



VAZHA
PSHAVELA

three
poems

ვაჟა
ფშაველა

სწიქი
კეთილი

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სემი
ანტონი



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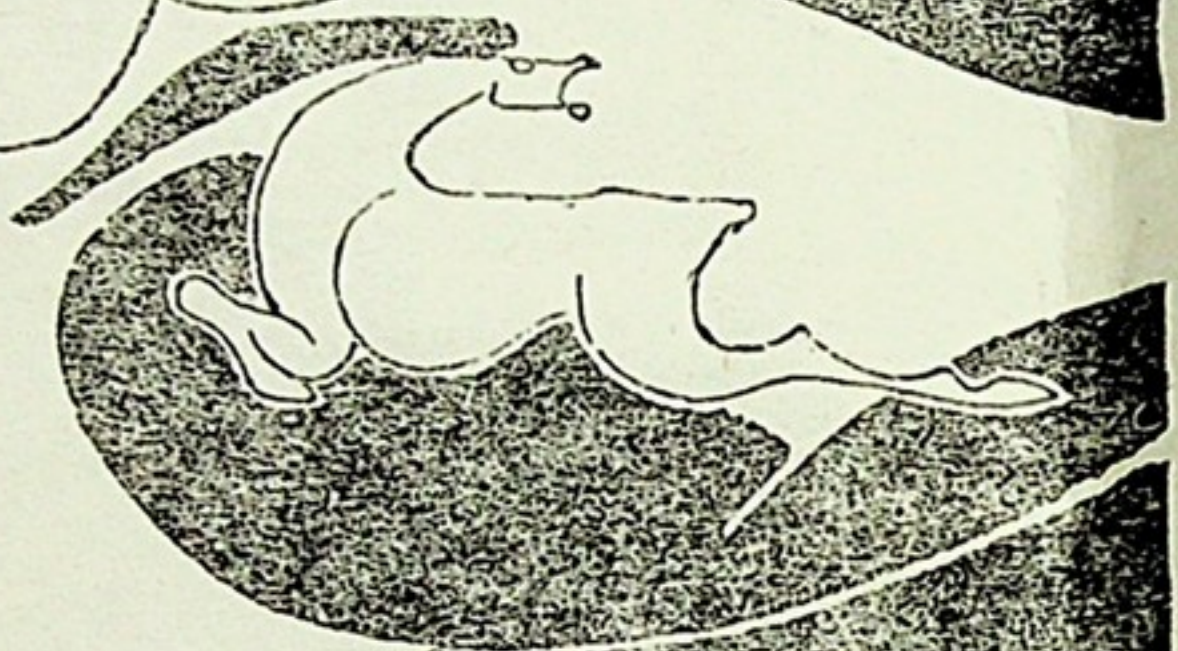
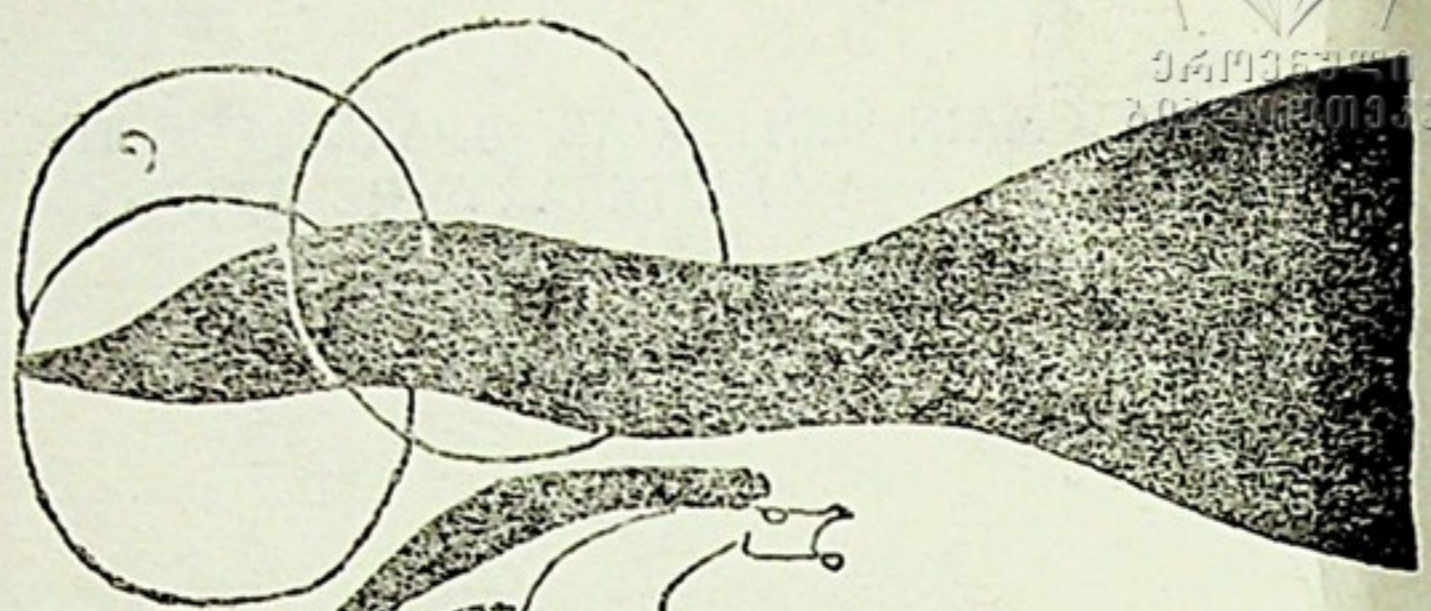


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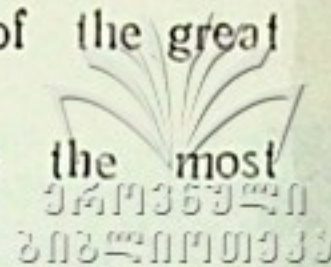
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VAZHA-PSHAVELA

Three
poems

Vazha Pshavela (1861—1915) is considered one of the great poets in the fifteen-centuried Georgian literature.

The three poems represented in the book are distinguished works of the poet.



Translated from Georgian by D. RAYFIELD
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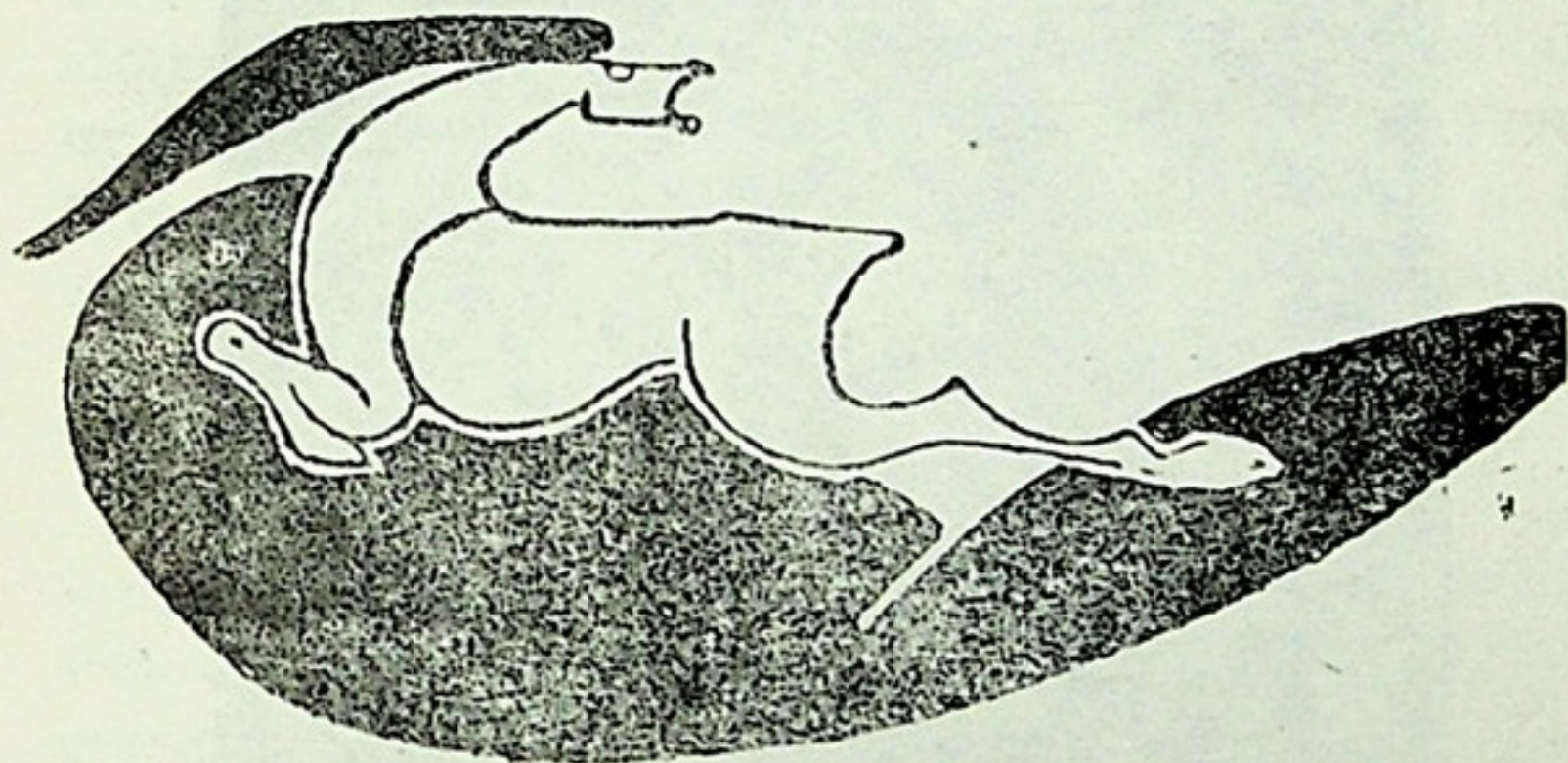
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საქართველოს
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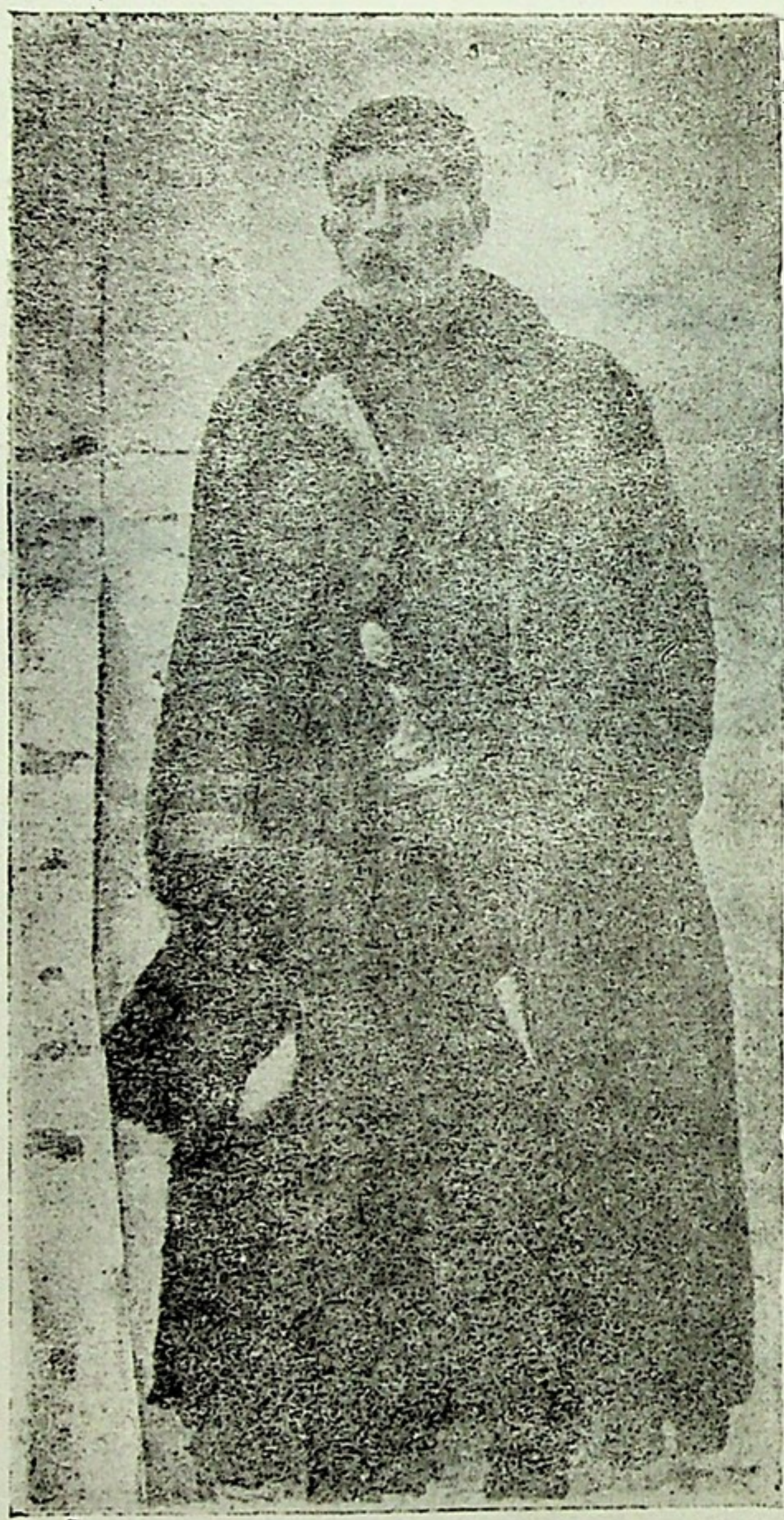


