying back his ears and balking him. He was finally encircled and subdued by a rough black stallion.

The horse trotted off all alone. The poor creature had no idea where he was going, led as he was in all directions by mysterious and invisible omens. Day and night, he was overwhelmed by dust and drenched by rain, his hooves knocked against stones, he walked in the dry spring wind, his mane flowing, his delicate legs maturing; his short body developed and grew bigger and he was aware of nothing but swallows.

The swallows were all around him, twisting front and back, hobbling him. These airborne beasts never left the poor thing alone, they brushed against his mane, under his belly, flying between his slender legs. How on earth would he get used to it? Who could help him, hobbled back and front as he was?

So the poor orphan trotted on. Worn out, he came near to some horses, but these rough stallions trotted further away, and cruelly shunned him. In this way, he went looking, all alone, from herd to herd, from encampment to encampment, from hillock to hillock, drawn ever onwards, unaware that he was heading north.

He wandered off, through the parched red dust, among elegant and colored flowers, rustling the yellow leaves of autumn, and crunching the thickly packed whiteness of snow.

Far off in the distance, he saw some horses and suddenly whinnied to them. And his voice, catching the breeze, rang like a flute and stirred under their tails and they galloped off. He galloped towards the herd, not knowing why, his tail stirred; unlike the others before, they did not spurn him. Although it was winter, he had discovered among them an ancient warmth.

He kicked up the dust, startling the stallions at the edge of the herd which was grazing at large among the hollows of the hills: they looked upon the small creature with great wonder, as though he had descended from the sky. This golden stallion's son came from a wise mare who had been sold abroad: the world confused him, it seemed muddled like a riddle, like criss-crossed threads.

This foal of the mare who had been sold abroad when pregnant did not feel that he had come home. He thought, rather, that that he had surely reached the end; he said, "This herd of stallions is either my dream or else the world's dream". His heart was simply absorbed in contemplating the secrets, these tokens of the world.

Straightaway, the earthbrown colt trotted off with the herd of stallions in the direction of a *ger*. Though weak and without wings, his four hooves dropped into a canter and he soared away, a pair of swallows on his withers, messengers of heaven.

## THE CRANES

Excitedly, the black-faced cranes  
Come every spring flapping their wings and,  
Blue beards fluttering,  
They land at will.  
It's not true what they say, that  
These wandering birds have no home.  
They travel their destiny,  
Returning to their birthplace,  
Cranes paired together  
Over the spacious steppe,  
Exhausted from the long flight  
Back to their regular haunt.  
And, year after year,  
The locals become used to these birds.  
Near to a farm,  
They lay two spotted eggs.  
Who could know that  
This untrodden place  
Hid eggs –  
You'd never think it.  
When they came to the gentle steppe,  
It was to a place without evil.  
When they laid their eggs on the bare gravel,  
They gave not a thought to misfortune,  
They got dirty, protecting  
The unsuckled birds within the eggs.  
An inquisitive fellow, they say,  
With not a thought,  
Trode local wisdom underfoot,  
And subversively pocketed the eggs,  
Getting home  
Without arousing suspicion.  
The two poor cranes  
Stepped into pools of rain-water,  
Hid their feathers as if they had no wings,  
And there spent the summer, without their young.  
When the autumn wind ruffled their plumage,  
They came near to the farmer who had taken their eggs.  
Nobody noticed their grief,  
As the horses were trotted out.  
Some way away, the farmer's son, his eyes sparkling -  
He had bells on his shoes and a short jacket on -  
Ran playfully after the cranes.

The adults weren't watching him.  
The cranes homed in on the happy child,  
Running in from behind,  
Closer and closer and closer,  
Distance out of mind,  
And his mother's breasts ached.  
Three times she called her child.  
They searched across the wide steppe,  
And combed between the blades of grass.  
He must have sprouted wings and flown away.  
They didn't find even one of his boots.  
As the days are borne forth by the world,  
Unravelling us into the kisses of old age,  
When will this scrap of a boy be found, he  
Who never knew the eggs were stolen?  
The cranes' melancholy song  
Is tethered above the *ger*.  
Is it a shadow or a tear?  
The milk in the pan has turned.

## THE SWALLOWS

Returning from afar, swallows in flocks  
Embrace the tales of the gentle, tranquil steppe.  
The waters of eternity were spilt into the yellow steppe's palms,  
And, ever since, these little birds have dared not leave.

Once, out riding with my father many years ago,  
There were swallows flying over the lonely hills.  
Returning from the distant time,  
They are perhaps still seeking their elixir.

I didn't understand my father's story then.  
I saw a swallow pass away, though  
It had found the water of eternity.  
I grieved it hadn't drunk.

My father shared the cream of stories,  
Eternal and prophetic. And once,  
I promised that, before the swallows did,  
I'd find and offer him the waters of eternity.

In this brief world, promises are not always fulfilled.  
My father's gone now, his son's not found the waters of eternity.  
The swallows circle overhead,  
Looking to source these everlasting waters.

To my own son, who'll gain his father's hearth and home,  
I'll tell the tale of the swallows.  
But, life is not eternal, I'll be gone,  
I'll leave the swallows' tale to my children.

The story's over. The waters of eternity are still not found,  
But they'll be found eventually.  
And what the waters of eternity reveal, please share  
With these my story's swallows, pursuing their joys over the steppe,

## THE BALLAD OF THE FORTY-ONE SWANS

When the cool wind of autumn came, the birds began to leave. For many years, smoke from dungfires had swirled upwards where the red willows stood beside a pond, rooted like sacred water in a cup. The old couple looked on as one swan from their flock grew its feathers but – for some unexplained reason – was unable to fly. One autumn evening, as the sleet blew all around, the flock turned in formation upon the surface of the lake. Struggling along at the rear, the cygnet grew sad that he couldn't rise from the water and fly away. What would happen to him, poor thing? And so, his flock flew off, leaving him to go round and round in circles, without success.

He called out to the darkening sky, in distress at being left, circling round and round in this way, abandoned by the flock. When they saw this, the old man and woman stopped and picked up the poor, injured creature. They deposited him head first into a basket and, taking him home, bandaged up his broken wing into a splint.

The forty swans circled over the *ger* several times, wondering whether they could trust the harmless old couple, whether the passing of time would inevitably push them forward. Their calls ricocheted off the surface of the pond into the blue spaciousness of the sky and, like the threading of a needle, they flew away.

By the third month of winter, all that the dark blue cuckoo beside the pond knew was that the thaw had passed into springtime, bringing the red willows into bud. Over the winter, the old man and woman had gotten used to the swan, and thought of him now as their child. Stretching up towards the sky, he would come home to the brown *ger*, where mother liked to lay his wing near the pluming smoke of the fire.

One gusting spring day, the flock of swans appeared, somewhat earlier than usual, they were as if like a cord threaded in the sky. They circled over the *ger* several times, all the while calling, and came to rest like white flowers on the pond. And the old man and woman saw their favorite son, flying like a black flower amidst this gathering of white lilies. For days and months he flew over the old couple, while in the land of Shambhala all they knew was that the air would turn chill and the top of the *ger* be dusted with snow. And so, one fresh autumn day, the flock of swans, circling clockwise over the pond, climbed higher and higher into the sky.

In one of those wonderful moments given us by the world, it is said that, as the old man and the woman watched, as if in a mirror, while the flock flew off in a V formation, one of the swans was flying home. And, while that one swan circled over the smokepipe of the old couple's brown *ger*, the whole flock threaded their way back, pleading with him one after the other, a line of swans like prayer beads strung together. And so they decided on their path.

