*The Invincible Rooster[[1]](#footnote-1)*

*An Armenian tale of a rooster who won’t change his tune for anything.*

There and there wasn't a certain rooster who dug in the trash and found some gold coins. He flew up onto the cottage roof and began crying, "Cock-a-doodle-doo! I've found some money."

The king overheard him and ordered his nazirs, or officials, and his viziers, or ministers of state, to take the gold coins away from the rooster and bring them to him.

The nazirs and viziers did as they were instructed and brought the coins to the king. The rooster cried, "Cock-a-doodle-doo! The king has misappropriated my wealth!"

The king gave the gold coins to his nazirs and viziers and said, "Take the gold coins back to the rooster. I'm not going to let that rascal shame me before the entire world."

The nazirs and viziers gave the gold coins back to the rooster.

The rooster flew up onto the cottage roof and cried, "Cock-a-doodle-doo! The king is afraid of me, so he gave back my money."

The king got angry and barked an order to his nazirs and viziers. "Go grab that rascal," he said. "Cut off his head and boil him. Then give him to me. I'll eat him for dinner and then I'll be rid of him."

The nazirs and viziers did as the king had ordered. They caught the rooster.

As the king's men were carrying the rooster to the king, the rooster cried, "Cock-a-doodle-doo! The king has invited me to dinner." The king's servants slaughtered the rooster and placed him in a large kettle with the intention of boiling him.

But the rooster couldn't be stopped. "Cock-a-doodle-doo!" he cried. "The king has ordered that a hot bath be prepared for me."

The rooster was cooked and placed before the king.

Again the rooster cried out. "Cock-a-doodle-doo! I'm sitting down to eat with the king." -

Enraged, the king grabbed the rooster and swallowed him, bones and all.

The rooster, already in the king's throat, nevertheless cried out, "I'm going down a narrow street. Cock-a-doodle-doo!"

The king saw that still the rooster couldn't, be silenced. He ordered his nazirs and viziers to draw their sabers and stand in readiness to chop the rooster to bits should he cry out again.

The nazirs and viziers drew their sabers. They stood, ready to attack, the nazirs on one side and the viziers on the other.

When the rooster reached the king's stomach, he cried, "Cock-a-doodle-doo! I used to live in the bright world, but I've fallen into a dark kingdom."

"Chop him to bits," ordered the king.

The nazirs and viziers began chopping at the king's belly and cut it open. The rooster jumped out and ran away.

The rooster flew onto the palace roof and cried, "Cock-a-doodle-doo!"

*The Wolf and the Lamb[[2]](#footnote-2)*

*An Armenian tale about the power of the powerless and what happens when you forget who you really are.*

A young lamb once lived in a shed. A wicked wolf got into the shed grabbed the little lamb.

The lamb fell down on its knees and said, "God has placed me in your power. Eat me: up, but before doing so, please fulfill my last wish—play a song for me on your trumpet. My ancestors told me that wolves are great trumpet players."

The wolf was flattered. He squatted down and howled at the top of his lungs. His song awakened the dogs. The dogs rushed at the wolf and bit him.

The wolf ran out of the shed and rushed to the top of the hill. He sat down and began weeping and beating himself. "I deserved that attack. Who on earth would ever claim that I was a trumpeter? I've always been a butcher and the son of a butcher."

***Father of Stories, Horse of Songs[[3]](#footnote-3)***

*A “Central Asian” tale of a young man who finds that music is the only thing that can hold back death – for a time.*

Oh my Khan,

under blue skies

beneath spreading trees

beside swift rivers

surrounded by strong horses

sitting on carpets of felt,

our ancestors drank tea.

In this time, Korkut was a young man. He was just sixteen years old when he had a dream. He dreamt that Death was looking for him.

Korkut woke with a start. "I am too young to die!" he cried. “It can take me when I'm old. Death can take me when I'm ready." And he leapt on to his beautiful chestnut horse.

"Carry me, horse," he cried, "carry me away from Death."

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Korkut had not ridden far when he came to some people digging a hole in the ground.

"What are you digging?" he asked.

"We are digging the grave of Korkut," they replied.

Korkut turned his horse and rode in the other direction. He came to some more people digging a hole.

"What are you digging?"

"We're digging the grave of Korkut."

Korkut rode fast. But everywhere he rode, there were people with spades, digging his grave.

Korkut did not stop riding. The chestnut horse galloped through sun and wind, stars and snow, looking for a place where there was no Death.

Korkut asked a tree, "Do you know the place where there is no Death?"

"Death is here," whispered the tree. "Birds peck me, leaves fall from me."

Korkut asked the steppe, "Do you know the place where there is no Death?"

"Death is here," moaned the steppe. "Sheep graze me, horses' hooves pound me."

Korkut asked the mountain, "Do you know the place where there is no Death?"

"Death is here," rumbled the mountain. "Rain lashes me, wind howls around me."

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Suddenly Korkut's horse stumbled. Its legs gave way and it fell to the ground. The chestnut horse was worn out. Korkut ran to the river to fetch water, but the horse was too tired to drink. Korkut watched as his beautiful horse closed its eyes and died.

"Death is here," wept Korkut. And he buried his face in his horse's mane. "My beloved horse, there must be a place where there is no Death."

