

# Beshkempir

AKTAN ABDYKALYKOV

1998

The shift from childhood to adulthood is uncomfortable at best. It happens gradually, but suddenly there is an inescapable realisation that the way we look at the world has changed and innocence lost cannot be regained. In Aktan Abdykalykov's deeply personal and heartbreakingly honest bildungsroman, the first of his highly acclaimed trilogy of autobiographical films, these natural growing pains are combined with a rupture. At a tender moment of adolescence, Beshkempir has to contend with the shattering revelation that he is adopted and is forced to interrogate his sense of belonging.

One of the most striking things about Beshkempir is the sound. As the protagonist played by Mirlan Abdykalykov, the director's own son, idles around the village in forlorn solitude the sounds of the Kyrgyz countryside fill the static camera shots. The sound of birds during the daytime chirp against the image of the boy's loneliness, crickets are deafening at nighttime and when Beshkempir is beaten up by his friends we can hear the splash of water as they fight in the lake. In fact, whenever Beshkempir is in a state of tension, either on the receiving end of violence from his father or violence from his friends, the diegetic soundtrack is turned up. It evokes the same fraught sensory overload we all experience under stress and transports the viewer to those moments in their own life. Stephen Holden for The New York Times commented on how the soundtrack simultaneously captures the specific Kyrgyz landscape and the universal experience of childhood: 'With a soundtrack filled with the sounds of nature, and frequent images of the wind in the trees, the movie transports you back to an age when, no matter how sophisticated your environment might have been, your experience of the natural world was fresh and filled with sense of discovery, an age when time seemed to open up endlessly.'

Beshkempir is the first film released after Kyrgyzstan's independence from the Soviet Union. Released in 1998, it is the trailblazer for the new wave of films coming out of the country. Following a neorealist tradition and belonging to the same milieu as works such as *The Bicycle Thief* and *The Apu Trilogy*; Abdykalykov depicts the real people's Kyrgyzstan. The film is free from political rumination and

the place of Kyrgyzstan in the world is not referenced. In fact the only element of life from outside the village that occurs is in the form of the glamorous Bollywood films that transfix the whole village. There is great attention paid to the scenes of quotidian life and the rituals of the people of Kyrgyz: from a five minute depiction of Beshkempir's christening at the beginning of the film; scenes of the village work and a shot of the woman singing and performing funeral rites after Beshkempir's grandmother's death. Whilst most of the film is in black and white, sometimes it bursts into high colour close ups of traditional items or elements of the beautiful nature surrounding them. This is clearly intended to provide a depiction of the rich and beautiful aesthetics of the region.

The film culminates in Beshkempir's grandmother's funeral. It is in this pivotal moment that the director remembers becoming a man. Beshkempir must stand up and speak, he wipes away a single tear, and is harshly told not to cry by his father. Following their traditions, as her male heir he accepts responsibility for his grandmother's debts and voids any that are due to her. Death is a maturing experience in and of itself, but in the context of his recent discovery it is even more potent. His father is an alcoholic who he has a tense relationship with, he is not particularly close to his mother and his most important familial relationship to him was the one he had with his grandmother. By speaking at her funeral, not only does he maturely reckon with the death of a loved one, he reorients his sense of belonging and accepts his place within the family. At the funeral, his friends whom he had been fighting with hug him. There is an innate understanding that some things are most important than their altercation, and this is a symbol of acceptance back into his community.

The film ends with a shot, in high colour, of Beshkempir and Aynura's engagement ceremony. At first only their hands are in view as they play a game of cat's cradle against a stunning, striped blanket. It is an ending which depicts a new union, happiness, and possibility which follows a scene of ultimate sorrow. From the vantage point of one boy's experience Abdykalykov depicts the highs and lows of one life and the wide breadth of human experience in a small town.