And when, from the clear turquoise sky, the pond was the size of a cooking-pot, the heat of this one action died down and grew like a flower's seed in the consciousness of many generations. And – how many such mysteries might there be? - two white swan feathers fell slowly in circles from the sky, down onto the roof of the *ger*.

## SNOWFALL TUMBLES LIKE WHITE STALLIONS

Snowfall tumbles like white stallions,  
And time rages like snowfall.  
Frozen horses gallop the white plains -  
The weather's dismal out beyond the coltish sky.

Forty years have floated by without a thought,  
In later years we've met on nearby passes.  
Frozen eagles circle the salty plains -  
Times are hard where no blue iris grows.

Before the tea is made, snow blows in flurries.  
The fire leaps upwards, enlightening past lives.  
Blizzards rush across the plains of Dariganga,  
We've boiled up tea at the rear of the *ger* to warm ourselves.

The fire in the hearth, cracking my soles,  
Like the warmth of centenarians.  
Controlled by the map of destiny, by these times of craving,  
We've picked up noise and rumor from the weather outside.

The burning dung sparks red, like shards of summer sunshine,  
We watch the heavens' movement from the burnt ridgeway.  
Beyond the walls of felt, the storm revolves in waves -  
We straightened out our melodies.

Out with an extra mount, you can change horses, and  
Out of a low mountain-pass, you can awaken the mind.  
Searching the world, always moving on, you find nothing,  
Like wandering in groups through fog.

The circle of the moon, the triangle of the roof, the square center table:  
Why are all things everywise a multitude of brilliance?  
At such advanced an age, we're sitting on cushions -  
What fate is there when mind abandons body?

The stormy wind takes hold of stalks of feathergrass,  
The rattle of hooves sounds out over the world,  
A thousand steeds kicking up snow upon the plain -  
An orphaned child in the center of its world.

The hungry storm, dishevelled and exhausted, rises up.  
A day and night of storms, we're used to them upon the plain.  
The mount's mane is white like a standard,  
And, tired, I gallop against the storm of years.

## QUICKWIT THE CAMEL

### 1

There fell from the sky into the narrow sandy gorge of a mountain pass a single huge blue stone. But to look at it, we would see not a stone, but only a camel lying down. As the sky traced out its path overhead, the skin on his two erect humps sagged down, weak and emaciated. He stood with his legs apart and slapped at the swarms of black flies with his tail, but even the grasses irritated him. Tears flowed from his eyes, like pearls of spring water and, in his watery eyes, the sky stretched a deep blue to its furthest edges and there rose a pale blue mountain, which seemed to him to be in the way. Behind this mountain ran a great red-colored pass, where soil tumbled down and where the water was sucked dry. In the skirts of the fine sand, he practiced walking ten paces at a time and, with the sun's help, he crept forward, meter after meter. And the further he moved, the more the place lost its sting and grew attractive to him.

On the silken sands, fine as hot ashes, his intestines became strained and perforated and his two hocks ached with stress, so much so that he could barely move a few centimeters at a time. There was a well behind him, full of cool, clear water. His rider had taken a bucket and filled three wooden troughs to the brim, each one to the depth of a meter, and the camel gulped the water down disdainfully. The water dribbled down and splashed the flies on his humps, terrifying them. He twisted his long neck round and looked behind him at what was happening. He gazed in thought towards the edges of the sky and remained happily where he stood.

The midday heat gave way to coolness and he took pleasure in gobbling down the red calidum flowers, which sucked the liquid at the edge of the saltmarshes. The time sped like the wind, the darkness fell in a haze of ancient dreams. His body became tired and the colors of the world gradually faded. The quick-witted camel's final desire, his breath continually rising and falling, was to have the red calidum of the Gobi in his mouth, in his warm body, as he took his last breath. And with the passing of every second, his entire body withered, he felt his desire for the river dry up like a padding in his hoof, and he saw the light blue mountain as a cloth tent at the edge of the sky. His body longed for dampness, he wondered from where it might come, and the tears dropped from his black eyes in watery cascades.

### 2

In this sandy pass, the quick-witted camel developed at the rate of knots. The late spring arrived with damp snow. Taking no notice of the undulating landscape, the camel ran over two valleys towards a bright, shining star in the

south. The wind howled, the feathergrass and the flowers caressed the soles of his feet, and his speed gradually made his body as light as a feather. Though the weight on his back was not distributed particularly evenly, it didn't trouble him. His rider would occasionally lash out at his rump, and he would hurry forwards. Since there was no moon, it was pitch black. From time to time, the drowsy birds at the bottom of the carigana tree and on the branches of elms and poplars flew upwards with a start while the rider, though quaking inside, remained calm in his body and kept himself focused on the path ahead. The sweat dripped from the camel's body, and he rested while dawn lightened the morning gloom. He ran and ran. The land went up and down, the land rose and fell, he was almost flying, he was almost in flight. Such was the power granted to his four sinewy legs. In fact, only the heavenly Buddha knew why it was he was in such a hurry. In the bright light, a filminess had descended upon the arid Gobi, it was as if the desert had no limits. And, as the camel pushed on, he paid no attention to his body, he could only feel his own sinewy power as he crossed the Gobi.

At midday, during the middle month of autumn, the body of the quick-witted camel was bright yellow, like hills of rippling feathergrass, his loose beard fluttered like tassels on a standard. The more he galloped, imposing and majestic, the more he was like a mighty dragon, twisting through clouds.

### 3

Time passed. The quick-witted camel felt his whole energy drain away. Somehow, in the eye of the shining sun, he crossed the narrow sandy pass. Like hemp wilting amidst stubby feathergrass, he briefly rested his fine neck. The scent of wormwood melded into rafters of feathergrass, but he felt no desire to bite it. If he only had his legs, he would stir himself. If he only had hooves, he would gallop away. Black clouds moved across the setting sun, casting shadows over the cloth tents of blue and red, and the birds of night took wing. The last of the day's strength snapped and, finally, it was night. Not a breath of wind. The movement of birds stirred a gentle breeze and those darkling birds who were not acquainted with the melody of the wind flew circling upwards, coming to rest in the branches of a nearby elm. But they had no strength left to go look at him, they moved only as much as he did. The curvature of the full moon, like a new three-ply bowstring, cast light upon the gloomy path and a deep darkness descended.

### 4

The gorge was covered in pebbles of various sizes, smooth and round like animal droppings. On the honeycomb of land beyond grew wild cotoneaster, and a warm wind had permanently settled upon the hollow to the rear of the blue mountain.

The camel was barely able to balance himself on his four legs, like twigs of cotoneaster. Barely able to raise his straggly neck, he could see, for the first time, in the rays of the full white sphere of the moon, the ghostly shadow of the foursided blue mountain, rising up like a cotton tent. Soon he was tethered outside the grey *ger*, from which smoke rose in plumes. He kept his eye on where he had come from, following the mountain as he circled the peg that held him fast. He missed the Gobi, missed heading into the wind with the herd. He was desperate to reach the eternal mountain, everything else had fallen away. As he trotted out, the eternal mountain bounced up and down and, when he lay down in the hot sand, it seemed peaceful and dignified. The days and months passed and he grew used to this mountain, this celestial tethering post. The four seasons came and went, his fluffy beard floated like the rays of the sun and moon, his two humps stood erect like bridle-studs. As the herd traveled beyond the mountain, he was in the vanguard, his lovely long neck an ornament, and his rider named him Quickwit. He crossed five narrow passes, looking down as his hooves, with their velvety black hair, stepped on wild leeks. In his bouncing gait he was like a celestial mount, his fluffy beard fluttered, and riding him was like riding upon an utterly undisturbed flying carpet.

