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AN ETERNAL A LAMB

永生羊

叶尔克西·胡尔曼别克 著

James Yongue 季宇琦 译



The tapestry of the Kazakh life

中国出版集团
中译出版社

Kaleic

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电 话 / (010) 68359376, 68359827, 68358224

传 真 / (010) 68357870

邮 编 / 100044

电子邮箱 / book@ctph.com.cn

网 址 / <http://www.ctph.com.cn>

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Yerkesy Hulmanbiek, a Kazakh writer, was born in the Beita Mountain region, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region in the 1960s. Currently, she is the Vice-Chairwoman of Xinjiang Federation of Literary and Art Circles and of the Xinjiang Writers Association. She writes, translates literature and song lyrics, and writes of movies and TV drama scripts.

Books in “Kaleidoscope: Ethnic Chinese Writers (I)” series

An Eternal Lamb

Monk Dance

Song Rod

Thus Speaks the Narrator

Writing Before Sleep

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The Old Graveyard



We walked out of the house and passed first by the small playground, second by the old graveyard, third by the fur shop of Cobbler Tang and last by the small spring. While Cobbler Tang used the spring for his living of washing and dressing fur, we went to the spring just for living. Our family went to the spring for water, first carried by father and mother, later by my sister and still later by me. In those years, we went to get water passing through old graveyard and gradually formed a path there that led to our home alone. Although the path belonged to us, at the very beginning when we started carrying water, the stretch of graveyard was like a barrier difficult to overcome.

I carried with me two empty buckets and walked south through the playground and stopped at the north end of the graveyard. My heart was overflowing with a sense of anxiety. The tombs in the graveyard standing side by side in close order were in sight. The sun shone aimlessly from high above. The graveyard was as quiet as a sleeping

village with no flying insects, no wind, and no dust or sand, and this left me almost breathless. I knew, as long as I moved a step forward, the empty bucket hanging on the hook of the shoulder pole would run against the big stone on the tomb and then the clashing sound of metal and stone would blast and shake dust onto the face of whoever was lying in the tomb and disturb him. No one would tell me what revenge would I get for disturbing a dead person.

I looked back in a gloomy mood at our house, which was just like a person without a trace of shade on his face. During the summer vacation, students went to the mountain leaving the houses empty, leaving behind the windows, doors and the playground with its two basketball stands casting their strange shadows down on the ground like two giant mantises. Time fell asleep over the house like it did over the old graveyard or was melted away by the smoke rising from our chimney before trickling down and moisturizing the dry ground. Mother stood in front of the door and waved to me. I know what she meant—since you have seen time melting away gradually, you need to fetch water as soon as possible!

Therefore, I turned back and looked forward, finding Cobbler Tang's chimney was also smoking, and his house casting its shadow on the southernmost tomb of the graveyard. A small lamb was hiding in the shadow behind the house ruminating with its eyes closed with its eyes closed, not caring about time in the least.

My heart was filled with a fit of anxiety again and I stomped on my shadow. How I wished I could be taller to make the bucket farther from the ground.

There were about fifty to sixty tombs in the old graveyard. With no gravestones, no one knew for sure who was buried there. Peering out of our window, we could see the tombs pressed by the riprap, which looked like a stone hill. Among them, only a few tombs were surrounded by a dry earth wall, which lent an air of mystery to those buried underneath. There was a window on the west wall, a door on the south wall, which decayed with time and fell onto the ground as if deserted by an owner who had left long ago. Nobody knew how many years the tombs had been here or who on earth was buried underneath. According to what the adults said, several people buried inside the area surrounded by the earth wall might have been very prestigious or have belonged to one big family. In a word, anyway, they were different. However, whether of humble origin or an honorable family, all the people were lying under the ripraps in the graveyard. They became earth and nobody showed any interest. For as long as I can remember, no one held any ceremony there to express their grief over the dead. Never had a new tomb since been set up there to shorten the distance between their age and ours. It seemed that they had been completely cleared out of our lives and sealed up by time forever, kept separate from the world. As time went by, some tombs on the edge of