ქართული
ენების ინსტიტუტი





ՀԱՄԱՅՆՔԱՆ
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INTRODUCING VAZHA PSHAVELA

To say that Vazha Pshavela's poetry deserves to be known outside the confines of Georgia is an understatement. He is known in Russia through translations by Zabolotsky, Pasternak, Mandelshtam and Tsveyeva, but few have heard of him in England and America. There is an elemental power in his language, his poetic vision and his themes which make this ignorance almost criminal.


The three epic poems which I have translated represent only one — albeit important — aspect of Vazha Pshavela's work. Their sheer power will, I hope, overcome the inadequacies of translation and open the reader's eyes to the phenomenon of this Georgian poet's genius and inner world.

Vazha Pshavela (1861—1915) was in fact Luk'a Razik'ashvili, a man endowed with cantankerous individualism from his father (a priest) and poetic effusiveness from his mother. He was born a man from Pshavia (the meaning of his pseudonym) and shared the tough peasant life and yeoman pride of the Georgian mountain tribes. Education and a bitter period as a schoolteacher brought him out of an anonymity into which his genius might otherwise have foundered, and into literature. His life, a legend-like series of ordeals, catastrophes, brief joys and violent strug-

gles, tempered his work to a steely hardness and his outlook to an unbreakable stoicism.

This is not the place for his biography, nor for a history of Georgian poetry. Let us just say that Vazha, like other Georgian poets of his time, synthesized what he had learnt from contemporary Russian literature and from European romanticism with his native traditions. But he did so on a unique level. Reading his work one is struck by echoes of Goethe, of Shakespeare, as well as of the Old Testament; but one is never tempted to speak of "influence" or "debt". Vazha's feeling for nature, for the cosmos as an organic system, for prophetic isolation is something, like his language, so individual that any similarities with other poets have to be explained as part of the common face of genius.

Even in Georgia Vazha was not always understood. His language, often saturated with the mountain dialect of the Pshavi and Khevsuri, is compressed, its syntax condensed; his narration is abrupt, sometimes dislocated. His philosophy, which mingles a pagan awe at the inhuman powers of nature with an almost Hellenic view of tragedy, seemed out of place in the literature of what was thought to be a small Christian country struggling to be reborn as a European entity. Many have seen in Vazha a national prophet, a Romantic pantheist, even a despairing Symbolist: all are right, but only partly. Through his heroes, however, one can come closer to Vazha himself.



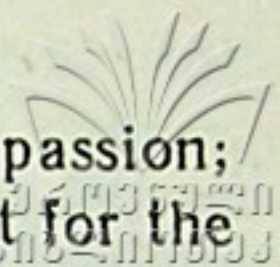
The three poems and their heroes come from different stages in Vazha's development as a poet. *Aluda Ketelauri* was conceived in the 1880s, *Zviadauri* (the guest) and *Joqola* (the host) of *Host and Guest* in the 1890s, *Mindia, The Snake-eater*, in the 1900s. Yet they are cast in the same mould. They are men who embody the virtues of the tribe and yet through no apparent fault of their own are set apart — by a tide of feeling, by the rules of their customs, by magic powers conferred on them — from the community and are, directly or indirectly, destroyed by it.

These heroes undoubtedly dramatise Vazha's own conflicts and the isolation of the poet in general. But they belong to a timeless heroic tradition. Vazha was perhaps the first Georgian poet — and one of very few of any land — to fuse folk traditions and his own lyrical vision successfully. *Aluda*, *Zviadauri* and *Mindia* are the subjects of many a Khevsuri folk poem. *Aluda* is moved to drink to the soul of the foe he has killed; *Zviadauri* unflinchingly endures ritual sacrifice over the grave of his enemy; *Mindia* returns from captivity to rule his tribe and die by his own hand. But Vazha enlarges on these folk elements to show the consequences, the universal spasm that the hero sets off. *Aluda's* revolt and expulsion do not belong to folklore; nor does the loyalty of the Moslem host to his Christian guest (*Zviadauri*); nor does the conflict in *Mindia* between the demands of his magic powers and those of his family. The folk tradition engenders

the hero; Vazha creates a cosmos and a tragic pattern.

The prime inspirational source, however, is not the hero but nature. For Vazha, as for Shakespeare and for Lermontov, nature is a hierarchy which barely tolerates mankind. The central pathos of Vazha's lyrics is often the unrequited love of man for nature. He gazes on the rocks as "lovely to behold as a woman's breasts". But nature remains aloof. It cannot endure the feel of blood shed on its surface, it denies man access to the high peaks, the *Sajikhve* where only wild goats can live. It reacts, like the heath to King Lear, with cleansing and destructive cloudbursts to human disorder. Much of Vazha's greatest prose and verse centres round this anomaly of nature's perfection and man's flaws. Thus the heroic ideal is not for him the self-sufficient ethos it had often been in Georgian folk poetry.

Vazha's philosophy is still a source of controversy. Like the Khevsuri he values stoic endurance, heroic devotion to duty, respect for the community's time-honoured rites. Sometimes he seems to rebel, as in the extraordinary curse on blood feuds in *Aluda Ketelauri*; but he relents and admits its inevitability. Except for the happy year of his marriage — 1886 — Vazha saw little consolation in love. Men and women live separately, the one sex to fight and die, the other to nurture and mourn. The community lives on a knife-edge, encircled like the Khevsuri by enemies, their



only friends, their weapons. Enmity becomes a passion; it is hard to tell from love. Thus Aluda's respect for the Chechen he has killed, or Zviadauri's respect for his deceitful guest feeds on the blood that is shed. The very word *mt'eroba* (enmity) comes to mean readiness to fight the good fight. Side by side with this violent, austere doctrine Vazha expresses the tenderest and most turbulent love of nature, expressed in a hierarchical scale that descends from the stars to the wooded groves, from eagles to songbirds, from beeches to meadow grasses: a gamut where man has no place.

Vazha's language exploits the full consonantal musculature of Georgian. Its assonance and rhythms are often strident. Rhyme is demoted to an unimportant incident. The eight-syllable Georgian folk verse is transformed into an infinitely variable medium, switching from lyrical reflection to dynamic narration, quite unlike the orderly flow of folk poetry, its syntax is often ambiguous, its displacements baffling. The translator's problems are formidable. Despite modern definitive texts, critical apparatus and, above all, the unselfish help of two good friends, I can still not be wholly content with the outcome. I have tried to bring out the impact of the original rhythms and have relegated rhyme to an occasional contrasting device; I have aimed at accuracy, so that Vazha's dense concrete imagery should not be softened and I have kept the ambiguities that seem deliberate.

It remains to give a few explanatory notes. First-

ly, the religious world of the Khevsuri, who were nominally Christian: the words *javari*, *khat'i*, *bat'oi* (cross, icon, Lord) are used in other, pagan senses. The "cross" is the shrine where the *temi* offers sacrifice (the *temi* being variously rendered as community or villages) to the local deities, who are subordinate to God, or more exactly to three gods *ghmert'i*, *mze* and *k'viria* — roughly equivalent to Zeus, the sun and Saturn. A sacrificed bullock or kid propitiates the spirits, brings fortune to the community and above all, peace to the souls of the dead in their Elysium. The hero in the other world (whether a nominal Christian or Moslem, as were the Chechens and Ingush of Vazha's epics) may have the soul of his enemy dedicated to him as a slave "to draw him water and plait bark sandals", but he lives by the memory and offerings of the living.

Secondly the traditions, some of them reminiscent of Mediterranean custom: blood-feud and hospitality are both absolute obligations — hence the hopeless dilemma of *Host and Guest* when the guest turns out to be the host's blood-enemy. In killing his enemy the hero is expected to cut off his right hand and hang it outside his door as a trophy.

Thirdly the community: each valley-side, or gorge (*kheoba*), existed as a *temi* virtually independent of the feudal state in the lower valleys of Georgia. It was governed by an assembly of adult males, who chose a *Khevisberi*, "an elder of the gorge"

to be their colonel, their chief and their priest. Any representative of the Christian church, the deacon, would function only as a medicine-man or spell-caster. The autonomy of the Pshavi and Khevsuri was waived only in national crises when they would descend to fight Georgia's foes. Otherwise they were a proud yeomanry of shepherds and cattle-herdsmen, living in fortified villages, meeting the outside world only in arms or occasional trade.

This was until the middle of the nineteenth century a real world, little changed since it first broke into history by beating back Pompey's legions. Vazha turns it into a timeless world, sometimes the lyrical present, sometimes the medieval Golden Age of Queen Tamar, sometimes a Promethean dawn of humanity. Prometheus, perhaps is the most apt simile for Vazha. Prometheus the Caucasian demi-god, and his eternally renewed torment and adamant rebellion against the gods best typifies the vigour of Vazha's poetry.