When his rider rode out from a similar group nearby, flying threads between the edges of the blue sky, he felt his stretched sinews relaxing, his velvety hooves itched, his whole body had a lightness, like warm feathers. But the fact that he would not be heading out on distant paths, that he would just be twisting and turning in this same pasture, saddened him to the core. There would be no-one to ride Quickwit over the winter and spring.

But his straight and elegant back and his long legs had nothing to do, and he thought of what he might do in such a miserable situation. One evening in the middle of spring, when the wet snows had fallen, and when the wind blew in squalls, a man came up from the pastures and, attaching a leading rein to the camel's nose-ring, placed a load of weapons evenly on his back. How could he understand why he was being prepared so hurriedly like this, without being tethered and deprived of water for even one day?

## 5

Quickwit wanted only to creep and crawl and steal away. In the middle of the night, he opened his mouth like a lion and, from the dark, a bird screeched and a cold shiver ran through his whole body. Off in the shadows, like an ancient evil, the old black bird turned on its perch; nearby the glorious moon seemed to come close, sitting there like a red guard, shifting its eyes from side to side. The screeching song of the bird had been a bad omen. The earth and *ovoo* came closer. He saw, indistinctly, how the tent of the blue mountain seemed to tower overhead. The network of cattle paths gave him comfort. To have lost so much power was a bad thing. After a short rest, he crept forward....

## 6

The yellow Gobi, covered in tamarisk, was a perfect land of Shambhala to which the Enshöo clan had become accustomed. It was blessed by Heaven with thrones like carved sandalwood, placed atop precious red camels. Others were jolted by the voice of Heaven and crawled, seemingly unthreatened, from their miserable lair. And so, one night, robbers entered a hole opened by darkness in the clouds and, snatching their booty – along with girls and women, screaming alarm - they ran away. The Enshöo were well enough armed to give chase and, for many days, they pursued the robbers to exhaustion deep into their country. Their weapons were blunted, their bullets spent, and they were sent into exile. An order was sent out that Quickwit was to be loaded up with the weapons and bullets and dispatched. At first, Quickwit went some way north, and he did not feel tired. He sailed past a couple of valleys, some brightly colored hillocks, the rubble of a steep cliff, saxaul and poplar trees, and, from time to time, he would speed past a herd of cattle who would take notice only of the weapons. As one half of his load slipped from his back onto the road, he would occasionally come upon the stinking remains of a dead camel. And this was a bad omen.

The robbers turned their strength to fighting back, and proceeded still deeper into the country. Another night passed, but they gave their legs no rest and kept galloping on. The following evening, they came to where there seemed to be ravines at every step. Then, suddenly, at dusk, they saw what they thought was a familiar-looking camel loaded with weapons. They had reduced their speed, and had no time to regain their energy to match his legs, and he roared past.

His rider gave a sudden tug and, though the peg had almost split the camel's septum, they had nonetheless already left the ravine, where some of the robbers remained. Now, a quite different, quite dazzling country stood out among the regular landscape and a sound like whistling cut the sky. The camel's right foreleg screamed with a burning heat. One bullet fell short, but another bullet whizzed past and Quickwit felt his rider fall to the ground. As much as he tried, he couldn't pull himself up. His left foreleg was also burning. He was moving under his own steam, he was riding himself.

As he twisted and turned, gently and deliberately slowing up, Quickwit's misted eyes could vaguely make out, among the cliffs and ravines scattered all around, riding saddles on the backs of many camels just like him. As he hobbled along, a man flashed by and grasped his leading rein which was brushing the ground. As he was slowly pulled to a stop his energy grew slack, and his four feet came up short as though he had been pegged to the ground. He only had just enough strength to keep himself from falling over. Although the man pulled down on his wounded nose and shouted at him to lie down, however much Quickwit tried, his four stiff legs wouldn't bend. The warm blood flowing in his two front legs stopped him moving forward: how could he even know his own name right now? The universal river had brought him among those similar to him and he found himself in very pleasant surroundings. *Oh, who is the soldier who has peace of mind?* Though his back sagged and his body, forever shouldering weight, had grown light, his two front legs had grown heavier. And just then, there was a loud

commotion, fire glowed in the twilight, bullets shot through the air and uproar reigned.

The fighting had started again. In the darkness, members of the Enshöo clan, bearing arms, came riding into battle on their camels. Quickwit alone remained in the ravine. The sound of the fighting grew further and further away, and he was immediately overwhelmed by a terrifying silence. But of course, all silences that come after a great commotion are terrifying.

After a quarter of an hour, his two front legs could not bear the weight of his body and this ship of heaven collapsed, lying down with his two humps like a pair of stupas. The sound of battle was far off and his ears, stuck as they were to the ground, heard it only vaguely.

## 7

Who knows how many days or nights had passed? Drifting in and out of consciousness, he had stayed there, lying low among shrubby bushes, away from the noise of the fighting and with only a few grey birds for company. Poor Quickwit had remained there, all alone in the world of humans. He lay, barely able to raise himself on his knees, he turned his black eyes, bulging with tears, and looked for a while towards his own world. And then, without a moment's delay, he crept forward. How could the cameleers who devoted themselves to great battles know what he was doing? One man, exhausted by many days' fighting, came to the ravine where Quickwit had been left behind, but found nothing. The poor suffering camel didn't even know that he had left the field of this wonderful battle. Autumn came, and it seemed that the summer months had drifted to a close.

## 8

Quickwit the camel rested a while and then crept forward. His poor belly had been cut by shards of stone and by rubbing up against caragana plants along the path. The journey home had been nothing special. To look at the sky, it would seem that dawn was breaking, that light was appearing in the east. The earth was a rich place. Now though, how could his feet take even a step? If only his legs would work! He stood up. If only his hooves would work! He wanted to gallop. In the dawn light, he could just make out that same ill-starred black bird sitting on a rock near his head. How long had this bird been following him? This shouldn't be happening.

*Don't look at where you are unless you know how you got there!* His poor neck had grown thin as string, and it pained him to lift his head, whose color was of sandalwood. Only his black eyes remained as they were before. But still he crawled forward. And so he came to a market on the salty marshes of the Gobi, all covered in tamarisk, and his entire body felt shattered. Who knows how long

it had taken? Lifting his neck for a final time, his black eyes looked upon the place of his birth and saw there the light blue mountain, like a cloth tent.

He perceived the universe as more clearly blue than it had been before. Over the hundred hollows of the light blue mountain, over the whole world, he saw the sun rise, shimmering. And, towards the west, inexplicably, he saw rise up a curtain of red dust. A few men of the Enshöö clan were returning from war, they had chased the robbers and had retrieved the stolen booty, their women and their girls. Quickwit looked in their direction. From the center of the dust a man on a camel emerged and he saw this one approaching as another dragon. The sun grew brighter, filled his eyes with the new morning. The bird of eternal misfortune flew up from his perch on the camel's rear hump and alighted on his fore hump. And now he is sitting on my head. Trying not to look, I close my eyes to the incomparable clarity, to the deep blue of the sky, to the gilded yellow of the sun, to a herd of camels and to the absolute power of the light blue, tentlike mountain.