the graveyard were gradually razed to the ground from frequent trampling of people and horses, like a sand hill carried away by the wind. One year, an ox stepped into the graveyard and trampled a tomb with the result that half of its body was stuck inside. Being stupid, the ox just couldn't manage to climb up by itself. Therefore, it took a lot of hard work for people to get it out by pulling and dragging. It felt almost like dragging an ox out of mud. What was different was that if we had been working in mud, we might have gotten stained with muddy water, but working in the graveyard, we were left covered with a layer of dust so that those working looked as if they had fallen into the tombs instead of the ox. It was funny. After the ox was pulled out, there was a hole left in the tomb, which was covered by snow in the winter and remained uncovered in the summer when it was pitch-dark and frightening. Still, it stayed there with nobody taking care of it. How I wished that someone could mind and comfort my little life with a sense of security. But at that time, who would ever imagine a little girl of just over ten years old would have a terrible struggle along the road of courage that led to the spring through the graveyard.

Too much thinking made me unsure about whether I was outside the graveyard or inside it.

One evening, I climbed onto the roof and helped my mother air the slices of tomatoes on it. At this time every summer, my father would go to Qitai to buy tomatoes and then we would air and dry them on the roof to get them

ready for the winter. It had been my sister's business in previous years and it was my turn this year. We aired the tomatoes from the afternoon until sunset. By the time it was getting dark, my eyes had been already dyed red by the tomatoes. I saw red roof, red sky, red land, red people and even a red star emerging earliest in the sky. This made me panic. I guessed that there must be something wrong with me. So I stood on the roof and rubbed my eyes, just to find my hand had turned red too. I stretched my hands over my head and tried to find out in the glow of sunset what had happened. At that moment, there a flock of red bird suddenly flew over my head like a low cloud together with hollow thunder. I turned my head and found, not far away behind my back, the pile of riprap was covered in a layer of red dust where some people as opaque as cicada's wings were fighting closely against each other, some were falling off and standing up again among a pool of blood, one was holding a spear in his hand and a man with no legs was creeping forward towards Cobbler Tang's spring . . . While at the same time, Tang was doing what he usually did beside the spring, together with his young and beautiful wife, not caring even a little about what was happening in the graveyard. Birds were flying above in an uproar, and then resting on the high wall . . . a beam of light was shining through the window in the wall lighting up the sky. I heard the loud horrible cry, "Water, water, water . . ."

In a minute, my body sank into endless red dust.

Somebody said, "The kid is sick. She's had a continuous high fever since last night and has talked nonsense all that time. She said she had seen the war and seen someone snatch Cobbler Tang's spring." I knew this was my father speaking. He said, "Look, her mouth is blistered from fever."

I opened my eyes and realized that I was lying in my father's arms. His right arm was under my neck while my head was hanging from the outer side of his arm. A door was reflecting itself in my eyes. Someone headed towards us and entered the house letting in a bright light that shone into my eyes and dazzled me.

Someone else said, "Never mind. The kid has got a rash. No need to take medicine or give an injection. Take her back home and after a few days she will get better. Remember to keep her away from light, since her eyes won't stand that. But I think we should apply some gentian violet solution to her mouth to avoid infection. Look at the blisters on her lips!" It felt like a piece of bitter cotton took a few turns around my tongue for a while.

During this time, all the doors and the windows were shut and the red curtain separated me from the outside world. But I lay on the *kang** thinking always about going to the old graveyard again and again by myself to look for the spear that had once lifted by that person;

* *Kang* refers to a heatable brick or adobe bed, common in North China.

about walking towards the spring time after time in case someone might snatch the spring away from us. In those days, I hid in the house and nobody knew how jealous I was of Old Tang. I was angry about why it was not us but Cobbler Tang who was able to set up a home beside the spring.

A week later, my mother climbed up to the small roof again to collect the tomato slices I had set to dry previously. They were dried completely. Dried slices of tomatoes felt like dried leaves in the hand. My rash faded away like falling leaves in the autumn wind and disappeared with my childhood memory like red dust. But it left me with the impressive revelation that the toxin hidden in my body was so irresistible that even though I had been vaccinated once, it still burst into a rash all over my body, even holding fort inside my eyelids. We are so vulnerable compared with it. Of course, it made me realize that as long as we could dispel the toxin hidden deep in our body, we were no longer vulnerable.