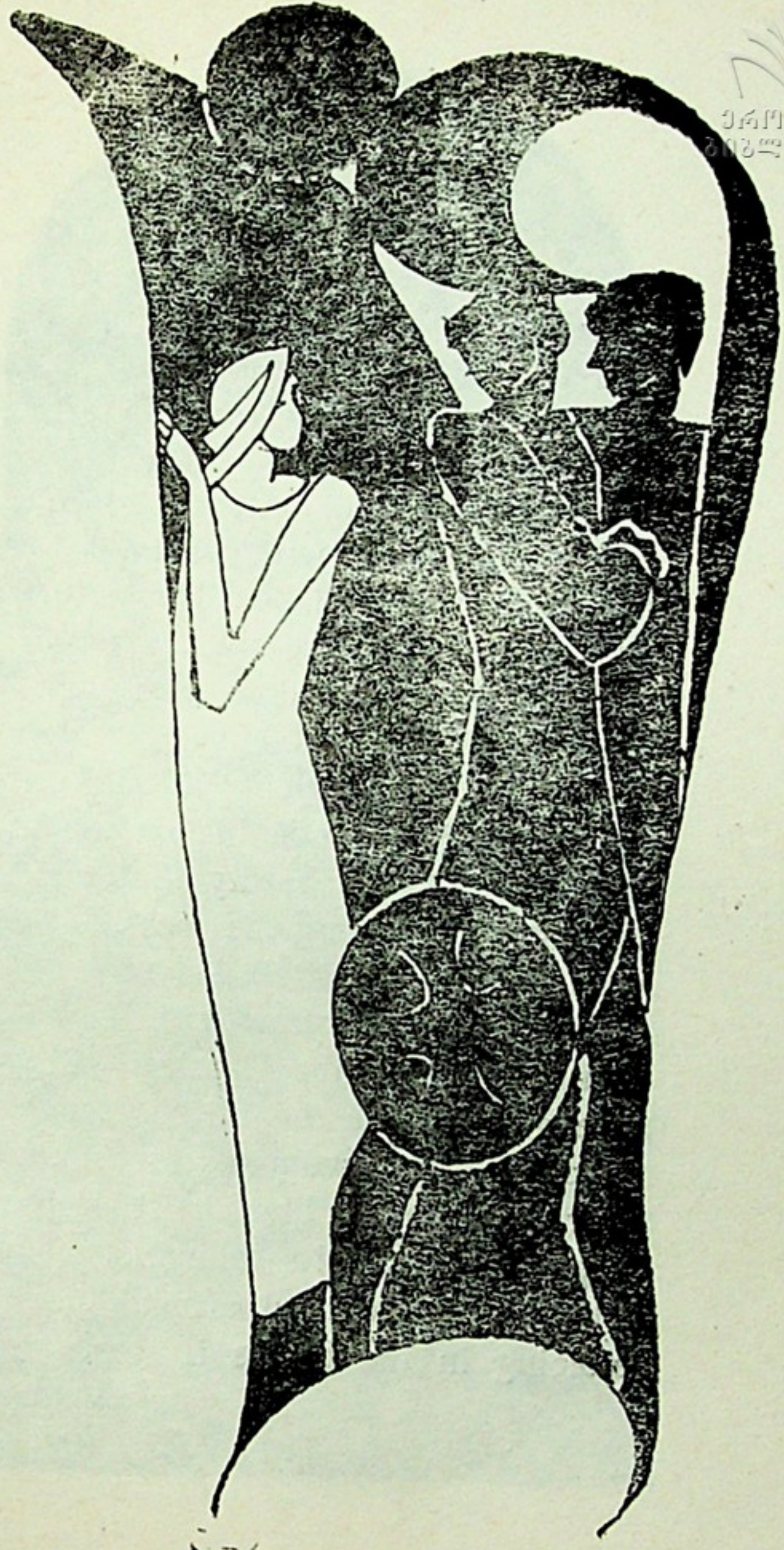
Vazha died in 1915, but his influence has grown. The best poets of the twentieth century in Georgia—the *blue horns group* (*tsisperqants'elebi*)—retreated from European modernism and symbolism to drink at his sources and to develop his themes. It is time for the poets of other nations to drink and invigorated.

Donald Rayfield

HOST AND GUEST



ქართული
ნაციონალური
ბიბლიოთეკა



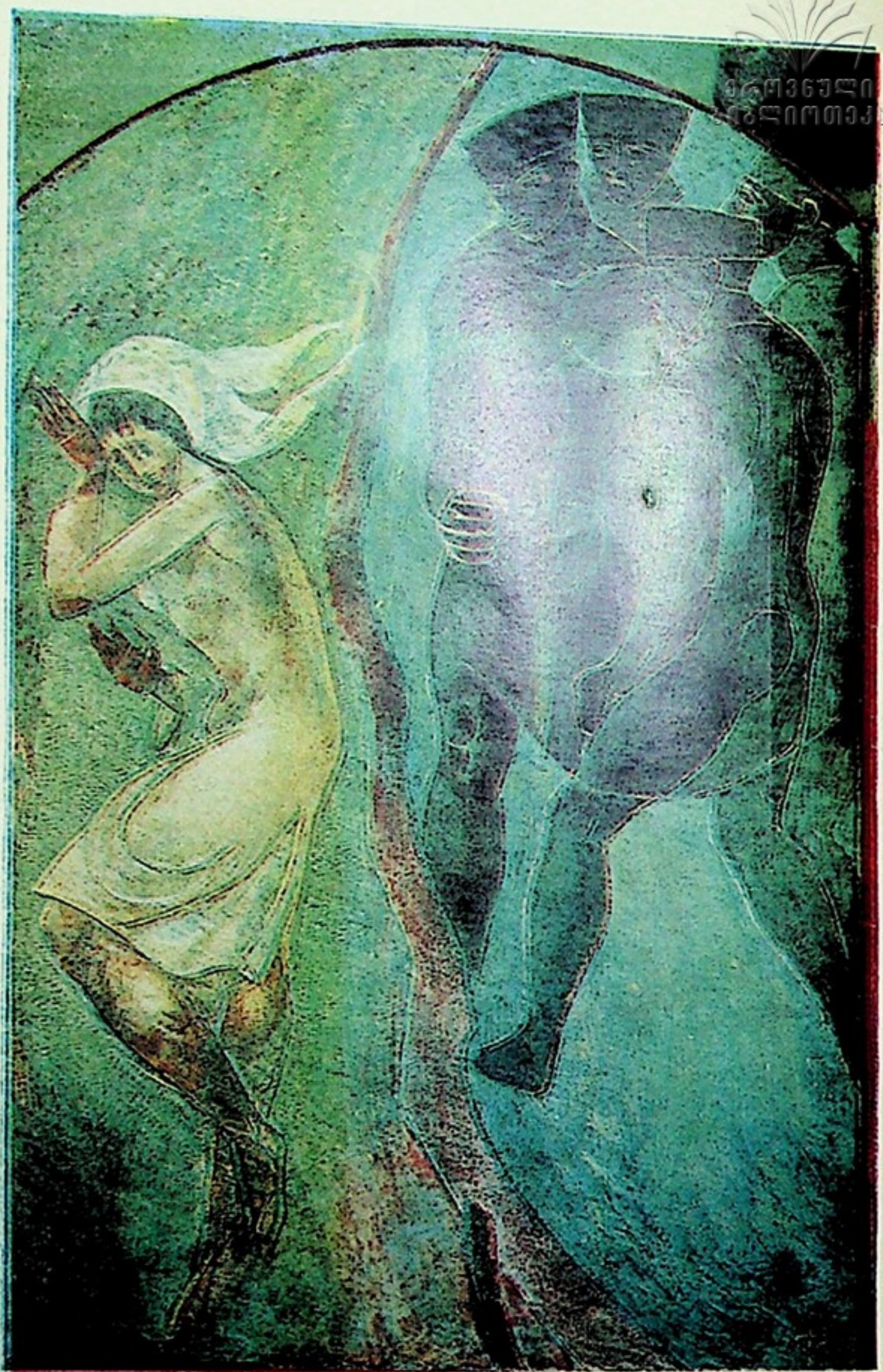
I

Buried in the gloom of night,
cold and pallid to behold,
the Chechen country seems to be
the bare rocks' throne. Below
in the dark gorge the river roars,
seething inwardly with wrath.
The mountains had bent down to wash
their hands and faces in the flood;
many a man had died on their slopes,
they couldn't bear the feel of blood.
They thirst for fratricidal blood
and a man is approaching on the track.
Track, I said, but hardly that:
a narrow trail along the rocks.
Hard to walk, it barely leaves
room for foot to follow foot.
Yonder appears the Chechen village,
an eagle's nest, as beautiful
to look at as a woman's breasts.
Over the village a black mist sleeps,
deeply sunken in its thoughts,
listening to the land around,
rejoicing in the things it sees.



ქართული
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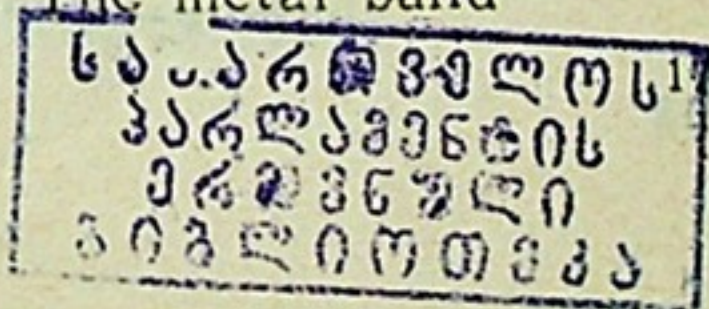
But tomorrow this passing guest
 moves on from here to other scenes;
 it will depart and cross the hills
 and the ridges gripped in ice,
 darkening the land as it conceals
 what was visible from the eyes.
 Or it will make the hunter weep
 when he finds he is lost in the rocks,
 and it will gladden wolves and thieves
 prowling and roaming in the dark.



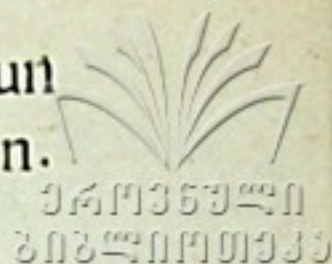
II

Someone unknown to him has sent
 a boulder tumbling from above.
 The traveller gave an upward glance,
 before him rose a mighty hill.
 He listens... and a little later
 he hears the crunch of trodden sand;
 the traveller makes his flint gun ready,
 lest this be a foe at large.
 Harder he stares, all eyes and ears,
 propping his rifle on the ground.
 He sees a man come striding down,
 a cleft-handled stick is in his hand.
 Something black he dragged downhill
 and ploughed a furrow in the sand.
 The stranger said nothing, not a sound
 came from his lips. The metal band

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that bound the barrel of his gun
shone like a drop of morning rain.




“Who, what sort of creature are you,
why are you abroad at this hour?”

“What do you think? I am a hunter.
I can't see why I should trust in you.”

“Why should I seem unworthy of trust?
Why say things that are untrue?
I am wandering, am I not,
just like you in these rocky parts?
I too am a hunter if you please;
today I have roamed about in vain.”

“Is it usual for a hunter to be
as empty-handed as you are?”

“I've plenty, brother, on my hands,
it's all I can do to keep on my feet,
I've walked every yard of the rocky screes
and not left the gorges for a moment.
A black mist hung over the higher slopes,
a mighty wind sprung up and howled
through the ravines like a starving wolf.
I couldn't see the path in front,
I felt like falling onto the rocks.
I'm foxed, I don't know where to turn,
that is what has troubled me.