But there is no darkness. I see the great iridescence of the world sink into my body. The muffled sound of people talking sinks into my ears. And at this very moment, Quickwit the camel, as though greedily gulping down the blue atmosphere of the Gobi, covered in red tamarisk, with its light blue, tentlike mountain, in the breadth and serenity of springtime, takes his final breath.

## THE LEGEND OF HUMAN LIGHT

When the world was not yet formed,  
When the sun was not yet raised in the sky,  
The ancient ones radiated light,  
It shone from their bodies.  
The branches of the trees bore shining fruit,  
And people's minds held shining thoughts.  
These shining people bore no malice,  
They made the darkness light.  
For some, however, though many shining fruits  
Might hang upon their own trees,  
Still, the fruits on others' trees  
They thought far tastier.  
So they switched off their lights,  
Went prowling,  
Stalking in the form of darkness,  
And stole from their neighbors.  
One by one, they extinguished their lights,  
And darkness drowned the everywhere.  
The time was ended, but  
A single story was preserved.  
After a thousand years of darkness,  
The Buddhas made the sun to rise.  
The age of our ancestors was past,  
And our present world was formed.  
Now even more the light is needed,  
And even the brilliant sun is not enough.  
The world's festooned with lights,  
The stars are become irritants.  
We make our faces up,  
A glistening of ornament,  
And nowadays we honor  
The shining light in others.  
The light of ancient times  
Is gradually losing iridescence,  
We miss the light  
Of other people's souls.  
We're looking for the times before,  
We're remembering the story.

## PASTURES NEW

Out of the wide blue skies of early winter  
The cuckoo's melody rings.  
May we free this body, born of nonexistence,  
And reach the shining vessel of serenity.

On those hills of feathergrass a thousand years ago,  
I thought of my mount, his neigh was silver trumpeting.  
And on those hills, not a thousand years hence,  
I see still the power of this horse's line.

In the flooding brightness of the morning, the sun  
Pours into the eyes, an offering to the body.  
Its rays drive out the worldly dust and grime -  
May they liberate and purify all things.

The dew glistens when the horse shakes down,  
A swallow brushes against his thoroughbred ears.  
His neighing is not a mating call -  
It's like the mind's calling to desires far away.

The sun's orb makes the blue sky hazy,  
The khan's stride encompasses the steppes.  
The meadow flowers turn their fragrant bodies,  
And the smoke of burning dung rises overhead.

In ancient times, my ancestors  
Moved their bellowing camels between pastures.  
They dug with bronze arrowheads,  
Slept there for years under the feathergrass.

The wheels of the sturdy cart don't break the flowers.  
Birds squash their eggs, making way for the horses' hooves.  
The animals enjoy peace without suffering -  
There's nowhere else such wonderful country.

We've played the fiddle in the shade of eighty years,  
We've plucked the song from the last gasp of suffering.  
We're like so many blue cranes along the salty plain,  
Again and again dwelling beneath the seven Buddhas.

I've known the flying of birds and desires,  
I've seen the way of stars and people.  
I've taken the guardian spirit's place in the fire of the hut:  
I've reached the center, I've found the distillation.

## THE MOON OVER AN OLD TEMPLE

The moon rises over the old temple,  
Its transfigured light gilding the finial.  
An air flows from a bamboo flute, and  
The heart is filled once more by distant nostalgia.

Wild grasses push up between the stones,  
Along the road where the Buddhas are gathered.  
But I can't see where the Buddhas have gone,  
The light is so bright from the time beyond.

The moon rises over the old temple,  
Its transfigured light shining in every heart.  
A bamboo flute carries me beyond my grief,  
Calls upon the Buddha's distant light.

The shadow of the temple casts its meaning,  
Like words fading into ancient ink.  
Upon the shadow of human grief,  
No light is cast by the candle of mind.

A shining vision of Buddha,  
Even in the motes of finest dust.  
There's paradise in the bamboo flute's melody,  
And the moon is rising over the old temple...

## THE GOLDEN BOOK CALLED *THE JADE KEY*

This is the golden book called *The Jade Key*, which opens the highly secret box of beryl, describing the origins of creatures on the wheel of destiny, in the sky and on the earth.

1

...the people of the stars shone brightly upon the canopy of Heaven. Mounted on pyramids amid the total nothingness, they descended to the unknown mountains. At that time, our world was pitch black. Light radiated from the pyramids and lit up the darkness. In the light, it could be seen that there was no water flowing, no grass growing - there was absolutely nothing. The shining people went searching in all directions. They searched, but they found nothing, and returned by the light of their pyramids, standing on the wooded mountains. But for no reason, they went looking again. They wandered around and there was a path through the world...

2

...as they searched, the scanty food and drink they had ran out and there was nothing to be found. Their energy was weakened. They searched for assistance from the canopy of Heaven and winged horses came flying down. The horses were how the gods appeared. Riding upon the winged horses, the shining people made another journey, but found neither companions nor the furthest edges. But they did not despair. An invisible, hidden force compelled them and they said that they would not go back, but struggle on towards their goal. The winged horses kicked up fire as they galloped, closer and closer to the end...

3

...for the first time, when they landed, the mountain was visible. It had absorbed the light of the people and the light of the pyramids and was itself illumined. And so, the shining mountain towered, alone, over the dark world. From the rock there radiated colored lights and from the soil there grew grass.

Finally, there was glistening dew. Clouds of dew rose up and from them fell rain. Springs flowed from the rain, and formed a lake. At the center of the shining world, covered over by the greenness of grass, there towered the golden mountain, alone and without end. The shining people grew accustomed to this sight...

4

...and there were many other things. The people drank from the water and enjoyed diving into it. Fruit flourished. This joyful place was on the solitary mountain. Far away, it remained pitch black and it was said that there were creatures, unseen in the shadows. These animals strove to approach the light.

The shining people were without wickedness. They grew used to the cycle of the light and took refuge in it. Innumerable living creatures developed faith in the light. They trusted the grasses and the water. The light in the world was small

and, because the groups which came together in it were large, the space became crowded and they looked down on each other and did evil...

5

...and the clear light of the shining people decreased. The darkness grew lighter, and evil was illuminated, and this was good. The temperature greatly increased. Many children were born. The pyramid did not function well as a home. Looking to the stars in the canopy of heaven, they found the *ger*. They copied the pyramid and produced *gers*. Life became an individual affair. A distinction developed between high and low. The canopy of the *gers* met with the canopy of heaven and received the light. From this emerged the fire in the hearth. The fire flamed ever upwards...

6

...heaven and earth joined together, and wisdom and abilities greatly increased. They journeyed from place to place and the crops they sowed grew tall. Some of them became lazy and hung back, secretly taking from the others' crops, and thus theft and banditry developed. As they skulked idly about, their light went out and they appeared dark and became shadows. The words of the shining people brought forth goodness. There was a myriad of words. In the end, they stabbed their words into their bodies. With gentle words they softened the harshness. Good words are vast, and so were able to repair human crookedness...

7

...and the light which shone upon the earth softened the frozen earth and rivers and streams began to flow. Winged creatures were born. It was springtime. From such great happiness there arose the summer. While they reveled in the pleasures and joys of the summer, the mountain grew melancholy and the heavens brought forth obstacles. The crops withered and it turned to autumn. The people developed insight, and they warmed their homes. They prepared the fire. They learnt skills. And so it became winter. The people worked more and more. The great powers came together and spring came, binding the frozen ice and snow. And so the four seasons turned. And the people's thoughts also kept going round and round...

