

LETTERS FROM
THE LAND OF FEAR

Intimacy, Beauty and Death in Central Asia



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Calvin White



MiroLand
publishers

MIROLAND (GUERNICA)
TORONTO • BUFFALO • LANCASTER (U.K.)
2015

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Front Cover Photo: Deena (Marcell Nimführ, used by permission)

All unattributed photos by the author

Guernica Editions Inc.

1569 Heritage Way, Oakville, ON L6M 2Z7

2250 Military Road, Tonawanda, N.Y. 14150-6000 U.S.A.

Distributors:

University of Toronto Press Distribution,

5201 Dufferin Street, Toronto (ON), Canada M3H 5T8

Gazelle Book Services, White Cross Mills, High Town, Lancaster LA1 4XS U.K.

First edition.

Printed in Canada.

Legal Deposit—First Quarter

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2014950178

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

White, Calvin, 1950-, author

Letters from the land of fear : intimacy, beauty and death in Central

Asia / Calvin White. -- First edition.

Issued in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-1-77183-011-9 (pbk.)--ISBN 978-1-77183-012-6 (epub.)--

ISBN 978-1-77183-013-3 (mobi)

1. White, Calvin, 1950-. 2. Doctors Without Borders (Association).
3. Mental health personnel--Uzbekistan--Karakalpakstan--Biography.
4. Mental health personnel--Canada--Biography. 5. Tuberculosis--Uzbekistan--Karakalpakstan--Psychological aspects. 6. Mental health services--Uzbekistan--Karakalpakstan. 7. Care of the sick. I. Title.

RA395.U93W45 2015

362.109587

C2014-906218-4

C2014-906219-2

To G.A.

No one has greater kindness, courage, and integrity.



Introduction

She's no longer in the TB ward, the cold bare walls painted a peeling yellow, the heat from one lone wood stove several rooms away. There are no other patients lounging nearby wondering what this odd foreigner has to say to them, amidst their boredom in the village sanatorium. There are no echoes in this room where the 22-year-old in the swaddled, traditional dress is not smiling and exchanging laughter as she was just two weeks before.

She doesn't have the multi-drug resistant strain of tuberculosis, only the regular TB. Only. It will kill her just as surely, but the medical regimen she needs to follow to prevent that early death, the relentless disappearance of lungs, is not so arduous. Just two drugs that are barely noticeable to her system. But every day for three or four months.

We are in her home seated on mats across from her. My translator, me and this sweet-faced girl who stares at the floor more often than she looks at me. She has stopped the medicine. Her grandfather has come to the sanatorium and taken her home. He came with another old man, and together they did their own treatment on her. *Don't take those drugs anymore. They won't work. We will cure you our way.*

What was she supposed to say? What could she do? They walked her home and had her face the wall. Then, as they spoke strange sounds, they struck her over and over on the back with a long stick. *Whump! Whump! Whump!* That's how to bring the disease out. How to chase away its cause.

She looks at me trying to smile, a quiet confidence. A quiet resignation clothed in a familial duty of hope. In this country, despite its

outward modernity, its ubiquitous cell phones, and its Russian legacy, the ways of the past are still the ways when they want to be. A shaman is a shaman. The evil eye is real. And what are the Western TB drugs but other kinds of inner sticks beating from the inside? She now beats her own back three times a day.

I look at her and nod. *Your grandfather is wise. You can keep doing his cure. But he doesn't fully understand this disease. I do. You must start taking the drugs again and do both cures. If you do both cures, then you will become healed, become well enough.* I smile and nod, looking her in the eyes.

She smiles and agrees. I'm a good liar.



For 11 months in 2010, I undertook a mission with the Nobel Peace Prize-winning international humanitarian organization, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), known in English as Doctors Without Borders. I went to Uzbekistan in central Asia to work as a mental health specialist with the MSF team there to address an epidemic of multi-drug resistant tuberculosis.

Little did I know that such a non-descript role actually meant emergency counselling. It was as though, each day, a human being was placed on a ledge ten stories high and I had to talk them out of jumping. They hadn't chosen to go there, but they were definitely thinking of jumping and it was up to me to search out some rationale, some aspect in their lives, or some convincing bit of hope that could bring them off the ledge, at least for that day. And I had only minutes to do it because there were a whole bunch of others on other ledges that I had to get to.

