

A Horse Hair Voice Chapter IV

(translated by: Diane Butterman)

The story so far:

A Mongolian shaman has summoned the Black Turtle to come to the Gobi Desert. The shaman is on a quest to find a language that will enable him to commune with nature. He believes that such a language is discernible in the patterning of the turtle's shell. For his part, while flying in a plane to China, the turtle maintains that he has seen, right in the very heart of the Gobi Desert, a rock – known as the Turtle Rock – that closely resembles he himself. He thinks that there he might finally be able to find the perfect happiness which, for years, he has been looking for all over the world. In Chapter IV of the book the turtle and his guide, the Mongolian artist Balgaa, are seen driving in an old Russian army jeep through the Gobi Desert to Gorkhi-Terelj, the place where the Turtle Rock is located.

Chapter IV

As soon as they reached the suburbs of Sainshand, Balgaa started to sing. At first they sang traditional songs about life in the Gobi and then the love songs of Danzan Ravjaa, who could turn water into whisky and was able to recall all his previous lives. Then he asked the Black Turtle to sing a song. The turtle gave a rendering of the lighthouse song and a number of old ballads learnt from his father. His old father, who could turn whisky into tears but was generally unable to remember the previous evening. *Sometimes dance music wafted over the plain. Do the places I dream about also dream about me?*

As soon as they have finished singing they translate poems. There is a book in the car by the poet Ts Bavuudorj, a good friend of Balgaa's. Balgaa reads each poem aloud in Mongolian and then talks about them in turn. The Turtle turns them into new poetry.

The west/is my fear/ The west is my anxiety/ The west is my dear comrade/ I am the east/ I have nothing hidden up in my sleeve.

When the sentences are too challenging, they simply abandon them.

The Black Turtle studies Erdene Balgaa's profile. Whenever he looks anyone directly in the eyes, he becomes distracted. It affects his ability to assess matters. The Black Turtle maintains

that it is the profile that reveals the true person. Balgaa's profile is good. Here, on the periphery of the Gobi Desert, he looks happier than in the city. Calmer.

'I hate the noise of Ulaan Baator,' Balgaa says.

'One day I shall leave Mongolia. In about five years' time. Then I'll go to the West. Amsterdam, Paris, Berlin, London, perhaps even to New York. As long as I am near to the works of Vermeer, Ingres, Turner or Casper David Friedrich. I will become a world-famous artist. But first I must win Paris-Dakar.'

He points to the faded, white fox, dangling from the rear-view mirror.

'It was cut out of felt a long time ago by the Shaman in the village where I was born. The little fox keeps the dreams of the bad demons at bay and only allows in those of the good demons. This tiny little fox ensures that my dream comes true. Just a couple more years and it will be hanging from the mirror of my Toyota Land cruiser V8 when I win the race. On the car doors the Chinggis Gold Whisky emblem and the Mongolian flag. On the number plate my name. Then the world will never ever forget my country.'

They drive for two days, until they reach the middle of the province of Dornogovi. The landscape now flows gently away. The hills slowly disappear, the green becomes sparser and makes way for red and brown. The intervals between the yurts widen. The camels stand clustered together, the small horses are dotted about the landscape. The water wells are less frequent. At night the light of the most beautiful star-spangled sky that the Black Turtle has ever seen links together the people, the animals, the tents, the stones and the mountains with smooth contours.

One morning they stop near a square field of red pebbles surrounded by 108 small, solid stone, snowy white towers only metres apart from each other. At the corners the towers are twice as big.

'Those towers are called stupas', Balgaa explains. 'This is Shambhala. The only piece of heaven on earth. Danzan Ravjaa gave us this spot so that after his death we could keep in touch with him.' Then Balgaa began to sing:

Just as from the centre of the lotus/ Comes the delectable honey scent

/ So the power of attraction for the eye / Never stops...

He keeps his eyes closed. It is a long song.

'The title is *Serenity of Qualities*', he adds. 'By Danzan Ravjaa. The song of the five offerings. An ode to the woman with the most beautiful face, with a voice as pure as that of

the cuckoo and skin like the softest imaginable silk. Singing this song once, at this spot, is equivalent to quoting the White Tara Puja at home a thousand times, so when I am here I always sing it all the time. There, in those mountains over there, are caves where you can meditate. Just like in your Turtle Rock. You just have to face in the direction of the Black Mountains, make a wish and then you have to throw some water towards the mountain.’ With that Balgaa gets out of the car, bares his chest and winds a long orange cloth around his middle. He then lies down on his back in the middle of the field with the red stones. He asks the Black Turtle to count aloud to twenty. When the Black Turtle gets to twenty Balgaa rolls onto his front. The Black Turtle counts to twenty again and Balgaa rolls over onto his back. After ten such turning over sessions he stands up and brushes the gravel from his body. He fetches a glass from the car and fills it with vodka. He dips his middle finger into the glass and flicks the droplets left and right over his shoulder behind him. Then, in one go, he downs the glass of vodka.

At the end of the third day they come to a pale and faded yurt. A man, a woman and two small children live in the yurt. They have solar panels and a satellite dish. The TV is on top of the fridge; *Extreme Home Make Over*. To the left in the yurt, in the woman’s half, is a cupboard. Alongside the cupboard is a chest. On the chest there is a small metal god, swathed in a blue cloth.

‘In the morning it is the little god that gets the first cup of salty tea’, says the woman. ‘The second cup is for my husband. The right half of the yurt is his domain. Because the little god cannot always be vigilant, there is always a saw above the entrance. Or, if there is no saw, the skin of a hedgehog.’

In the middle of the yurt there is a wood-fired stove.

‘When I was a child I once burnt my hand on a stove like that,’ Balgaa says. ‘After that my parents put a rope around my middle and tied it to one of the bars of my bed. From that time onwards, I was only able to get as far as the cupboard and my own bed.’

Balgaa squats next to the Black Turtle alongside a small, low table. They are given fermented mare’s milk, pure vodka distilled from camel milk and biscuits made of dried milk rennet. When it gets late the man puts the children on the front of his motorbike and takes them to the next yurt, some two hours’ ride away. His wife shows Erdene Balgaa and the Black Turtle to her children’s bed. There they listen for a long time to the camel conversations and the pauses in between.

'You can never tear yourself away from a Mongolian friend', says Erdene Balгаа.

The Black Toad Turtle thinks about that for a long time.

'We have been travelling for almost four days now', he says. 'When are we going to Gorkhi-Terelj?'

'In a couple of days', replies Balгаа. 'First Ergeliin Zoo.'

'You will never leave Mongolia', says the Black Turtle.

'One day', says Balгаа. 'One day. Paris-Dakar.'