8

...light and dark were everywhere distinct. Black and white quarreled together. Heat and cold clashed against one another. Good and bad exchanged blows. And so chaos ensued. Robbery and violence and noise took up residence of the dark countries, stalking ever closer towards the light. Arguments arose from craving the goodness of the light countries. There was a patchwork of experiences, various ups and downs. The shining people grew determined, the light piled out of their bodies and created a ball of fire, which rose, shining, into the sky. All the people equally gave worship to the light and there arose the replenishing cycles of the earth, taking birth and dying, arising and fading away...

## THE FIRST MOTHER

### Prolog

At first, this tale  
Was known to only one.  
Nowadays, this tale  
Must be known by many.

i

Once upon a time, a long, long time ago, there was an unimaginably empty, terrifyingly immense abyss. In that abyss, there was nothing but emptiness, there was nothing. There was no earth, there was no water, no air, no golden sun, nothing.

ii

The universal Mother, at the beginning of the universe, searched the great emptiness of the pitch-black abyss for a space to give birth to her child, which was due at any time. But she found nothing. As there was no space to embrace the child she has carried in her womb for so long, she turned her soul into unlimited space. They say the this was how sky was created. Although the sky was created, there was no light.

The Mother unceasingly looked for the light.

iii

The Mother looked and looked for the light, tirelessly, relentlessly. But the light was not to be found. There was not even an inkling of light. She could not find any light in which to see, cradle and feed her child, which was due at any time.

The Mother collected all the light of her body and of her heart, turned it into a ball and set it to float upward. The golden sun was born from that ball of light and proceeded to light the universe. Did you know that? The sun is the light of energy of the Mother's heart.

The sky and the air provided space and the sun shone the light of energy. But the Mother had no earth to lean upon to give birth to her child under the sky and the sun.

The Mother unceasingly looked for the earth.

iv

The Mother looked and looked for the earth, tirelessly, relentlessly. But she found nothing. Neither earth, nor the planets had yet been created.

The Mother gave up her fruitless search for the earth to support her delivery of the child, which was due to be born any time. The Mother turned what flesh and body she had into the earth. She made the milk of her two breasts flow as abundantly as spring water, to make the earth fertile. Thus the earth was born.

Did you hear that, my son? The earth is the Mother, the beginning of our beginning.

v

In this way, they say, the first human was born beneath the cotton wool clouds floating in the blue sky, in the indiscriminating light of the golden sun, on the earth with its flowing rivers and spring water, covered with a multicolored blanket of flowers and berries. The first human grew up breathing the air and nurtured by the sun, and spring water, and colorful berries created by his own Mother. The first human increasingly looked for life...

vi

The Mother who became the sky and the air, the sun and the earth still suffered. As one piece of wood does not become fire and one person does not become a family, she created the next human as well.

The first humans unceasingly looked for life.

vii

They say, in the beginning, that there was nothing. Only the Mother gave birth to her child and sacrificed herself for the sake of humanity in order to create the universe and the earth.

On this earth, humans reproduced and life continued with no interruptions, and good was created from that life as well as from the evil.

viii

Later, the children forgot that they took their beginning from the first Mother and lost their ability to govern their development and desires. They began to use the creative power of the Mother's soul to commit good deeds but also to commit evil deeds, such as domination and violent warfare. Should ever evil dominate, such a time may come as there was before the beginning of the beginning.

ix

Every mother that has given birth to a child on this earth has a tale of her own created by her happiness and her suffering. At the end of every tale, the mother is dissolved in that tale and only her children remain to live and rejoice in their existence.

Epilog

Nowadays this story  
Must be known by many  
Only one will still know it  
When we return to our beginning.

## THE TEMPLE OF MY SAVING MOTHER

### 1 MEDITATION

I am sitting among Ongon's many great hills of yellow sand. I close my eyes, reflecting, dissolving into eternal skylike mind, a blue thumb-sized spot with a red triangle of flame flickering imperceptibly within...and then...a white dot...like a square of yellow sunlight striking the door of a *ger*...the qualities of the wise, their form and appearance, appear from beyond time.

So how should the excellent seed of human activity, from the peaceful void of the fully purified mind, be seen as the holiness of nirvana, a departure from the world in that space which is no more than the flickering tip of a candle?

The mind, meditating in the brilliance of mind upon the form of Dharma, together with the quality of emptiness, finally achieves the superior holiness of constancy.

### 2 FORMING THE CIRCLE

On a thousand mountainous heaps of Ongon sand, the blessing of the Buddhas of a thousand kalpas, permeated by the milk of primordial holiness, one hundred and eight flowers of five colors, rise up to form the small circle of the mandala.

The holy reincarnations, who have meditated on the golden sand, the pure wood and the bright flowers of this land called Ongo, purified throughout a thousand kalpas, meet in the complete and powerful mandala palace.

### 3 ERECTING THE TEMPLE

I am creating a temple of bright quartz for my mother. The eternal blue skies are the covering sphere of an inverted shining temple.

From overhead, the rays of the sun, the ornament of midday burning the top of my head, gild the pinnacle of the shining temple.

I meditate that the gentle rain which pleasure the fluttering leaves and flowers sprinkles the dragons, which eternally look upon each other and writhe amid the white clouds on the temple ceiling,

A ring of dark mountains encircles the walls of the quartz temple of my mother, rising up like an unshakable king.

And where, we might ask, is the lovely and precious lion throne? I meditate in the clarity of mind, contemplating the assembly of Buddhas, divinely canopied by the light of the perfect land which glimmers on the yellow hills of the plain.

My mother, my homeland...oh, this your shining quartz temple, my mother.

### 4 CREATING OBJECTS FOR VENERATION

Oh, my mother! Free me from the search for the perfect bright holiness, which is eternal peace!

What offering is made to you by these tokens of the earth, in which the essence of the peaceful land come together, the sprouting five-colored leaves which adorn the precious crystals of the homeland?

Meditating upon the blessing of the Buddhas running through the veins of the stone bodies of my wild, isolated steppe, I create the body of my mother, my true savior, through the manifestation of the thoughts assembled in these stones.

Your right foot brushes against the petals of the young columbine flowers on the skyblue steppe, your left foot treads upon the earth of the turquoise-green steppe, and I invite you to the lion throne of the gentle sands, to sit upon the cushion of the sands of Ongon.

In your face, a union of wisdom and skillful means, smiling like the moon in the sky, there manifests compassion, the ultimate care of protection, the liberation from all suffering.

In your right hand you hold the lotus flower, the display of the highest of gifts to all beings, the flower of your left hand offers up the knot which displays protection, and you open the leaves of the blue columbine in the river.

Oh, she is Tara, Buddha-mother-savior.

Oh, she is my savior-mother.

## 5 MAKING OFFERINGS

The golden offering of water from many pale blue springs amid the great sands of Ongon cools the savior Buddha's face and feet, and eternally shimmers as the four seasons turn.

Among the offerings are many blooms from the great sands of Ongon, and blue stones, like stars, which are signs of the world and of the earth, as well as the pure scent of fragrant grasses, and the neighborhood's most succulent food....

## 6 A FLAME ARISES

Over the saving Buddha, to the left, there shines a white moon of the fifteenth day, and, to the right, the round sun of the sixteenth day gleams brilliantly..