If I couldn't find the right words, couldn't understand clearly enough what they needed to hear, couldn't connect with them deeply enough, then they jumped. Not the quick plummet to instant death, but a slow fall of days or weeks to a death just as sure and in some ways sadder and more far reaching.

So, I became a negotiator, and each case was different. Sometimes, I could see them ease away from the edge. Other times, I'd have to leave knowing they were teetering. I'd have to close my eyes and hope

for research to develop new drugs. To treat MDR-TB, patients must take more drugs and for a much longer time, and all of these drugs are of the same 1950s' vintage—and have toxic effects on the body. These side effects are the biggest obstacle to patients adhering to the full duration of treatment.



So it was that, in early February of 2010, I ended up in Nukus, the capital of Karakalpakstan in western Uzbekistan to work with 450 patients suffering from MDR and XDR-TB. I knew nothing about disease, nothing about TB or MDR-TB, and nothing about Uzbekistan. Like everyone else on the planet, I had never heard of Karakalpakstan. In fact, it took me a month to be able to pronounce the word correctly—after all, it does have five syllables.

I never really lived in the space that I physically inhabited. I lived within the reality of those hundreds of Karakalpaks who fought one of the world's most terrible diseases. Very early in my time there, I realized I was each day immersed in the human heartbeat. Culture, language, gender, and age all disappeared.

MDR-TB is a killer. Though it can attack other parts of the body, most often it is lungs which are ravaged. Slowly but persistently the bacilli destroy. There is no guarantee that the massive amount of drugs will even work. But everyone starts with hope. Thus, this is a story about living and living with hope. It is a story about dying. And in both cases it is a testimony to a population which struggles each day to make the best of its breath. It is a story of intimacy. It is a story about beauty.

Salt

Imagine you are being swept along in the slow waters of a great river. Every so often a fleck of gold surfaces and catches your eye as it glints in the sunlight. Then it sinks again into the depth or floats beyond your sight. Occasionally one keeps its direction near you for some time. The wonder of all that. There and gone, but bright and textured, the brilliance there for you to see. And if each of these individual flecks had a name, you would say that name, but then forget. You would only remember those who stayed longest. But all, all would remain the gold they really were. And then you would be left to whisper: "What a river. What a great river."

It is the end of January 2010 and I'm on a plane from Kelowna to Calgary to Frankfurt to Moscow to Tashkent. Twelve hours away to the other side of the planet to Uzbekistan, one of the five stans from the former Soviet Union, now a stan on its own run by the same guy who ran it under the Soviets: Islam Karimov. Like probably every other westerner I had only heard the word Uzbekistan and knew it was over there some place. On the map, I had seen that my project was located in a city called Nukus in the west of the country. It was close to the Aral Sea. I was happy. The Aral Sea. Wow! A long way from Silver Creek where I live. I can't wait to see it. The fourth largest body of inland water in the world. Only the Caspian Sea, Lake Superior and Lake Victoria are larger. Wow!

Below us suddenly are thousands of glowing spheres. The phosphorescence of a tropical sea suddenly reborn instead as gathered eyes searching upwards from this land of central Asia.

When we land at the Tashkent airport, everyone claps. I climb down the stairs from the back of my plane and cross the tarmac to the bus. It is a frosty, still night with a full moon. And it suddenly sinks in that I am walking in the centre of Asia. Marco Polo's route.



Tashkent, January 30

It's cold but not too bad. I wear my t-shirt. I walk to the MSF office. It is afternoon already. I am 12 hours different from where I last woke up. I am walking upside down. The sidewalk feels the same. This is another big city. Small cars whiz by on the two lane street. Big trees are on its edges. A drainage ditch separates me from the road. No one pays any attention to me. Some men wear dark fur hats. I am in Central Asia. This is it.

I am badly jet-lagged, having only slept intermittently in the MSF Guest House, an immaculately appointed, warm, two story house within a groomed, locked courtyard. And now only a few hundred metres away I walk through the metal doors to the MSF headquarters.

Everyone is friendly, if not especially interested. The financial officer gives me a big wad of money. The currency is called *sum*—pronounced *soom*. A 1000 sum note equals half a dollar. I am informed that my HIV test is useless. It needed to be stamped and signed by a Canadian doctor. Unbeknownst to me. It might have been helpful to tell me in the first place exactly what documentation was needed. At any rate it should not surprise me. I just hope they get on my missing bag that never arrived on the plane with me. The guy that the job was given to says he'll check it out tomorrow. I say that I might be leaving for Nukus tomorrow. "Oh we'll check today then."