I startled game in many places,
I clearly heard the sound of their hoofs
or of horns when a wild goat touched
against the rocks as it leapt across.
This was enough to break my heart,
I couldn't make anything out with my eyes.
Never mind firing or killing now,
I hardly dared to move a step."

The stranger approached him somewhat
nearer,
standing just a little way off.
"Greetings, then", he called out to him,
"don't complain, do not be angry."

"Greetings to you, brother, in return:
long may you kill the leaping game."

"There's game right here, why complain?"
he pointed to a horned wild goat,
lying dead, its horns curved back,
the cunning beast now silenced for good.
"If you like, let's now divide it
as between comrades, the two of us.
All I want is a tiny bit,
let's carve it up the proper way.
Tonight you'll come and stay with me,
I have my house not far from here.
Brother, where are you from? Say your name.
Do not be sad: today the Lord
has, it seems, provided for you."

Part of the wild goat that I've killed
is allotted for you to take.

What astounds you? I am not
mocking or deceiving you.

Well, if things are not what they seem,
how have we stumbled on one another?

Shame on him, I say, who lets
you go off without your share.

What's your name? Tell me your name.

You have the look of a Khevsuri."

"Brother, my name is Nunua,
I came from Chieli not long ago."

Zviadauri was lying,

he had concealed his proper name.

He had no choice, his name was known,

much Chechen blood cried out for vengeance.

Many Chechen right hands he had severed,

many Chechens he had despatched

to untimely graves.

"Tell me your name,
since I have told you my real name."

"Brother, my name is Joqola,
my clan Alkhasta. We shan't have
to tell each other any lies.

My house is here at Jarega,
behind its fortified stone wall.

This night you'll come and stay with me,
I myself shall lead the way.

Though I might not be the best,
I shan't be the worst of hosts.
Tomorrow, brother, you'll do what
seems best, go where you want.
I shall tell you of my worries
and you can tell me some of yours."

"Brother, where I haven't ploughed,
how can I reap? That's never done.
I see you've cut the wild goat's throat
and skinned its feet. I shan't refuse
to stay with you. I shall help
to lug the goat. But I'll not ask,
I'd have you know, for any bit.
I should not venture to do that."

They skinned the beast, left for Jarega,
told many stories as they went
and got to know each other well.

III

Thick stone towers came into sight,
dogs started yapping here and there:
they had come. From the doorways
curious children gazed at them.
Now it was clear that what seemed boulders
were indeed houses of polished stone.

“Here you are, this is my fort,
my house, my home and family.
Please come in like a man to his brother
or to the father of his godchild.”

Joqola called his wife, “Come out
to the door and look”. The host’s words
showed his pleasure with himself.

On the veranda they stand and wait...
the fire was dying on the hearth,
by the fire a man of some age
sat and played the panduri.
He sang of heroes and their deeds,
of battles fought by his forefathers:
how they pillaged Pshavi and Khevsuri
and left no brother’s blood unavenged.
The brave young warrior’s right hand
is blessed and revered in every land.

A beautiful woman then appeared
dressed in black. Her body was
as slender as a silken thread,
she was a star torn down from heaven.

“Here now, I have brought a guest —
this is the grace of God upon us —
now it is up to you to show
how you will receive us, wife.”

The woman offered her guest a greeting,
"Guest, come in peace."

"Peace be with you,
long life to you, to your husband
and your offspring."

She took away
her guest's chainmail, they asked him in.
The woman was the last to enter —
Joqola first, then Zviadauri:
he had found himself a brother.

IV

The man they saw in the house,
his hair streaked grey, showing his age,
rose up straightway to his feet,
a mighty leopard of the rocks.
Come as a guest to another man's house,
a stranger respects any other guest.
It is the custom to rise to one's feet;
he cannot break the mountain customs.
But when he saw the outsider come,
his face took on a wolfish tint.
It was easy to see what this man thought.
The elder Chechen did not find
the alien youth a pleasant sight.
Stirred with rage, his heart was racing,
his feelings showed clearly in his face.
His hand is groping for his dagger
and silently it tests the blade.

But he, a guest in another's house,
can't unleash a bloody brawl.
He rose and silently went out,
he bit his finger bitterly,
thrice he struck his heart with his hand
when he found himself outside.

Off he went from door to door,
putting a venomous edge on his tongue:
"Chechen men, our blood-feud foe
has crept this night into our midst.
Joqola, it seems, has no idea
who he is, as though his eyes
had never seen the annihilator,
this man who preys on us tooth and nail,
who is never sated, always hungry
for our blood and for our bones.
Today we have him, let us try
to give him a taste of bitter gall.
We have many dead who are unavenged
and who were killed by him this summer.
Speak if I am telling lies,
if what I say is not the truth.
Let our enemy discover
that we are not of mongrel stock.
Joqola's witlessness astounds me:
why did he open his door to the foe,
to whom is the idiot playing host,
what has driven him out of his mind?"

We must make vinegar flow
out of Zviadauri's nose;
if we don't then let us yield
the womenfolk our sword and shield."

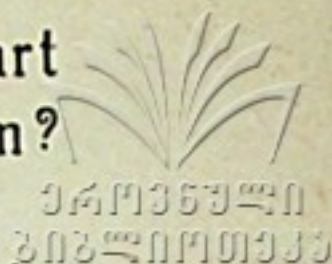


The sons of the Chechens were aroused,
each one buckled on his sword,
the whole of the village was set astir,
every man and woman and child.
They must sacrifice the head
of Zviadauri to their dead.
His throat must be cut on the grave of his foe
as was the custom and the rule.

They sent off a man to act as a spy,
quietly they trust him with his task.
He was to visit Joqola
as a neighbour or a brother,
not to alert him in any way
to the village's intent.
He was to sup, to have a chat,
to find out where the guest would sleep:
at night they'd storm and tie him up,
they didn't want to wait for long.

With honeyed words the spy arrived,
greeting Joqola by name,
at his ease as though unvexed.
He makes himself at home, tells tales:
his tongue is flashing like flint and steel.

Who would know he had a heart
poisoned with a serpent's venom?



They supped. The host was taking
a heartfelt liking to his guest.

"He's a good man, that's only too clear,"
he swears repeatedly by his faith.

"Today we are friends, tomorrow brothers:
our two souls are linked together..."

He asked him if he would like to sleep
and offered him his wicker bed.

"No," his guest said in reply,

"I don't need blankets or a mattress.
I shall sleep on the veranda floor,
I'm not accustomed to sleep indoors."

His desire, his inner wish,
the wish of his heart was now fulfilled:
this is what the spy was after,
for this the village had charged him to come.
Overjoyed, he took his leave
and alerted all the people.
The fox has no more need to search
if he knows the cockerel's perch.



“What’s up, woman? Get my sword and my dagger, this is no joke. The enemy’s soldiers are storming us, they mean to wreak real havoc on us, it is our guest who’s played us false; under the cloak of friend and brother he has smuggled his army in. Right then, wait... I am wrong, these men here are Chechens like us. Why have they come at this hour of night, what is this argument, what do they want? Listen closely, I hear someone croak. What a horrible row this is. They must be putting my guest to death, daggers are flashing all around. Take a look at these shameless men, trampling my family underfoot. They have cast a slur on my manly honour, crushing it into the dirt like pulp; am I supposed to run away? What on earth are they raging for?”

Joqola spoke and rose to his feet, clutching a dagger he left the room. He flung the house-door open wide, proudly, angrily stepped outside.

"What are you up to," he called out loud,
"whose guest are you binding up with rope?
Why are you breaking our God-given rules,
why foul yourself with a pitcher of dirt?
I swear by my faith, I'll shed your blood,
I'll make you rue your savage deeds,
I'll make you rue, though you be my brothers,
the day you trampled on my manhood..."

"Madman, what do you mean, what
have you said?"

Can't you come back to your senses?
Who would sever his mother's breast
so as to please a blood-enemy guest?"

The Chechens shouted out at him
loud as thunder, as one man.

"You and your guest, the two of you
we'll throw over a precipice.

The village will do as it desires
by its communal laws and rules.

Why is this man in your house as a guest,
this scourge of all the Chechen lands?

In the mountains even a child
knows Zviadauri by name.

You brainless fool, he always has
tried his utmost to destroy us,
falling on us like a wolf,
sitting in wait for us on the road."

A fleeting thought held Joqola back,
a twinge of remorse suffused his face
as if an arrow had been fired
and struck the middle of his heart.

“It was he who shot your brother
in the birch woods. We know his face
when it is like a rabid mask.
‘Zviadauri if you please’,
he shrieked at us from the upper slopes.
We know him clearly to this day,
our eyes have tracked him from afar.
Pshavia and Khevsuria
are full of cattle he’s rustled from here.
Quick-footed, in his blue-black tunic,
he used to hang behind the army.
You ill-starred wretch, why foul yourself
with this never-sated pig?
How can it not make you retch
to sit there in his company?”

“All this may very well be true...
Whatever you may say about him,
no thread on earth will bind my heart
to go along with your desires.
Today, you see, he is my guest,
though seas of blood be on his hand,
I am unable to betray him,
I, God’s creature, swear by God.

I ask you, Musa, let him go,
don't torture him so savagely.
Once he has left my family,
then do him harm. Who'd sell a guest?
What Chechen have you known do that?
What great wrong can I have done
that you should batter down my door?
You forgot your laws and faith
to act in such a wrongful way!
How will you answer my family?
This is no highway, this is my house.
Woe upon you, sons of the Chechens,
Woe to this army at my door.
You put an unarmed man to torture,
even your hearts must feel for him."

Musa (to Joqola)

"You headstrong fool, we'll tie you too,
if you defy the common voice.
How dare you mutiny against
that which we decree is right?
You have been yapping like a cur,
you have been talking a madman's drivel;
and for the sake of this infidel
you treat your brothers like enemies.
Don't you know that from this day
your affairs have gone awry?"

Joqola (to Musa)

"What was that? Cur? Did you say that?
So now you've made a dog of me?"

He drew his dagger, thrust it hard
to the hilt in Musa's heart.

“Hark at this dog, listen to him,
you saw the liberties he took with me.
You who trample on my honour,
do you still abuse and curse me?
I swear by Allah, I'll wipe you out
unless your swords dismember me first.
May earth's and heaven's grace abhor you,
what you are doing is unjust.”

“The man is godless, what's he done,
he's off his head, he's gone insane...”
The whole armed gathering of Chechens
swooped on Joqola, bound his arms,
too fast for him to use his sword.
They threw him down, bound hand and foot,
on the veranda like a corpse.
The people's curse is a thunderbolt,
its spittle is a fall of rain.
They lead a wounded man away,
it was Zviadauri.

What says Zviadauri?
Why is his face so chill and pale?
Bile is eating the young man's life
because he cannot hold a sword:
“Should you ever fall in my hands, you dogs,
I'd give you something to remember.”

He said these words with nonchalance,
but nothing more came from his lips.
They were taking him to the graveyard
to sacrifice him to their dead,
so that he might in the other world
be the dead hero's obedient slave,
plait him bark sandals and draw him water.