Korkut took his knife and cut a branch from a tree. He began to carve a pear-shaped box. He stripped some skin from his horse and stretched it over the box. He twisted hairs from his horse's mane into two long strings, and tied them to each end of the box. Then he cut hair from his horse's tail, and stretched it along a stick.

Korkut made a musical instrument, a horsehair fiddle and a horsehair bow.

Korkut waded into the river and stood on a stone. He rested the fiddle in the cuff of his boot and began to play. He drew the horsehair bow across the strings. Music filled the air. Korkut began to sing a song about the life and death of his beautiful chestnut horse. The sound of Korkut's music echoed across the steppe.

Children stopped playing, old men stopped working, women put down their embroidery. They all ran to the river and stood silently, listing to Korkut's music.

Korkut sang of warriors and princesses, eagles and wolves. The horsehair fiddle resounded and everything listened. The rocks listened. The wind fell silent. The river stopped babbling. The birds were still. The flowers moved closer. All creation listened to Korkut's songs.

At the back of the crowd there was a shadowy figure. It was Death. Death had come to listen to Korkut's music. Death listened in wonder as Korkut sang of heroes and monsters, saints and devils and magic horses. Korkut sang and sang, and Death listened, Death was so entranced by the stories, he forgot his work. And all the time that Korkut sang, nobody died. Korkut's songs and stories held back death.

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Many, many years passed. And there was no death. Korkut grew old, his hair turned white and his back bent.

"Now I am ready," said Korkut. He stepped out of the river, put his instrument on the ground at the feet of all the people who had been listening, and let Death take him.

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The people buried Korkut on the banks of the river. Then they picked up his horsehair fiddle and began to play. They sang his stories and played his tunes. Korkut and his horse lived on, in the place where there is no death - the place of stories.

The people called the horsehair fiddle the kobiz. And they carved a horse's head on top of the kobiz, remembering how the horse of songs helped make the first fiddle.

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Korkut's grave is on the banks of the Syr Darya river, in Southern Kazakhstan. And it is said that if you sleep beside Korkut's grave, you will become a poet.

Korkut became known as Dede Korkut, Father Korkut, father of all the stories he had created - stories still being sung by storytellers today.

Dede Korkut sang the stories

of all the Central Asian peoples.

Like them,

we come to this world and leave it,

camp and move on.

For if we did not die

the earth would not be made.

When Death comes

may he give you fair passage.

May your firm-rooted mountain never crumble.

May your great shady tree never be cut down.

May your clear-flowing river never run dry.

May your horse never stumble.

May your sword never be notched in the fray.

May your lamp,

which God has lit,

never be put out.

Oh my Khan.

***Korkut II, Kazakh variant***

*The following are my note [DANA] s of a version of Korkut that I heard our own Alma Kunanbaeva tell at the Asian Art Museum in 2013. It is clearly the same tale retold by Sally Pomme Clayton, but differs in various respects. Most importantly, it presents Korkut as the first bakshy or shaman, linking music with travel to worlds beyond our own. The kobyz here is emphasized a shamanic tool, the horse that takes the shaman on his journeys – associations that go beyond what I associate with the “fiddle” in the first story.*

* Korkut wakes from a dream.
* Dream – man in white tells him he has lived twenty years, and he will live twenty more, but then death will come from him. he tried to tell himself it was just a dream, but the man’s words sat on his heart like a stone and he knew it was truth.
* (defiance, resolution) – fine, if death will come for me in twenty years, so be it. but it will have to catch me first.
* takes his white she-camel, (Jel-)maya, and rides to the east – boy digging grave for korkut. rides west – youth digging grave for korkut. rides south – man digging grave for korkut. rides north – old man sitting next to grave, which he has finished digging for korkut. understands that death awaits him wherever he may run.
* goes to the center of the world, and there, on the banks of the syr darya river, he cut a branch to form the shape of an instrument, a cup below and a neck reaching up. he slaughtered jelmaya, and used the skin from her neck to make a resonator (alma’s repeated words, how to put it more smoothly?) – the first kobyz (explain what that is).
* He spread a carpet on the ground, he sat, and he began to play.
* played such music as the world had never heard – and it fell silent and still to listen to him. The mighty river slowed. The birds and the animals turned their heads in wonder, people stopped their work, and even Death froze under the spell of his music.
* At last, though, Korkut’s eyes grew heavy and fell closed… The kobyz fell silent… Death took the form of a snake, came close, struck. So Korkut came to the Underwater World, the land of the Dead, where they say he became the ruler and even today helps those who call him with the voice of the kobyz.
* the birds came, and each took a part of his music to add to their songs. the animals came, and each took a part of his music to add to their calls. the people came, and each took a part of his music to keep their heart. his music reached to the sky, over the earth, and even into the water, which repeated his songs as the great river rushed over stones.

1. From *The Flower of Paradise and Other Armenian Tales*, translated and retold by Bonnie C. Marshall (Westport, Conn.: Libraries Unlimited, 2007), pp. 8-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. From *The Flower of Paradise and Other Armenian Tales*, translated and retold by Bonnie C. Marshall (Westport, Conn.: Libraries Unlimited, 2007), p. 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. From *Tales Told In Tents: Stories from Central Asia*, by Sally Pomme Clayton (London: Frances Lincoln Children’s Books, 2004), pp. 48-53. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)