I meet Stefan, the head of mission—HOM. All of MSF is abbreviations and shortened forms. I'm MHO—mental health officer. Stefan seems like a good guy. A Norwegian who has a PhD in Sanskrit, he

Clay brick walls, craggy fruit trees gnarled yet before the greening of real spring.

Bronya pours me tea, pure Ceylon leaf tea. Premium quality. The lid falls off the pot into the cup as he pours. We drink together, steam curling about our lips. The land passes us. On the train, you only see one side, the side you look at. Momentary embracings, then gone. The start of a relationship with the way it is. The way it is.

Outside is a long gathering of shaggy haired goats, black, grey, white. Ambling in their field, scrub ground, low surrounding hills, faint patches of green tight to the soil. Goats always look happy. Alive. Independent. Trundling along, the herder on his donkey, his feet almost touching the ground, his bobbing stick a baton for what must be *Goat Symphonic Etude #4,000,002*.

After another couple of hours, two Uzbek men come in to sit. Soon, the compartment's curtain is closed and my buddy pulls out a small bottle of vodka. The blue tea cups are poured, toasts are had. They are perplexed that I don't want any. My buddy says with a smile and a bit of sign language that the *polizee* would take them away in handcuffs if he caught them drinking on the train. After several drinks they leave.

At midnight we stop for passengers. A young man in a black pea coat and round face, black cap, comes in. The attendant pulls on the compartment light for him. He gets on the upper bunk. In the weak bath of moon, the land outside squeezes us forward. Steppe land. The barrenness yields to the tracks passing us through, only the moon and misty air knowing we're there, accepting the intrusion.

And by 8 am we sit, the three of us drinking hot, Ceylon tea until the latecomer rises to get off. He shakes our hands, the Uzbek one which has a mouth and the Canadian one that is mute. He says: "Bye-bye," for the first time smiles ... a full upper row of gold-coloured teeth.

Bronya and I remain. He has a small inked tattoo on the top of his foot just above the tendons to his toes. A skull and cross-bones. He has four daughters and eight grandchildren. Or vice versa. My mastery of gestures is not what it used to be. He is a truck driver on his way to Russia, a day more of train past where I get out in Nukus.

We have stopped now for four hours. Bronya is outside smoking

Lucky Strikes in the sunlight. He looks in at me through our window, waves. The smoke from his cigarette competes with the frosty air. His slightly pushed in nose gives him the visage of an ex-boxer or mafia thug. But he has taught me to say thank you and explained that it is one letter away from saying insane. Beside him, school children walk by in their coloured toques, little dresses, smart orderly trousers.



February 2

Nukus arrives at dusk. Jenny, my predecessor, has come to greet me with two of her counsellors and her translator. They all speak English. We greet. The two counsellors leave for their homes, and Jenny takes me to a restaurant to have supper with her translator who, she explains, will be mine for a month until a woman is hired allowing him to become transportation manager. Supper will be with them and the other foreigners on this project, who soon arrive wearing colours of dread. The meal is uncomfortable. I am just another arriving expat. They are tired. They and Jenny don't get along. Two doctors, a nurse, a lab tech, and a logistician. We eat in silence. And then we all share the bill, even though I, unlike the others, ate no meat dishes and drank no beer.

We go back to the same expat house, called Vostachnaya for the street it's on: "eastern" in Karakalpak. This is Karakalpakstan now. It's a part of Uzbekistan but the people refer to themselves as Karakalpaks. My room is the only spare one, the guest room. It is the biggest and has a double bed. Since it is on the ground floor near the hot water radiator tank, it's also the warmest. It is very cold outside.



February 7

QARAQALPAQSTAN ----- No'kis

Three days after my arrival: Jenny is leaving today. I have followed her everywhere and I have been briefed and introduced and briefed and introduced to every MSF expat and significant National Staff. But I am lost.

“What will I actually do, each day?” I ask Jenny. “After I finish the little one week schedule of visits and meetings that you have given me?” She says not to worry, just take my time, that it will all emerge. She’s on her way home. She is sad to leave. Her mind is elsewhere, not on me. The nine counsellors on our team, they’ve all had her for two years. Their minds are on her. Now I’m alone.

Uzbekistan is bigger than Germany, slightly smaller than Spain and has 25 million people. It is in the middle of central Asia with a tiny south-eastern border on Afghanistan and otherwise surrounded by the four other stans, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. No relation to nearby Afghanistan or Pakistan. It’s where Timur was born, where Genghis Khan rode and where the Silk Road wound through the desert.