VI

Beyond the village stands a hill,
sunburnt, sandy. Many men,
lion-hearted, thoroughbred, lie here.
Below, the rock-face crumbles to
a silent dry clay river-bed.
These men once held cold steel and firearms:
their rugged hearts have ceased to beat.
Relentless and insatiable,
the tongueless earth devours them;
the human form of everyone
is obliterated in it...
no earthly power or cunning words
undoes for us the claws of death.
This is the wrong that nature does us,
the cause of our eternal grief:
evil and good, it kills them all,
no-one has it ever spared.
All the voyagers' goods are sunk
when their ship is swallowed up...



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ქართული
ბიბლიოთეკა





The sun's first rays had not yet shone,
 the dew still slumbered on the grass,
 the breeze had not begun to blow
 or fan itself low on the ground.
 Already countless men and women
 had gathered on the wooded banks.
 Zviadauri, arms bound,
 was being dragged here by the mob.—
 All look forward to seeing him killed,
 for who would think to mourn for him?
 Though death may frighten all of us,
 we long to watch when someone else
 is put to death. Men cannot feel
 too often great wrongs that they do.
 How many evil men I know
 who walk about without a frown.
 And is there a man who would not want
 to see his tormentor annihilated?

VII

Here now is the Chechen's grave,
 the people gather in a circle,
 the mullah reads aloud the prayer
 which invokes their dead man's soul:

“Darla, let your suffering stop,
 put away your worries now,
 we your fellows have come to stand

by the grave where you are buried
with a sacrifice; rejoice in it,
we will not leave you unavenged."



"A dog is all your corpse deserves,"
the young man raises up his voice,
fury makes his hair prick up
like the hackles of a panther.
Fire like a lime-kiln's seizes hold
of the victim's inner feelings.
What can bend his clouded brows,
his sun and wind-tanned mountain neck!

They turn round Zviadauri,
they press a swordpoint in his throat:

"Be sacrificed as Darla's slave,"
everybody shouts at him.

"A dog is all your corpse deserves,"
came his answer to the people.

The brave man did not bend an inch,
his eyebrows did not even twitch.

The sons of the Chechen were aghast,
the people reared like a maddened horse.
"He's trying to spoil the sacrifice,
just listen to the damnable dog,"

they bawl, while slowly, inch by inch
they thrust the sword into his throat.

“A dog...” the words came through the throat,
until his head and neck were severed.

“Just take a look at him, have a look,
he hasn't even blinked an eye.”

Life was ebbing, blood was gushing,
Zviadauri was dying.


But the hand of the foe could not kill his heart,
his heart stayed a heart right to the end...

And as she watched this spectacle,
a woman felt her senses faint,
the beautiful creature hid her tears
as she stood behind the throng.

“Do not kill him,” her heart cries out.
She thought, as anger overcame her,
“If only a woman had the right
to wield an axe, or was entitled
to spare this man from being killed,
I'd make the rest fear for their souls.
I can't imagine that the woman
who used to lie down by his side,
whose breasts, from now on cursed,
used to touch against his chest,
could ever feel, I can't believe it,
her passion for her husband waning.”

The Chechens were hurt and deeply angered:
their desires were unfulfilled,





they had failed to make an offering
that befitted the soul of their hero.
The man they killed had killed their hearts
and given the lie to their boastful oaths.
Enraged, aggrieved, these men now wished
to draw their daggers all together
to inflict on their victim's corpse
open windows stained with blood.
But they were ashamed and dared not;
each man thought, "It is a sin."
The violence of the crowd's intent
had drifted off into regret.
Making their way back downhill,
once they were home, they started saying:
"We should not have killed him as a foe,
surely, had foes not done us harm."
"He must have been a brave man indeed,"
everybody swore by Allah,
"That's why he fought us like a panther,
he stood up for his motherland.
But 'show the enemy no mercy'
the Lord himself commanded us.
Better to do what we shall now try:
to stick a knifeblade in his heart."

They went. Zviadauri
was left high up on a desert spot,
for the dogs to pull at the carcass
and flocks of birds to rip it up.

“He wouldn't submit to sacrifice,
let him lie there, that's harm enough,”
loudly the Chechens shouted out,
pleased and satisfied with themselves.

And the dark gorges caught the sound
and echoed their voices through the peaks.

Evening came and down the mountains
the last rays of sunlight edged their way,
light gives up the ghost, dark steals in.
The sun's rays froze and ceased to move,
the glimmering sand no longer shone.

No-one could see, for it had dimmed,
the white hair that covered the mountain's
blackness,

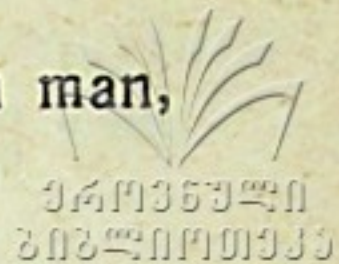
the grief-embroidered, woven face
of that black rock which always mourns
and drops down many a limpid tear.

Death calls for mourning and laments,
a dead man for his sister's weeping,
the forest for the leaping stag
or sometimes for the howling wolves,
a brave man calls for death in war,
a broken sword-stump in his hand,
war calls for the victorious feast
and for the enemy's defeat.

Zviadauri was mourned
by the lashing, tossing waters,

by the sighs of the mountain tops
wafting down as a gentle breeze,
by the tears of a host of mists,
all these the things God had commanded.
By the edge of a spring a woman kneels,
the lovely, beautiful wife of a Chechen,
pouring water on her brow and chest.
From time to time her heart feels faint.
Many a silent tear has she shed,
though she still shuddered from time to time.
Zviadauri's death was like
a ghostly vision in her eyes.
But this was no full-blooded weeping,
for though she wept she held it back.
She feared the opinion of the village
and also felt the fear of God
whose anger would be wreaked on those
who mourned the Chechen people's foes.
Such was her mind's thought, but her heart
went its own way. It would not
put aside this man's brave death.
The spectacle had struck the woman
like an arrow in the heart,
it obliged the lovely woman
to mourn the slain man as a duty;
She waits for the dark, so she may go
to weep at night for the deceased.
She thought no more of Joqola,

or whose wife now wept for which man,
or of her demented actions.
Joqola might be being killed,
the door of his house might be broken down.



She rose to her feet, looked around
like a startled, hunted beast;
peering all round, at length she came
to the gorge's rocky bank.
The frightening trumpet of the waters
resounded in the chilling gloom.
Shy, overawed, she approached where he lay,
falls on her knees, leans over the corpse,
sobbing, catching her breath with grief:
her tears would have melted a polished stone.
She took out her knife, brought it close
towards the body of Zviadauri;
from his beard she cut three hairs
as a keepsake and a token,
wrapped them up in her silk scarf's hem
with her crystal slender fingers...

What is this rumbling sound she hears?
A ringing swells up in her ears...
She catches, coming from the graves,
the angry protests of the dead.
A shriek of bitterness builds up
like a burst of children's crying.
Universal wrath rings out,
universal heartfelt pain:

“Have you no conscience, what have you
done!”

they cry outraged. “May God almighty
turn his anger on your head”

from their graves they shout at her.

The clouds rushed faster across the sky.

She turned and ran, she looked behind:
the dead pursued her, as she thought.

“Though you may escape us here,
you won't elude us once you're home.”

The sound of the chase rings after her,
and is echoed by the hills.

Hardly anyone at this hour
still is lingering outside.

“You have no conscience!” the slender forms
of rhododendrons call to her,

as do the herbs, the rocks, the sands
all round. Ebari, her brother,

rose from his grave. He was a man
among his peers beyond compare.

He joined the harrowing of his sister,
thunderous words burst from his lips.

“Woe to you, sister, how have you treated me?

Why let such dreadful furies loose on me?

I lie already in the grave,

but you have buried me yet again.

Is this how you show your sisterly love,
is what you've done a womanly deed?"

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A baying dog was trotting off
along the track towards the graves.

VIII

"Where are you off to, cursed dog,
where do you think you're making haste?
Who'd let you eat a brave warrior's corpse?
Dog, may your eyes be glazed with death.
Have Zviadauri's bones become
something fit for you to rip at?"

After she said this, Aghaza threw
stones at the dog as fast as she could.
Then she runs off, blindly following
the very edge of the rock-strewn gorge.
Still she can hear the voice of the dead,
the mountains sing a bass in reproach,
shaming Aghaza's jet-black hair.

As she got nearer to her house,
she saw a light still burnt inside;
she tried to cry out loud, "oh help,"
to make her voice pass through the walls.
But she cannot say a word,
sweat pours like water from her brow...
Gasping for breath, at last she reached
the threshold and collapsed, worn out.

Cross-legged, sitting by the hearth was Joqola. "Alas," she called, the very word dried on her tongue. Her husband put his arm around her and pulled her over to the hearth.

"What's wrong, woman?" worriedly he questioned her. "Must I add your lamentations to my troubles? What's wrong then, tell me what. Open your mouth. Has anyone tried to grab you and roll you in his arms? Tell me. You shall be avenged. This instant I shall make him rue it, I'll quickly bring back to his senses anyone who's smirched my honour, just as I made Musa rue the night he broke down another man's door."

He paused to let his wife reply, he loomed above her while he clutched his dagger. All the time he kept his hand around the handle, yet not a word came from the woman, and her face was drained of colour.

Joqola fusses over her, waiting for his wife to speak. By midnight, slowly, Aghaza had regained her former self.

She said to Joqola, "What's that you say?
Why make yourself so miserable?
Why do you imagine things
that never should be even thought?
That's all nonsense, I have not
seen any man at any place.
Who'd dare try anything on me,
what are my veil and dresses for?"

I have come back from the cemetery,
I have been looking in the gorges
for your horse. I am unlucky,
I could not find the horse, but fell
among a company of demons.
One that wore a black felt coat
over his monstrous body came
for me. (The stench of his hide
is still there flashing in my eyes).
Big ears he had, with teeth like tusks,
horrid to see, coloured black;
he stretched his great big hands at me,
he wore a hat as big as a hill,
blackish, leather, on his head.
And he said, 'Come live with me,
woman, I've got gold and silver,
lots of it, you'll see it all.'
I ran for it, I'd taken fright,
the demon chased me, bawling loud.


The rumbling from his pounding feet made the whole earth move. The sound terrified me. Mountains and valleys twisted and shook in all directions. I only just made it. Shuddering I let you know of my piteous state."

Joqola says to her, "Something else, not the demon, is the matter.

Your words do not convince my mind, my thoughts are muddled. Why have you been crying? Your cheeks are wet with tears; tell me quickly, tell me properly, do you think I can't endure it? Some feeling, sorrowful, innermost, has lodged in your heart. My eyes cannot help seeing the trace it's left; what you have drunk, what you have tasted needs must leave behind its mark."

"What can I hide from you, Joqola, or why should you turn angry with me for what I've said?" his wife replied, her voice took on a tender tremor.

"I have offered up my tears for the man who was your friend. I felt so sorry for the wretch, meeting his death in foreign parts with neither relative nor comrade nor anyone to pity him.



But when they killed him with the knife
he wasn't flinching in the least.
I may have sinned against you and God,
but I burst into tears, what could I do?..

“How could I chide you because of that?
Speaking the truth is better than lies.
You wept? You did a gracious thing.
How can I be the judge of this?
It always has been fitting that
a woman mourns a good brave man.”

IX

Morning came and Aghaza
drove the cows out of the mountains.
The birds flew down, for they were flocking
towards the corpse. But Aghaza
creeps to a rock above the graveyard.
From here she scares the crows away,
and the black slow-flapping vultures
and the white insatiable griffons
that squawk around the dead man's body.
She waves her arms about, she shades
her eyes that sparkle like the sunlight.
She plays at knitting a woollen sock,
while hurling pebbles from the rock.