The everlasting flame, the mandala of the shining Buddha, is in the infinity of stars in the calm, flowing river of blue sky, and in the spiraling red fire which blazes in the hearths of every home.

## 7 AN OFFERING OF INCENSE

A pure incense drifts through the shining temple, scenting the blue haze, drawing out the perfume of colorful flowers and of wormwood and thyme and other fragrant herbs.

The clear and ringing voice of the lark on the lonely plain sings out the soothing dharma of Buddha, and throws its song every morning into a light blue mist, every evening into a dark blue gloom and every day into a golden radiance.

## 8 CHANTING SUTRAS

The heavenly spirit of Dariganga is the azure overhead.

The land in the soul of Daringanga is the gilding underfoot.

The cloud of garudas over Dariganga is a flashing flight.

The turquoise hills of Dariganga are growing green.

The hearthfires of Dariganga are turning to crimson.

The light of pure Sukhavati grants transformation,  
The gentle rain drops from the clear vessel,  
The white conch of Dharma sounds in all directions,  
The cushions of pure nectar blossom, and  
I meditate upon the shining temple whose vitality is a blessing.

The lock on the gate of the turning world is open.  
There is a little empty space in the human world,  
Where the Buddha resides in every white *ger* in the district and  
They wish for a melody from the precious horsehead fiddle.  
Oh, my mother, may I come to this place.

Here in this peaceful mandala of a quartz temple,  
Here in this land of the boundless and pure Buddha,  
Here in this land of perfect and impartial joy,  
Here, where superior birth grants blessing -  
Free me from the search for the saving Buddha's holiness! Oh, my mother!

## THE TRAVELING STAR

Once upon a time there were two boys called Altan Bombarai and Mungun Bombarai, who lived with their parents, King Altai Sumber and Queen Oyu Sundel, in Alag Buur Gobi. They had flocks of wild asses and wild, light-bay horses scattered all over the steppe, wild sheep and mountain goats covering the talus, and as many herds of camels as caravans and bushes.

It had not rained for many years, and Alag Buur Gobi had dried out. The grass had become sparse and water was scarce.

King Altai Sumber's family loaded up all their possessions and, one day before dawn, an unbelievably long migrating caravan started off towards the mountain of the Azure Stupa which could be seen on the horizon.

The older boy, Altan Bombarai, led the caravan riding his golden-white horse. The caravan was so long that, when the front of the caravan was already crossing the Khangai Mountains, the rear still had not emerged from the mists of Gobi. At the head of the caravan, Queen Oyu Sundel, the mother of the two boys Altan Bombarai and Mungun Bombarai, was sitting in a sandalwood coach, whose roof was of juniper and conifer, and which was harnessed to a precious white camel gelding.

King Altai Sumber brought the long migrating train to the great road through the Khangai Mountains and said: "Well, my children! During the day, proceed in the direction of the mountain of the Azure Stupa, which seems to touch the sky. At night, go towards the star of azure pearl right above the mountain. Do not stop! Once I have rounded up the beasts and animals left behind, I shall catch up with you." The King left on his mottled brown horse, which is faster than rain and wind, leading his velvet black horse, which is never overtaken by air or wind.

The boy Altan Bombarai led the long caravan through a valley of blue mountains, in the direction of the mountain of the Azure Stupa, which touches the sky. When the front of the caravan, led by Altan Bombarai, was reaching the top of the mountain of the Azure Stupa, and while the rear was still traveling through the valley of the Blue Mountains, the King still had not returned to his family. The caravan kept going and going. The night fell as they were still traversing the mountain slope.

The star of azure pearl on the horizon seemed very close by, and there was an azure bridge connecting the mountain of the Azure Stupa with the star.

When the mountain of the Azure Stupa came to an end, and when the caravan turned to cross the azure bridge over the limitless blue Sky to the star of azure pearl, Altan Bombarai asked his Mother: "Mommy, Mommy! Should we keep going? Here Earth comes to an end and the Sky starts. Shouldn't we stop here?"

Queen Oyu Sundel said: "I am worried about your Father's delay. What did he tell you about stopping?"

"He told me to go towards the mountain of the Azure Stupa during the day, and towards the star of azure pearl at night, and he told me not to stop anywhere." Altan Bombarai replied.

"How can we go against what your Father has said?" answered Queen Oyu Sundel. So Altan Bombarai led the caravan and kept going over the bridge which linked the Earth and the Sky. And still there was neither sight nor sound of Father returning.

The Sky Bridge came to an end, and the front of the caravan arrived at the star of azure pearl. The caravan kept on moving.

Altan Bombarai asked: "Mommy, Mommy! Should we still keep going? Earth had come to an end and we went on the Sky Bridge. Now that the Sky Bridge has come to an end, we are traveling on the star of azure pearl. Shouldn't we stop here?"

"It has been a long time since your Father left", replied Queen Oyu Sundel. "I am so worried, that I am unable to sleep and I can't hold back my tears. We'd better do something now."

The three of them discussed the matter and decided to go back to the foot of the mountain of the Azure Stupa and wait for Father there. They thought that something terrible must have happened to him, or else he would have caught up with them at the foot of the mountain of the Azure Stupa.

While they were getting ready to go back, with Mungun Bombarai leading the caravan and Altan Bombarai following it, the azure bridge of the Sky detached from Earth and folded up. It is said that the Sky Bridge connects to Earth once in nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand years and that it also detaches from the Earth once in nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand years. This was the very moment that the Sky Bridge detached from Earth.

Thus Altan Bombarai, Mungun Bombarai and Queen Oyu Sundel ended up in the blue Sky, separated from their home in Alag Buur Gobi and from the Earth, where King Altai Sumber remained.

Everything in the blue Sky world is made up of gems. The buildings have topaz walls, golden and silver roofs and coral pillars. The roads are covered with pearl and the soil is of turquoise and azure. Everything illuminates itself. There is no suffering, no weeping, no sadness, hunger, or thirst.

The Milky Way starts from the star of azure pearl. It takes nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand years to travel from one end of the Milky Way to the other end. The caravan kept going and going. After nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand years it will reach the other end of the Milky Way and from there they will land on another star of azure pearl. Once again, an azure bridge will appear between the star and Earth. The caravan will come down this bridge onto the mountain of the Azure Stupa. From the mountain of the Azure Stupa they will descend the mountains and reach their Alag Buur Gobi. The caravan kept going and going.

Apparently, they took a lunch break right in the middle of the Milky Way. Right there is the King of Heaven's palace, made of crystals and topaz. Outside the crystal palace they unharnessed the camel geldings from the carts so that the camels' backs could have a rest.

The people in Heaven do not know how to light a fire. They cook only by magic. So Queen Oyu Sundel borrowed the Dung-basket and Rake constellations from

the Sky and collected the camel dung to light a fire. They took a rest while having milky tea, dried meat, and fried pastry from the load.

The golden white and silver white horses tied up to the Golden Stake, or Pole Star, look like the two yellowy white stars in the Sky. The Seven Old Men of the Big Dipper, who once lived on Earth and later went to Heaven, came across Altan Bombarai, Mungun Bombarai and Queen Oyu Sundel and showed them the way.

In the Sky World, nine hundred and ninety-nine years pass by for one lunch break. The family was to move on after the lunch break.

While the caravan was passing through the crystal streets of the King of Heaven's topaz city, the Children of Heaven looked at them in wonder and said they should feel at home in the Sky world. "There is no lack of anything. You can tend to your camels, and you can get as much clothes and food as you wish by magic. And there is no death, the people here have eternal life," the children said, hoping that they would stay.