And in February it is very cold indeed in Nukus, a city of 300,000 and the capital of Karakalpakstan, a huge so-called Autonomous Republic about a third the size of Italy and with a population of just over one and a half million. A region of Karakalpaks who are divided into tribes which they must marry outside of, who speak their own language and think of themselves as separate from Uzbeks, and a people as proud as they are resigned to being beleaguered by the more powerful forces in their world. Forces such as a Uzbek majority, a secret police called National Security, and an epidemic called MDR-TB which is the much more dangerous brother of an epidemic called TB.

In February in this desert land, the trees are bare that line the narrow streets and the few wide, grand ones that move to criss-cross the city or flow past the White House, home to the president of Karakalpakstan. The trees are bare to the wind that flies relentlessly from the desert, keeping the ancient crows tucked into their beaks on the shuddering branches.

I am in Nukus with the crows.

☞ I walked to the bazaar yesterday—about three kilometres. It was cold but not as cold as in Canada. I'd say about 6 below Celsius, dipping to 11 below when the wind rose. The bazaar is the main market place. Much is outdoors or in small shops and then one big central venue with tables set up. But no heat anywhere. I don't understand the language, either spoken or written. The alphabet is not like ours. So I couldn't tell what was what. I did manage to get cheese, bread, some cookies, walnuts and a jar of strawberry jam. I point and then hold out my wad of money for them to take what I owe. As far as I could tell, they don't try to rip you off.

Speaking of money, the highest bill is 1000 *sum* which equals half a U.S. dollar. So everyone has to carry this big wad of bills to pay. And there are no coins.

We aren't allowed to take public transport so, every time we want to go out, we get a chauffeured MSF car if available. Or we can walk. In other seasons some bikes are available. Not much traffic here so it's pleasant to get around. In the residential areas, the houses are low style, squarish, featureless and fronted by a wall. All you see are entrance doors. Then into courtyards and then the dwelling. Nothing like a country in south or southeast Asia with its constant visual stimulation.

☞ The crows huddle in dark clumps on the bare branches. The desert cold sticks to them. Twenty below zero to a crow must seem much like it does to a human. Their beaks are hidden beneath tightly folded wings, pretending the vulnerability to freezing fingers of this wind doesn't exist.

These are the wise birds of Karakalpakstan. Aziz, my 30-year-old senior counsellor, tells me they can live to be 100. But he doesn't like them, their parallel lives unreachable, unlike the dogs with whom Karakalpaks have formed a working relationship. He knows they must be wise, the keepers of how it is, how it's been, seen it all but never sharing any advice, as they hop on the ground with less impudence than the magpies but too much self-assurance. He's seen one suddenly die, fall stiff onto the ground. Seen others with beaks cracked

than triple the norm. Soon after leaving the station in the capital of Tashkent, 800 kilometres from Nukus, the train starts to cut through flat, arid land and a light skim of white appears. Since it was winter when I arrived, I thought it was skiff of snow. But it is salt.

Despite being a long way from the Aral Sea, salt covers the land. People here talk of the taste of salt in vegetables and fruit. Drinking water in Nukus, over two hundred kilometres from the old sea, has a slight tinge of salt. Being here and seeing the salt layering the earth around me indelibly drives home the depth of the environmental carnage.

I had learned of the situation before coming. But it was travelling across the land and seeing the white of the salt everywhere that drove it home. Each day, when I am driven in the Landcruiser away from town, I look out at the barren, flat land. It is all white. In town, bare lots are white. I think of it as the colour of tuberculosis.

Refugees

June 13

I'm in the middle of interviewing prospective counsellors in Takhtakupir. We have gone through three candidates so far. My housemate Maru, who has become Project Coordinator for this new project, insists on being the one to start each interview, talking about MSF, etc. He's the boss. Then we take turns with the questioning. If I start to feel strongly that an applicant is not suitable, I say that I have no more questions. That's the signal to Maru and we close off the interview.

Candidate 1: Do you know what a counsellor is? No

Do you know what TB is? Yes

Can you tell us what TB is? A disease.

What strengths can you bring to this job? I will do my best.

Candidate 2: What made you apply for this job? I need a job.

What strengths can you bring to the job? That's for you to determine. I can't be the one to say.