She does her utmost to conceal
what she is up to from the people:



X

The news struck like a thunderbolt
when it came to Biso village.
“They have killed our Zviadauri
who was our pillar sent from heaven,
Pshavia’s and Khevsuria’s
shield and sword, the best of men.”
When they heard this dismal news,
the mothers set up a wail of lament.


One old Biso woman wept,
crying out loud in bitter sobs:
“Why am I, cursed wretch, alive?
Entrust my body to the earth.
Show my son’s strong arms to me,
bring them and put them in my hands.
Take my son’s right hand and fling
the earth of the grave upon my heart.
Woe is me, why do I live,
why do my legs still walk the earth?
Souls of the dead, why have you not
called me over to your side?
How can I bear to think of my son
lying in unbelievers’ land?”



The fighting men had heard the news
And knew that it portended trouble,
they talked it over with each other,
their faces marked with misery.
“Why should it astound you that
we weep hot tears for our protector?”
They went away and fetched their lances,
the blades were dipped in mutton-fat;
they fitted out their swords and shields,
preparing the army for the morning.
This is not the first time that blood
should gush like water from a pipe.
Apareka calls to the men,
“You will need a week’s provisions.”
Babarauli shouts out,
“All men who wear a hat must go.”
The uproar of excited men
is louder than the sound of pipes.

XI

“Get up, Joqola, come outside,
don’t lie peacefully by the hearth,
look: what a crowd has gathered round
the white beards of our mountain peaks!
They intend to visit us,
they have invited themselves to stay.
They will make our mothers rue
the days they rocked us in the cradle.



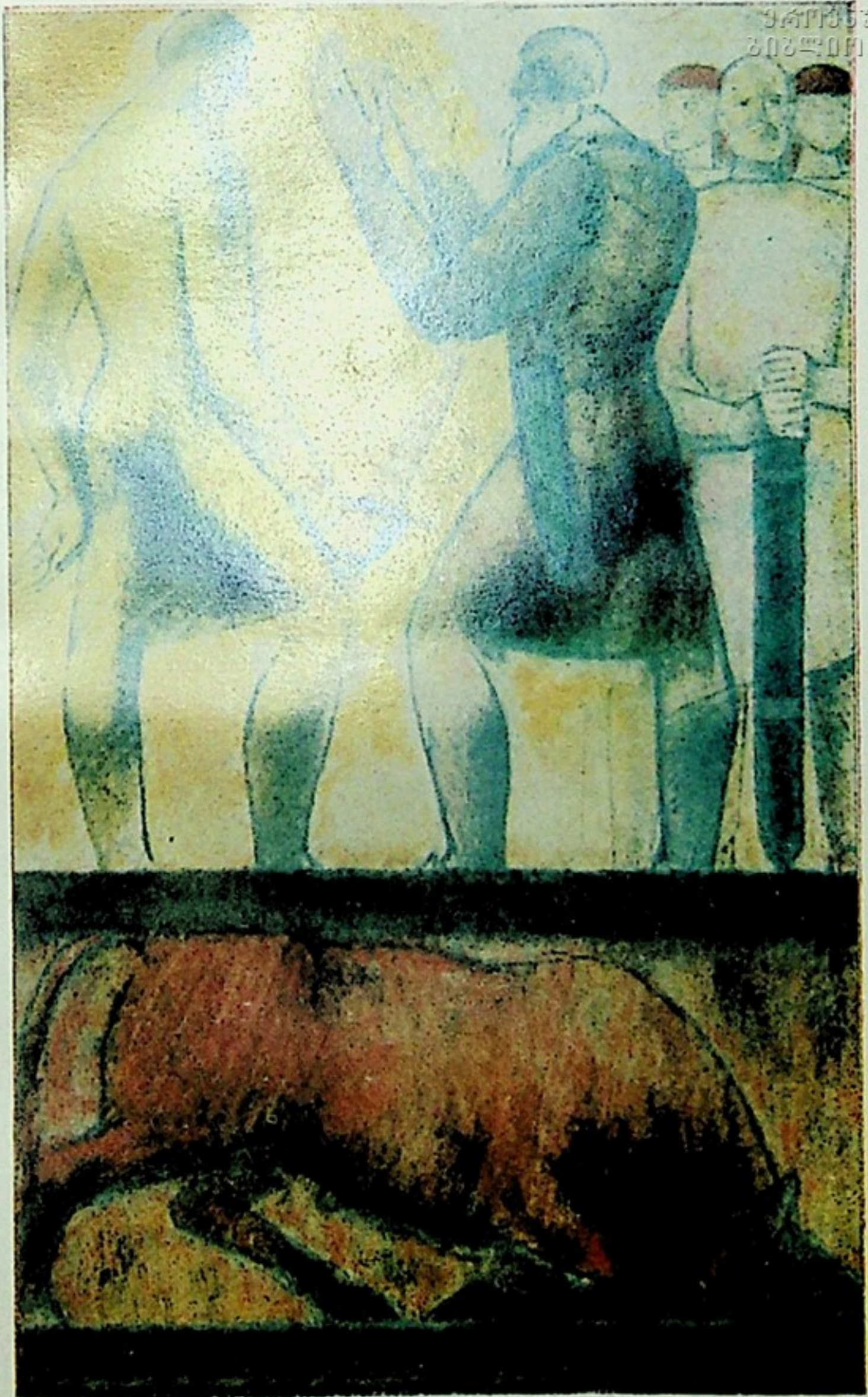
Now they are driving the cattle away,
what a turmoil, what confusion!
Look over there, the army has massed
on Jarega's heights, the Triple Peaks.
They've loosened rocks and rolled them down
on the terrified cattle-herdsmen.
Off you go and help your fellows,
they are running to meet the foe,
You too, Joqola, must go
like the others."

"Me follow them?
What are you saying, bird-brained woman?
They wouldn't have me next to them.
I must fight my war alone,
for all Jarega to see me:
let my country see for itself
who is faithful, who is not.
The Chechen take me for a traitor
who has broken with his faith;
they believe that Joqola
has sold his soul for money, that
I have betrayed the Chechen lands
and washed my hands of my immortal soul.
They bring and lay a heavy stone
over my heart to bury it alive."

These were the words of Joqola
as he put his armour on;



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საქართველოს
წიგნობრივი მემკვიდრეობის
სახელმწიფო ბიბლიოთეკა




he buckled his sabre round his waist,
over his shoulder he slung his gun,
following the Chechen custom,
he put no helmet on his head.
Alone, he went off on his own,
dedicated to the fray...
The others, ready to engage
the foe, had spread out on the hill.

XII

Down the Khevsuri army comes,
its banner proudly borne before it;
they headed for the cemetery,
the Chechens' silent dwelling-place:
they meant to find their hero's corpse,
to gather up his valiant bones,
to gouge the eyes out by the roots
from Zviadauri's tormentors.

Hidden on every gorge's edge,
the Chechen army fought them back.
They fired their banded Magyar guns.
These hefty, well-built lads don't yield
the path to the Khevsuri men.
Both sides raise their guns and fire,
yelling out their battle-cries,
both sides find the going hard,
both fight to the bitter end.

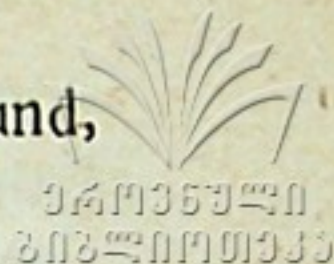


The bullets were drinking copiously
of blood and grazed the fescue-grasses.
But the Chechen did not break,
standing like a buttressed fort.
Baburauli told the Khevsuri
to turn to fighting with cold steel.
The battle became a clash of swords,
shields cleared paths for swords to hack,
the Khevsuri are out to win
a precious treasure and a booty.
Shield, don't let the sabre down,
you and it are boon companions!
The Khevsuri tore down the hill,
before them rose a tall sheer crag.

A Chechen with his sword raised high
suddenly leapt down from the crag;
he astounds the Chechen army
by beating back the enemy hosts.
Some think it a spectre or a feint,
or speak of ghostly apparitions.
"Who is that engaging the Khevsuri?
He's one of ours, who can it be?"

"It must be Joqola, indeed
it's him all right," one man said;
others concurred and watched, amazed:
he is not frightened by the mob,
though swords and daggers are thrust at him;


now he's struck down and spins around,
the point of a dagger stabs his chest.



The Chechens were utterly overjoyed:
“Let them kill him, if they have,
he asked for it; he's shown us up.
He often used to give us trouble,
he set himself above the village
and rubbed our faces in the dirt.
He went alone to meet the foe
and thus has brought bad luck on us.”

The Khevsuri left Joqola
dead, on a lofty, jutting rock;
they then fell upon the Chechens
and spread out over the mountainside.
Now swords and daggers whirled about,
blows reached chests, swords and shields
set up a clanging and a crash
that rose to God in the skies above.

The Chechen army turned and fled,
they headed, clattering, for their towers.
The Khevsuri follow close behind,
their helmets shining on their heads;
at the graveyard they gathered up
Zviadauri's scattered bones;
one lay here, another there,
strewn and torn at by the birds.




The bones collected in a knapsack,
they turned for home. They had fulfilled
their heart's desire, their first intent.
They drove the sheep and cattle home,
taking them back across the peaks;
they'd had their vengeance on the foe,
what cause had they for sadness now?
Home they brought their hero's corpse,
the fort, the iron gate, the hope
of Pshavia and Khevsuria
had not been left in foreign parts.
Comrades would weep as was their custom
for their departed, they'd bury him
by the graves where his forefathers lay.
Costly are the tears indeed
shed on the breast of a man we've loved.

XIII

“You who mourned for a foreigner,
the Khevsuri have killed your husband.
Go off, Aghaza, weep for him,
lay him in his grave. The wind
ruffles his whiskers and his beard,
the crows are croaking at his head.”

“May your enemies endure
a life as bitter as mine has turned.



No-one now approaches me,
no-one offers a helping hand.
I have buried him there on top of the rocks,
there I dug a grave for him.
Everyone turns their back on me,
everyone stands aside when I pass.
They fenced the graveyard off from me,
to stop me from burying the body there.
'Joqola', they say, 'was a traitor to us.
His place is where he fought alone,
he smeared us with pus, he is a man
who disobeyed the village's will,
a two-faced and a wanton man'.
Fire, oh brother, is burning me,
a flameless fire that doesn't catch;
it deadens my heart, it clouds my mind
with thoughts I cannot understand."

Joqola's wife shed tears for him,
harder and faster the tears poured down.
She was a gazelle with its head arched back,
her thick-flowing hair and moon-shaped face
made her an adornment to her husband,
like a pearl button on his chest.

XIV

The night is dark, the rain pelts down,
all around the earth is trembling.

God, look after the suffering,
give them help and show them mercy.
The good are well-off anyway,
show the ill-starred wretch Your love.
Strew like roses the prayers and entreaties
of the tormented in Your heart.
If You can't help them, then redeem
these unfortunate creatures' souls...
Enough of your threatening: scatter, clouds!

The river thunders and it rages,
breaks off boulders and sweeps them away.
Today the river is wreaking evil,
it does not know for what it howls.
It fears no pain, it knows no death:
only one thing does it know —
gushing of tears, howling out loud,
and endless and unsmiling scowl,
weeping alone, weeping alone...