Altan Bombarai, Mungun Bombarai and Queen Oyu Sundel expressed their gratitude to the people of Heaven and said: "At the end of the Milky Way there is a star of azure pearl. A bridge appears and links that star to Earth once in nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand years. We should, given time, cross that bridge. On the horizon, we will find the mountain of the Azure Stupa, which we should descend. From there we will cross the valley of a thousand Blue Mountains and arrive at our Alag Buur Gobi. In our Great Gobi of Alag Buur, it must have rained, water must have filled rivers and streams, and flowers must have blossomed. As the wild asses, horses, camels, sheep and mountain goats are scattered for grazing, Father Altai Sumber must be there, waiting for us", they said with a sigh.

The King of Heaven's astrologer said: "On the wide, sun-drenched valley of the Great Gobi of Alag Buur, there is a big rocky mountain. Also there is a large circle. In the middle of the circle, there are four directions. Right in the middle of the four directions there is a burning flame. That is your Father's heart. But right there your Father is sleeping soundly and forever. Take some holy water in this crystal urn with you. When you sprinkle the water over your Father, he will wake up from his eternal sleep. Continue your journey from there and all four of you please come visit our King of Heaven's topaz city after nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand years again". Thus saying, he saw them off.

Altan Bombarai and Mungun Bombarai left their golden white and silver white horses tied up to the Golden Stake as a symbol of their return and proceeded on the Heavenly Prince's twin brown horses as fast as clouds. Now they are on their way down the Milky Way with their Mother Oyu Sundel sitting in the sandalwood coach whose roof is of conifer and juniper.

"There is a star of azure pearl at the end of the Milky Way. Sky stairs will extend from the star of azure pearl down to the mountain of the Azure Stupa once in nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand years. We will climb down the stairs, descend the mountain of the Azure Stupa, cross the valley of the thousand Blue Mountains and reach the Great Gobi of Alag Buur. Our Father is there, and we will wake up our Father by sprinkling the holy water from the crystal urn that

was given to us by the King of Heaven's astrologer. When our Father wakes up he will know that we have traveled on the Milky Way and have brought him the holy water of eternal life, and he will be overjoyed. From a distance of three years, our Father will call his speckled brown horse, which is faster than rain and wind, and his velvet black horse, which is never overtaken by air and wind. He will count the animals and beasts spread over the northern and southern sides of the mountain. We will erect our big, white *ger* palace. Then Father, Mother, and we two sons – the four of us - will live happily ever after.” This is what they're saying to one another while continuing their journey down the Milky Way. When Altan Bombarai and Mungun Bombarai, along with their Mother Oyu Sundel, come down on Earth, all their wishes will come true and they will live happily ever after.

Translated by Surenjavyn Sumiya

## THE LEGEND OF THE HORSE-HEAD FIDDLE

It is said that a long time ago there was a young man named Huhuudei, who lived in a white felt palace-*ger*. One day he decided to discover the mystery of magic. He didn't know where to look to find it, but the Mongolians say that in order to find something, you must search for it, and in order to learn something, you must be persistent. So Huhuudei decided to wander around this world in hopes of mastering the mysteries of magic.

To do this, however, he first needed a fast and tireless horse. He took his saddle and bridle and came to a herd of horses grazing on the steppe. But though he looked, he didn't find the good horse that he was looking for. He needed a beautiful stallion that could travel a year's distance in a month, and a month's distance in a day. He search among the thousands of horses on the northern side of the mountains and among the thousands of horses on the south sides, but still he could not find the one horse he was looking for.

One day, when he sat exhausted on the ground, he heard what sounded like a beautiful ethereal melody coming from nearby. He went to where the sounds were emanating and found on the ground two pieces of horse manure connected by a horse hair. The hair vibrated in the breeze blowing across the steppe creating the ethereal sound he had heard. He pondered that if a single hair could create such a beautiful melody, then many hairs could create an even more beautiful one. When he returned home, he took a wooden ladle and covered the top of its base with a piece of dried skin. He then attached two horse hairs to the two ends of the ladle. He took another horse hair and attached it to both ends of a tree branch. This was how the fiddle originated.

Huhuudei carried his fiddle on his back to the summit of a mountain to look for his horse. As he walked, the breeze vibrated its strings, creating pleasant melodies. These melodies made the sky even bluer and the nearby springs even clearer. They also calmed the horses that pastured on the steppe below. The Mongolians say that "not every man is alike, and not every horse is fit for riding." While some of the grazing horses paid no attention to the melodies of the fiddle, others neighed in response.

Huhuudei learned how to play his fiddle by imitating the way the breeze made the strings vibrate. He practiced with his fiddle over and over again. One day he heard the sound of a horse's neighing, coming from far away. He moved in the direction of the sound, sat down and began again to play his fiddle. As he moved closer, these distant sounds became clearer. How endless is the steppe, he wondered, how numberless are the herds of horses? Huhuudei continued to move in the direction of these sounds and eventually came into the valley of a blue mountain. Here he sat and again played his fiddle. The valley was filled with grazing herds of horses. From far away a tall bluish-brown horse with a

beautifully even back approached him, its four feet pounding the ground as it did. As it came close, it was startled by an old horse skull lying beside an *ovoo*.<sup>1</sup>

Huhuudei took this skull, which had startled the bluish-brown horse, and filled it with horse manure in a way that made it appear to come alive. Then he set his fiddle on top of the skull and again began to play it, playing over and over again. On the *ovoo* were hung many horse hairs that appeared to sing as the breezes blew past them. Then the old horse skull itself began to make a sound like a horse's neigh, which made the many horses in all directions neigh.

Huhuudei again played his fiddle. He played for three days and three nights. On the third night, just before dawn, the bluish-brown horse suddenly brightened and neighed, and the echoes of his neighing bounced off of the surrounding mountain. At that moment a pair of white wings, like a swan's, emerged from under the horse's legs and opened and closed. Huhuudei played again for another three days, and as he did flowers sprouted from the horse's skull and quickly grew. Again, just as the sun was about to rise, the bluish-brown horse brightened and neighed, its echoes bouncing off of the surrounding mountain. Once again, the white, swan-like wings emerged from under the horse's legs and opened, but this time the bluish-brown horse flew into the air. Huhuudei continued to play his fiddle until the bluish-brown horse leapt into the air and flew high above the heads of the horses grazing on the steppe below. It circled three times before returning to the earth.

Huhuudei wondered how he could capture alive such a wild horse that had never been touched by anything except the stars, moon, and sky, and by the plants and flowers of the steppe. Many fine horse herders gathered in order to capture the bluish-brown horse. But none of them could put even a hundred meter rope around its neck. The young man played his fiddle for three months from a place where he could see the bluish-brown horse from a distance. But then he stopped, stood up beside the horse herd, and decided to go back home.

Huhuudei carried his fiddle with the old and weathered horse skull over three mountain passes. As he crossed the third, breezes blew over the fiddle's strings, making what sounded like a horse neigh. He crossed over another three mountain passes, and as he crossed the third one, he heard the head of his fiddle make a horse neigh. When he turned to look back, he saw the bluish-brown horse approaching him in the air, neighing as it landed. Huhuudei felt that this horse must have been called by his fiddle's melodies. When he sat on the ground to play his fiddle, the bluish-brown horse came close to sniff the head of the fiddle and again it neighed. The horse then allowed Huhuudei to caress its beautiful even back and neighed twice.