Candidate 3: Why would you like to be a counsellor? It's better than sitting at home doing nothing.

Candidate 4 is a 21-year-old man. He is super alert. Smiling, every utterance filled with energy and enthusiasm. He needs the money. He likes people. He wants to help. He will do everything to learn and help. This would be his first job. We thank him. I tell Maru he is like

the Energizer bunny from the TV commercials. Maru has never heard of that commercial. We agree he is a great kid and we'd like to hire him, but ...

Now we go on to the next ones. Candidate 5 is just thrilled to be there because both she and her older sister applied but only she got the interview.

Candidate 6 is a 47-year-old teacher. He is clearly the old guard authority type but with a nice open face and obviously intelligent. I doubt he will fit our needs. But then I ask about what kind of struggles he has had in his life. His demeanour changes. He tells us about his wife getting seriously sick and almost dying, how he had to stop work to look after her and nurse her back to health. His eyes moisten, and he says it was a great learning experience and helped him realize what mattered and what didn't, how scared he was that he might lose her. He'll do.

Candidate 7 is a 25-year-old man. Smart guy. Personable. Good answers. I ask him how he would handle a situation of a female patient who is being beaten by her husband. He pauses, reflects. "I would meet with her to learn about what she does that makes the man want to hit her. See if there is some actions she could take to change that." I'm thinking oh no, he sees it as the woman's problem, her responsibility. He pauses. Thinks. "Then, I'd meet with the man and find out why he is abusing his wife. What makes him want to do that, why he thinks it's okay, and try to educate him that it is wrong and that his wife needs support not beating." Hired.

The phone rings. It's Stefan, Head of Mission from Tashkent. There has been a crisis in Kyrgyzstan, another former Soviet Republic just to our east. A coup took place last month. Now there has been an outbreak of violence in their southwest right on the border with Uzbekistan. Kyrgyz have attacked their Uzbek neighbours in the Kyrgyz cities of Jalalabad and Osh. Thousands of refugees have streamed across the border into Uzbekistan. Camps have been set up and MSF is sending help. They need a mental health specialist. I am to leave that evening for Tashkent with my counsellor Deelya as translator.

Interviews ended.

Acknowledgements

I want to acknowledge Médecins Sans Frontières. Despite our disagreements, they are an NGO that saves lives and makes a difference. We need them. My life has changed because MSF allowed me to work in Uzbekistan. I will always be grateful.

I will also always be grateful to my former wife, Jacquie Sharpe, for encouraging me to go on the mission.

Michael Mirolla, Connie McParland and Guernica Editions are why this book exists. Thank you so much.

Marcell Nimführ has graciously allowed me to use some of his fine photographs for the book and, particularly, the cover of our beautiful Deena.

Some of the essays in the book have previously been in the *Ottawa Citizen* and the now defunct regional B.C. magazine, *NORTHof50*.

All of the Karakalpak counsellors in Nukus will forever be in my heart. Thanks to Collins Kidake for being my friend in Nukus and to my sensei, Manas Daniyrov, for his help.

Although most of the names used in the text are fictitious, this book was written as a testament to bear witness to the strength and beauty of those we served in the hospitals and clinics in Karakalpakstan. As such, it is in memory of:

Venera
Oleg
Guldana
Islam
Kurbangul
Shahargul
Gulsara
Deena
Sluwhan
Kural
Gulbazar
Azamat
Oralbay
Malika
Nietbek
Roman
Gulnaz
Ayjan
Aybek
Aydar
Kayrat
Sarbinaz
Mukhabat
Jadra
Saule
Sayora
Bakbergen
Munavar
Tokhtagul

About The Author

A former high school teacher and counsellor in Salmon Arm, British Columbia, Calvin White translated his experience developing educational and therapeutic approaches for troubled teenagers into leading a team of local counsellors in Uzbekistan, a remote corner of central Asia. As a mental health specialist for Médecins Sans Frontières, he spent a year creating therapeutic practises aimed at saving the lives of hundreds of patients suffering from multi-drug resistant tuberculosis. During this time, violent communal attacks broke out in neighboring Kyrgyzstan, so he was also sent for a month to help the victims of that crisis. White's writing background includes scores of essays and interviews that have appeared in Canada's major newspapers including the *Toronto Star* and *Globe & Mail*, a book of poetry published by Turnstone Press, and a non-fiction book entitled *The Secret Life Of Teenagers*. As well, he has written curriculum units for college level educational/counselling programs.