Down in the gorges a wind strikes up,
yelling its battle-cry through the peaks.
A woman stands and stares at the river
from a rock; her hair hangs loose.
The pallid quiver of her cheeks
reminds me of a star extinguished.
She makes no sound... seized with fright,
she shudders looking at the river:

what a horrible roar it makes,
how horribly it rushes on!
The cruel blackness of the abyss
rages with its jaws agape.

Now if only a single person
had told her. "Do not kill yourself!"
The woman closed her eyes and quickly
she fell away into the chasm.

"Why on earth should I stay alive?"
were the woman's final thoughts.

"Nowhere in the Chechen lands
does even a pebble share what I feel.
The Chechens condemned me on two accounts.
They have anathematized my husband...
My other sin is greater still:
I have shed tears for an alien man."

The water bore away Aghaza
and mixed her with the slime and sand.

XV

Above the rock where Joqola
died fighting off the Khevsuri,
at nights, a vision can be seen,
on that landslide-battered hill.



High on the rock Joqola rises
and calls to where the graveyard lies:



“Zviadauri, my brother,
why don't you show your face to me?”

From the cemetery comes out
a phantom bearing sword and shield;
his arms, with armour on the elbows,
are folded crosswise on his heart.
He goes across and gives a silent
greeting to his bosom-friend.

There too Aghaza arises,
sad-faced, full of melancholy.
By their side a fire is lit,
it flickers palely on the mountain.
Aghaza is doing the honours,
she spit-roasts goat-meat over the flames.
They talk of brave and manly deeds,
they talk of their trust in one another,
about the laws of hospitality,
friendly acquaintance and brotherhood.

When he sees them there together,
no man can satisfy his gaze;
but an impenetrable fog looms up,

like a mist that is dyed with black.
It seals the spectacle from the light
as though it were a writ of Fate
and draws a magic curtain over:
no flail on earth can break it down,
no sorceress undo its spell,
no human hand can make it rise.

Only the river's voice is heard,
down below it coughs and swirls;
and, stalk erect, the heliotrope
gazes into the bottomless pit.





ქართული
ნაციონალური
ბიბლიოთეკა

ALUDA KETELAURI



ქართული
ბიბლიოთეკა



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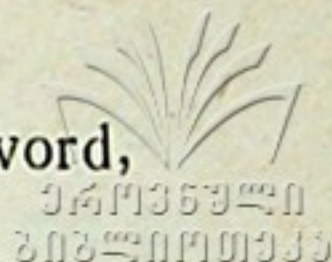
A messenger came to Shatili:
“The Chechens have struck a blow against us,
these evil men of evil ways
have sent our shepherds scattering”.

Aluda Ketelauri
is a man smiled on by fate,
in village assemblies he sits at the head,
his words when he speaks are to the point;
he has proven his sharp-edged sabre
and hacked many Chechen right hands off.
The bad man has no need to fight,
the good man can always meet the foe!

The Chechens had driven off, he heard,
Aluda's own fleet-footed horses;
he has an inkling that they would cross
the mountainous head of the Arkhoti,
their horses' shoes trampling down
the dewy fescues of the mountains.

As soon as Aluda heard all this,
he put an edge on his rifle's flint,

put on his armour, sharpened his sword,
testing carefully the crosspiece,
lest the sword should break its hilt.



Dawn. The peregrine falcon of the rocks
swiftly pursues the enemy;
as day breaks over the rocky scree
the snow pheasant's bell-like call rings out.
But the dogs still sleep in their pens,
the sheep have not yet left their folds.

Aluda's eyes soon fell upon
the Chechen's tracks. Moments later
he caught them up. His gun went off.
One thieving Ingush tribesman met
the evil instant of his end.
His body toppled from his horse,
hanging over upside down,
pierced by a ball in the shoulderblade.
He feels fire spreading from the wound.
Another Ingush, the dead man's comrade,
squeezes the trigger with his finger.
Mutsali's rifle fired a shot,
splintering the bare rock-face.
Shattered pieces of bullet fall
into Aluda's tunic hem.

“Haven't I hit you, heathen dog?”
Mutsali called out to his foe.

“Don't you believe it, heathen dog,
I am a vassal of Gudani shrine”.

The bang that came from Aluda's gun
was thunder striking from the sky.

“Haven't I hit you, heathen dog?”
he shouts out to the other man.

“Mutsali's unharmed, heathen dog;
I was only struck by broken rock.”

“Aha, that must have pierced his hat,
the bullet's singed the ends of his hairs.”

“You aimed too high, miserable wretch,
it didn't touch the bones of my skull.”

Mutsali's rifle returned the fire
the bullet makes a horrid noise.
It had broken Aluda
Ketelauri's powder-horn.

“Aren't you hit now, heathen dog?”
Mutsali asks him threateningly.

“No, I am not, you heathen dog;
the vassal of Gudani shrine
is followed by victory-bringing forces
that invoke the powers of God.
His heart's unhurt, don't be misled.
Just my gunpowder pouch was smashed.

Now that I must kill or be killed,
I'll venge myself on my enemy."




The man from Shatili fired a shot
which broke the Chechen's breastbone up.

"Now, I've got you, heathen dog!"
loudly he shrieks at his Chechen foe.

"My heart is hit, my heart, heathen dog,
woe to Mutsali's prowess in battle.
You killed my brother, you've killed me too:
what can I say of the grace of God?"

Mutsali does not wish to die,
he does not lose his wolfish colour,
he tears at the green mountain grasses,
spreading the herbs all over his wound.
He fired once more at Aluda,
losing no chance of fighting on.
Then he flung his gun to Aluda,
speaking to him one more time:
"Now let it be yours, you heathen dog,
lest it fall in another man's hands."
The very words dried on his lips,
he lay low, sprawling on the earth.



Aluda doesn't want the rifle.
He burst like a woman into tears.
His eyes do not covet his enemy's weapons,
he does not strip the armour off.
He placed the dagger by Mutsali's head
(it had a handle of ivory),
he put the flint gun on his chest
and on his arm he laid his sabre.
Aluda does not cut off
Mutsali's right hand. Instead he says,
"It's wrong. Man, whom I have killed,
God let your body rest in peace.
The least that I can do for you
is leave your arm and right hand joined.
Let your hand on your heart go back to dust;
the stone wall's door shall not have your hand
hanging up to gladden it.
Good people must have brought you up.
God prolong the days of your kin."
He covered him from head to toe
with his cloak, and the shield on top.

II

The sun had risen in the sky,
the mists dispersed and left the gorges,
the demons of the Caucasus
crowd against the heavens' edge.



საქართველოს
წიგნობრივი მემკვიდრეობის
სახელმწიფო ბიბლიოთეკა





ქართული
ბიბლიოთეკა

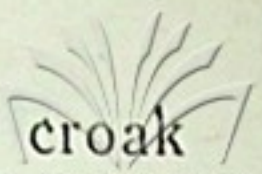


Hawks and predators get up to hunt,
vultures follow the eagles' path,
always close when the food is free.



The wild goats kept to the snowy peaks,
the grace of God upon their horns;
the evilly cawing ravens croak,
calling each other from gorge to gorge:
“The Chechen Mutsali has died,
I must eat the young man's eyes,
then scrape out his heart and liver
to warm the surface of my wings.”

The midday sun had not yet sent
its rays of light to Shatili,
they do not light a man's descent,
a sky of rock stands over him.
Over the peaks a young man came,
uneasy with himself; his face
is clouded, heavy and dark his heart.
On his saddle-bow he has hung
the right arm hacked off Mutsali's brother,
his silver-chased Bazala rifle;
here too his Khorasani sword.
Now he comes to the rocky outcrop
where Imeda's stone walls stand.
Summer brings them the sound of gunfire,
winter the crashing avalanche.
Many a raincloud has burst upon them,



their stones have heard black ravens croak
and felt the insatiable vultures flap
No-one has undermined their fortune,
no-one was able to do them evil.
The burning rays of the sun above
melt the infidel's very hands.
The walls live today: for no snake
has burrowed under their foundations.
Come rain or shine, fair or foul weather,
what harm could befall them; many a corpse
of downy-bearded young men have they seen.
Often have the slain sent a torrent of blood
down to the river grove, dyeing red
the evil waters of the Ardoti.

Whoever thirsts for enmity,
let his house-door open wide,
let his heart be a dam of blood,
let his feet stand in the pool,
let him drink not wine but blood,
let him have it for his bread,
let the sign of the cross be made
as though he stood in the house of God,
let him have a wedding in blood,
let his vows be made in blood,
let him invite the wedding guests,
let him gather round a crowd,
let his bed be made in blood,
let him lay his wife by his side,

may he have children in plenty,
many boys and many girls,
here too let him dig a grave,
let him bury the corpses here.



You who have killed will be killed in turn,
the kinfolk will not spare the killer.

All the women of Shatili
were standing on their flat roofs watching.
Aluda is greeted by
his brother's three children and his brother.
Many want to hear the news,
telling Aluda their wish,
"May you be renowned for your deeds."
The elderly Ushisha asks
Aluda how the battle went.
Ketelauri relates
the story of the wolflike Inguish.
"When I left here, Ushisha,
I cut across his tracks in the hills,
very soon I caught him up,
I spotted his hoofsprints in the sand.
They were two, I fired my gun,
I couldn't get close enough for swords.
That Mutsali, God rest his heart,
must have had iron for a heart."

"What are you saying?" 'God rest a Chechen'
are words forbidden by our faith."

“I use them to praise his bravery,
bravery can't be bought for money...
I fired thrice and he fired thrice,
with the third I did for him:
a bullet struck him in the chest
and smashed his heart to smithereens;
he covered up the wound with smallreed
and thereupon gave up the ghost.
He fought to keep body and soul together,
once more he cursed me for my faith.

We should say that we are men,
that only we are raised by mothers,
that our souls find rest, while infidels
must gasp eternally in pitch.
If that's what we say, we're talking drivel.
The gods of the shrine know better than that.
Do all speak truth who swear an oath?

I couldn't bear to take the knife
to cut Mutsali's right hand off,
my heart revolted and wouldn't do
a deed too difficult. It said,
'So be it, let your fame diminish,
you prefer me to wield command.'

At this the young Khevsuri men
became sour as sloes. They looked
angrily at Aluda.



Sullenly they chided him,
“Die, you would be better dead,
why do you speak such lies to us?
Unbuckle your sharp-edged sword, throw it
to the women to use as a shuttle;
your shield can be their weaver’s comb,
give them your flint gun for spinning yarn,
throw your pistol to the women,
they can twirl it as a spindle.
A Chechen has made you forswear your faith,
A Chechen has made a woman of you.
You killed him but left his right hand on,
why then did you track him down?”

They turned their backs on Aluda,
with angry faces, they all went home,
going straight to the upper storey.
With embittered hearts they left
Ketelauri alone.
They called the name of Aluda
lamentable, misbegotten.

Mindia came to Shatili,
his dun horse armour-clad with bronze,
a sabre buckled to his waist.
He, whose hilted lance had killed
a dozen Chechens, had his shield
hung from his shoulder. His horse,

Tsitla, is like an antlered stag,
his white brow-spot is like the moon



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Mindia is told of Aluda's shame,
the words are laced with poisonous venom.
Mindia was pained, he furrowed his brow
with wrinkles awesome to behold.