This was how that young man got the bluish-brown winged horse. This was the horse that shortens the distance of a year to a month, and the distance of a

---

<sup>1</sup> An *ovoo* is like a cairn, a place that people mark with piles of stones out of respect for a local spirit.

month to a day. Huhuudei then started herding the uncountable herds of horses on the great steppe of Mongolia by flying upon this amazing animal.

But even with such a fast horse, he chose not to continue pursuing his dream to wander around the world in search of the mystery of magic. When people questioned him as to why he was ending his search, he replied, “How can one find anything more mysterious and magical than the horse-head fiddle, which has a beautiful melody and magic? Through the sound of my horse-head fiddle, I have captured the wild horse that had never been touched by anything except the wind of the sky. Through the sound of my horse-head fiddle, I created the wings that made my horse fly. If magic exists, then it must be the horse-head fiddle!”

From that time on, every nomad family who lived on the steppe, herding horses, placed their horse-head fiddle on their home's *khoimor*.<sup>2</sup> Every family carved a fine horsehead on the top of their fiddle, made strings with horse tail hairs, and preserved on their fiddle the sound of their horses' galloping and neighing. In this way they preserved the memory of their horses. It is said that on the Mongolian steppe, everyone played the fiddle and all horses became fast. The horse-head fiddle spread throughout the Mongolian steppe. In the melodies of the horse-head fiddle, the horse herds multiplied rapidly like rice and wheat, the scented breezes blew, plentiful rains fell, the springs were full, herbal flowers and plants blossomed, nothing frightened the people, there were no illnesses, and everyone lived happily from that time on.

Translated by Peter K Marsh

---

<sup>2</sup> The *khoimor* is a place in the *ger* where families place their most precious and respected possessions.

## THE STORY OF THE ASHOKA TREE

In a garden, shaded from the arid heat,  
I cooled down by the Ashoka tree, the sorrowless.  
I sensed the vapor of the Ganges wafting up into the grove,  
A poet from afar, I sang the Song of the Parched Tree.

### *The Gardener:*

This withered tree puts forth leaves.  
Its legend has been rubbed away - how did it get its ancient blessing?  
Though the trees in this elegant garden are all in bloom,  
I'm an old gardener, my body's like a dried-up branch.

Without being soaked by the rainwater that falls from the clouds,  
This dried-up branch blossoms when touched by the foot of a beautiful woman.  
Just as our fate lot is tied to the rising of planets,  
So it is with the Ashoka tree.

### *The Poet:*

Coming to the Ganges, where roots grow deep,  
Isn't it amazing how the tree grows green?  
An old man's staff gets cut from its roots,  
It stills the voice of power, its legend rooted firm!

### *The Gardener:*

A hermit on the Buddha's path comes from abroad,  
Asking just one thing - the elixir of return.  
Asking in song just enough for a staff  
From these ancient branches of the Ashoka tree.

### *The Poet:*

The man who cut the staff from the Ashoka tree  
Says *ashoka* means sorrowless, means getting free from all things.  
To lean upon the staff of truth, he says, is to find holiness.  
His question - was the earth eternal from the beginning?

### *The Gardener:*

The gardener is not allowed to give what's taken  
From the holy tree which pleases Buddha Ashoka.  
For a hundred days the withered branch has sung forth blossoms -  
He says it was the Khan who gave the half-fathom branch.

### *The Poet:*

Around the yellow oasis, where the horses are mottled brown,  
In the *ger* of a lean and dark old man, belching yellow smoke,  
Is the staff of Ashoka, kept for ten generations.

The holiness within the trunk is more valuable even than gold.

Once the old man is asleep within the folds of eternity,  
They say his son takes up the staff.  
The silversmith and goldsmith take their time to ornament it,  
And then, they say, the trunk is laid to rest.

The chill of autumn falls, the voice and fiddle at rest.  
Feet begin to move, bowls of *airag* are drained.  
They load their *gers*, and cranes surround the dried-up marshes.  
The stick in the back of the *ger* has blossomed.

*The Gardener:*

The theme of my story is cherished in the garden,  
Amid the heat and cold which crisscross Gimalai.  
Through your lineage of Chingis Khan, in song and lyrics,  
A withered old man has thought forth the Ashoka tree.

## A POET'S STORY

The shattered sun reddens, weak  
Amid clouds of dust.  
Their tired horses' manes droop,  
The weary heroes helmets glisten.  
They set up the pavilion  
With shining standards erect.  
At evening, thoughts flash and  
Open into the master's mind:  
With no chance to shake off even the dust from the road,  
He gives his orders:  
To find the poet whose star is rising,  
The spirit of whose talents gushes forth,  
They charge full-pelt along the road,  
With urgent missives flying through the day.  
Crossing the ravines of peaceful mountains,  
Fording a thousand rivers,  
The hooves of hale horses growing lame,  
They raced to a halt alongside the famous poets.  
Gers of white silk stood side by side,  
A thousand sheep were slaughtered for their flesh,  
The very best of *airag* glistened, and  
Serving maids and toastmasters and children all ran  
To the confluence of three rivers, where  
The three hundred came together,  
Never setting down their goblets for three months,  
Nor taking the sun for three months.  
The milky distillation flowed like a river,  
Ran dry like springs and streams.  
The feast that shook the world drew to a close.  
His Holiness gave his orders.  
As the residence moved onwards,  
Two hundred seventy poets  
Proceeded to a special feast,  
Received their reward of silk brocade.  
With gratitude for his blessing,  
They headed home.  
Everyone was proud in their *deel*.  
Thirty sensitive poets,  
Who wrote heartfelt verse,  
Were held in custody for three months,  
And very nearly starved to death,  
Their songs of sadness pressing on their ears.  
One poet's misery is  
Surely not the same as others':

A grey bird plucks out its feathers,  
Then moans its distress at piercing its chest.  
In the dark depths of imprisonment,  
In these miserable conditions,  
Three poets never put away their brushes,  
But sat and wrote their joyous odes.  
Twenty-seven were released,  
Received their reward of silk brocade and,  
A coach and two being harnessed,  
Were sent off with honor to a distant land.  
Having passed the king's test,  
Those three determined poets  
Were placed upon the golden lion throne  
And crowned with fame.  
The days and months passed by,  
The world turned and turned.  
One sat upon a cushion and  
Sunk his talent into homely joys.  
One sang praise to privilege  
To please his master -  
A royal poet, giving  
Pleasure to queens and princesses.  
Only one of them  
Chose to follow another path.  
He had been thought uncouth by the ministers,  
He went searching for his own truth.  
He looked, sleepily, upon misty mountains,  
He gazed, confused, into cloudy skies,  
While the brilliant horsemen rode away,  
He mounted his poetic steed.  
The earth turned, and  
The entire nation was at rest, and  
He wrote the everlasting truth,  
Not dragging his feet through time.  
By the nine-tailed banner,  
Among the virtuous masses,  
The Mongol poet revealed himself,  
Faithfully singing the story of horsemen.  
It is not easy to find a special white stone  
Among many white jades,  
Nor is it easy now to recognise  
The talents and wisdom of divinity.  
The precious, shining path has not been worn away  
By the hard yoke of the centuries.  
It is not easy to say who wrote  
The epics of azure Mongolia, but

He devoted his whole life,  
He committed himself to his work, and  
His name is forgotten.  
It is not easy to make such an effort...