I laid down the basin of tomato slices handed to me by my mother at the thought of going around the graveyard to see whether I was braver than before.

At that time, a few kids from school were playing basketball on the playground already. They were fighting for one small ball, running from the east side of the court to the west side with dust stirring up under their feet. Soaked in sweat, they even became angry about missing a ball, which was very funny to me. They were idling away

time in this way while those who were lying underneath the earth were throwing time away.

I walked toward the old graveyard, afraid not of those sleeping there forever but of the ball coming at my head to embarrass me. I was afraid of fighting since I was born thin and weak. Furthermore, I had just recovered from a serious illness so my body needed sufficient nutrition from the sunlight to grow.

The sun was shining brightly in the sky, which enabled me to be brave enough to enter the graveyard.

I walked forward along the road of water trodden by my father, mother and sister and felt at ease with the noise of the kids ringing in my ears. The daytime sun warmed the stones on the tombs. They gave out heat in the air like clouds when the sun set. The small white goat of Old Tang was standing on a mound, lowering its head and feeding on the grass. I found it had grown up a little. But at the sight of me having grown taller, it showed no concern and left. I stared at it and thought that when I was fully recovered a few days later, I would be brave enough to go fetch the water from the spring. Till then, I could grow a little taller still. When I was thinking in this way, a basketball from the playground bounced over. But instead of falling onto my head, it fell into the tomb previously trampled by the ox.

A little boy walked towards me and stopped at the edge of the tomb. I understood why he stopped at once. Meanwhile, he saw me and greeted me excitedly; his eyes

lit up with joy, and pointed to the ball. I strode over a few tombs and saw the basketball had only fallen on the tomb trampled by the ox, not inside the hole. I hesitated before walking towards the tomb to pick up the ball to throw it back to the playground. Then I cast a timid look at the open tomb. I knew I was still somewhat anxious. But there wasn't anything but earth in the pit. I thought I should leave as soon as possible since I was not brave enough to go into the grave to have a look at any white bones. When I was just thinking of leaving, I saw a piece of iron in the earth beneath my feet. I started to move aside the earth and picked it up, finding it was an arrowhead. The arrowhead was slightly pointed with an incomplete fan-shaped tail and it was as rough as a stone. It felt heavy in my hand and somewhat warm because of the hot sunlight.

Many years later, I still thought about the time I stood in the graveyard that evening, and about how I remembered the guy who held the spear up high in my red illusion and how I had believed that the arrow must have been left over by him. But I thought no one would ever believe the fact. Though later on many people showed keen interest in the arrow and made various explanations, yet nobody saw it as clearly as I did. Only what the red-faced old man had said sounded rather reasonable. He said the area around Beita Mountain was located at the border and therefore had undergone many wars. From ten to more than a hundred soldiers and

bandits were involved in the war. They fought here not for a fortress but for a spring. The arrowhead must have struck one of those people and been buried together with him before being found many years later by a little girl. That must have been it.

In any case, I kept the arrowhead, and even now it remained my most cherished and memorable gift. I wanted to bring it into my new life as part of my dowry for the day I got married. But eventually I left it at my parents' for the hope that when I came back home, I could still find a trace of my childhood memory in it. All I gained later in my life began at my parents'.

I would never forget the road to the spring. A real road of death as it was, we had never given up on living for one single day under the spell of the road.

We, as well as Cobbler Tang did the same.

As I never forgot the road, nor did I forget that winter when my father and I carried Cobbler Tang's wife on our backs from the high wall to our house.

That was the beginning of spring when a gentle snow in large flakes fell, and covered our road layer upon layer. Old Tang came pushing open our door and said despondently that his young and beautiful wife had planned to take him to the leader to ask for a divorce. For so many years, they had quarreled and made a noise, so much so that they couldn't move past things together. But the poor woman was not brave enough to walk forward after reaching the graveyard, since she knew that