“Do not let your frivolous tongues
call a brave young man disgraced.
I'd like the truth to be as easy
as I'd wish your enemies' death.
We have no need of much affliction,
one day's supplies suffice for me,
my paths and tracks are not mixed up,
I know the way through anywhere;
Mindia will be with you today
until the stars of the Bear have set.”

He struck with his heel, Tsitla started,
surged and moved off like the breeze.

III

Dark has fallen. The waters weep,
the lap of night is hidden from us,
now is the time of the twinkling stars,
the dewdrops clustering on the grass,
the souls of the dead rising up
from the graves to sing their soft song.

Out of the rocks the demons emerge,
wandering from gorge to gorge.

Supper is over, everyone now
prepares to sleep.




“Have some food,”

Aluda's mother and sister beg him.

“Mother, I do not want to eat,
my heart is somehow strangely cramped,
last night I dreamt some loathsome dreams:
I was standing somewhere in a line,
a dead man's body lay before us,
Khevsuri sat there deep in mourning,
some stood at the door ready to fight.
I too was there, I was crying
as is customary for a man;
I sensed that war was in the offing,
that the time to leave had come.

In a flash my hand was grabbed
and in it was placed my dagger-handle.
I looked to find it was Mutsali.
He wore his tunic of bronze chain-mail,
over his heart you could see the wound,
the sign of the moment we had fought.
Over his bullet-wound was dabbed
a greyish poultice of mountain small-reed.
He stood like a rock, an unbreakable rock,
not a tear falls from his eyes.



‘I want death, I cannot die,
you killed me,’ he said, beseeching me.
‘You have kept this fleeting life,
while I am parted from this earth.
Sate yourselves, Khevsuri sons,
with waving and swinging your swords about.’

I sat down, I was served a bowl:
a juicy piece of human flesh.
I ate it, but a bony piece
of human hand or foot appalled me.
‘What am I doing?’ I raged,
‘horrible outcast that I am...’

‘Eat’. Something called across to me,
don’t behave like a man insane...
Please, offer Aluda some more
meat and juice and heat it up.’
They gave me more; they’d seasoned it,
with hairs that came from a human beard.

Dreams have tortured me, that is why
my mind and spirit are upset.”

IV

Day is breaking. The peaks have reddened,
the mists have furled up on the hills,

the village rises and awakens,
the paths are trod by travellers.
The vultures too have started their travels,
scanning the mountains and the valleys:
but however hard they flap,
they cannot leave their trail in the sky.

Who is riding here on Tsitla
and has crossed the running waters.

The Khevsuri men call to Mindia,
"Come in peace." They shout from afar,
"What is the news that you have brought?"

"Young men, your blood is in a ferment,
you let your hearts do the cutting and stitching,
you let your heads be ruled by your hearts
and let the axe cut off your heads,
you cannot easily know a man
just by his manly faith and customs.
Don't let one oppress the other:
heart and mind should be like brothers.
Aluda's right, may the sky not crush me!
If you still doubt it, here then, look,
is the Chechen's right arm which I've cut off.
You ought to keep your tongues in their
sheaths,
don't be too ready to open your mouths,
don't be too ready to say of a man,
'he's no good!' — let alone to his face."

He proffered the hand to Aluda,
“Take it and nail it to the wall.”



“It was up to me to cut it off,
would I not then have done it myself?
What you did, Mindia, cannot be right;
such an action ill befits you.
Why should I want it? It's no use to me,
it won't come in handy for a shield;
it won't mow for me in the mountain meadows;
it's no use to me for baling hay.
Take it away, if you've faith in the Lord,
from now on keep it out of my sight.
It's the right hand of a brave young warrior,
my heart is burning with remorse.
Why are the Khevsuri so enraged,
why are they bursting themselves with wrath?
When I next kill a foe, I shall refuse
— out of spite — to cut off his hand.
'It isn't right to kill the foe,
unless his right is hacked off with a knife!'
Woe to your idea of justice,
it is a sin for a man baptized.”

V

The feast days of the Lord had come,
the people were flocking to the shrine,
they want to let the spirit know
what ailed them, who was suffering,

Men and women crowded in
with sheep and oxen; they beseech
and offer the spirit sacrifice
through the offertory doors.



Who then is standing there like a mist,
with his sword that is chased with brass?
He hands a bullock to the priest
and stands still with his head bent down.

“Whose soul do you pray for, Aluda,
to whom do you consecrate this black calf?”
the chieftain-priest asks Aluda;
holding his arm outstretched he says,
“Mighty is the spirit of our shrine,
Gudani shrine especially.

The vassals who serve it are powerful
through God's strength and God himself;
a good young man will please the shrine
and grace is added unto him.

Young men on whom we can rely
bring good fortune to our shrine.
Name me the man to whom you sacrifice
and to him it shall be done.”

He raises the dagger and prepares
to speak the glorifying prayer.

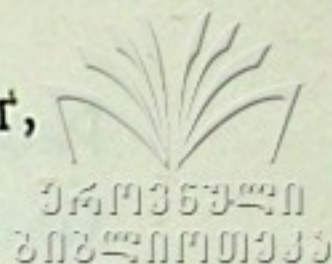
“This beast, Berdia, I sacrifice
to the Chechen I killed the other day.

The name he bore was Mutsali,
he was a son of the unbaptized.
Sacrifice my offering well,
I don't grudge it for his soul,
do it as though for a handsome brother
whom unwittingly I had killed."



"Are you sanctifying an infidel?
This is quite unworthy of you,
no good can come to you from killing
an animal for a Chechen's soul.
This is no part of our fathers' law,
the testament of our forefathers.
You are Christian, come to your senses,
doing this will make you a heathen.
Cast off the devil. How could such words
escape your lips? You have killed
so many others that on your stone wall
there hangs a plaited rope of hands;
some from Lezghi, some from Chechens,
the right hands hang there like a bridge.
You never slew a goat-kid for anyone,
let alone a great black bullock.
How can I implore rest from the Lord
for the soul of a dog, born of dogs?
Better it were that the heavens should fall
or the back of the earth break open beneath me
or the bottomless ocean swallow me up
and I should eat a meal of sand!"

Berdia's face takes on a new colour,
the hue of otherworldly fear.



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“Do not weaken the strength of my offering,
if you believe in the grace of God.

I am a vassal of Gudani shrine,
a Khevsuri of your waters.

We're as good as equal, Berdia,
dwellers in the same high valleys.”

“You're wasting your time in vain, Aluda,
you wear out your lips to no good end.”

Ketelauri was enraged,
his face took on a wolfish hue.

He struck his sabre with his hand,
a beam of sunlight glanced from it,
he swung it over the bullock's neck;
the head rolls off onto the ground,
as Aluda entreats the spirit:

“Hold this not to be a sin from me,
thy child. The unbaptized hero,
Mutsali, have this from my heart.”

Berdia, his hackles rising,
turns around to face the crowd:

“Have you ever heard,” he called out loud,
“such a mockery of our faith?”

Aluda kills the beast himself
in memory of a Chechen's soul.

People, give me your hearts' response.
Gather together, Khevsuri sons,
everyone of you, great and small,
let us do justice, let's smash down
the foundation stones of Aluda's house.
Feel no pity, let yourselves be
the cause of his wife's and children's tears.
Proscribe, expel him; let him gaze
on other lands and skies and clouds.
Off you go, smash down the doors
of the wretch's house and fort.
Set alight, burn down his hayrick,
let the flames reach to the sky.
Drive out his sheep, his cows, his oxen
for the villages' common wealth.
Make his family in Shatili weep,
his girls and mistresses at Gudani.
Do not pity him. Let him feel
the wrath of the spirit of our shrine."

When he heard this, Mindia's eyes
filled with tears. Nothing now
could he do for Aluda.



He folded his arms across his heart,
The Khevsuri, a little drunk,
lift their shields in readiness,
they are to strike at Ketelauri,
with sullen malice their bronze armour clangs.
Then some children came to the fore
of the assembled Khevsuri.
One of them held out in his hand
the gnawed-at bones of a man's right hand.



“Men, I invoke on you the grace
shown by the spirit of the shrine.
Give me the warrior's prize cup to drink,
for I have brought you an enemy's hand.
A raven bore it in his talons,
heading for a crag of rock.
I drew my bow and shot an arrow
stet boldly it flew across the sky.
My shot was true, it pierced its wing,
the raven let its booty drop
from its claw and fall to earth.”

“This is the hand of Mutsali,
which brought about the sentenced passed
and the curse of the Khevsuri,”
Mindia said with an angry voice.
“I was the man who brought it to Aluda,
I made him flush by vexing him.

As Aluda refused to have it,
I flung it to the gorge's depths."



"Take it away," says Berdia,
"If it's not the limb of a heathen dog,
then we're not sons of the Khevsuri
but the devil's vassals or the nymphs'."

The hand that came from Mutsali's arm
was thrown away for a dog to eat.
The cur disdained to open its jaws,
uttering just a piteous howl.

Berdia the chieftain says:
"Khevsuri, see for yourselves.
'Dog doesn't eat dog', men have said
since time began."

The Chechen's right hand
was fixed by the children to a crooked stick
and dragged along across the ground.

VI

Falling snow and raging winds
have covered up the mountain passes,
landslides sweep down through the gorge,
slipping and toppling from the rocks.
The waters' breast and rivers' arms
are bound by ice in bonds of blue.



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საქართველოს



საქართველოს
ბიბლიოთეკა



Ice has piled up with the wind
on the footpaths' narrow trails.



Who finds it irksome to be alive,
who is this traveller setting off?
Someone sweeps the snow in front,
five more follow in his wake.
Suffering from the pangs of hunger,
a pack of wolves howls at the peaks.

“Khevsuri, may you behold
naught but evil,” one woman curses.
“Woe is me, our house and home:
not a stone is still left standing.
On the upper storey pillars
and the fort the crows now squat.”

Aluda's mother says to him,
“Son, slow down. I can't keep up,
neither can Lela your wife walk fast.
The children have started whimpering,
our hands and feet are frozen stiff.
Alas what pathless wastes we tramp,
woe is me, how dark it is.
I wonder, won't the Khevsuri
one day perhaps require your help?
Whose country is going to take us in,
where will we drop when we succumb?”

We have no refuge and no home,
everywhere else we will be cursed.
Never again will we go down
to our home across Shatili gorge.
It has been more that I can bear
to part for ever from my country.
I have turned the colour of a dying man.
My mind is crazed, my knees are folding,
the dark is a pillar in my heart.
Woe to you, our forefathers' graves,
woe to you rocks, that stand so sharp!"



Aluda says to them angrily,
"Women, stop your idle chatter.
Come, follow me, let's move on.
God has appointed this as our lot.
Don't curse the village, lest the shrine
be roused to wrath. Have some sense"

Only once did Aluda want
to turn his head, only once.
"Farewell, mountains, joy of my eyes,
peaks where only the wild goats live.
Farewell, my home, peace be with you,
you stir such pity in my breast.
Farewell, spirit of our shrine,
who gives such power to the men who serve you."

Now the travellers had left forever
the land and waters of their birth.
The mountain peaks seemed to stand by blankly,
only the wind's hoarse howl resounds.

They crossed the ridge to the other side,
the tracks that they gouge in the snow have va-
nished,
the only sound that still is heard
is the sound of a woman's bitter sobbing.

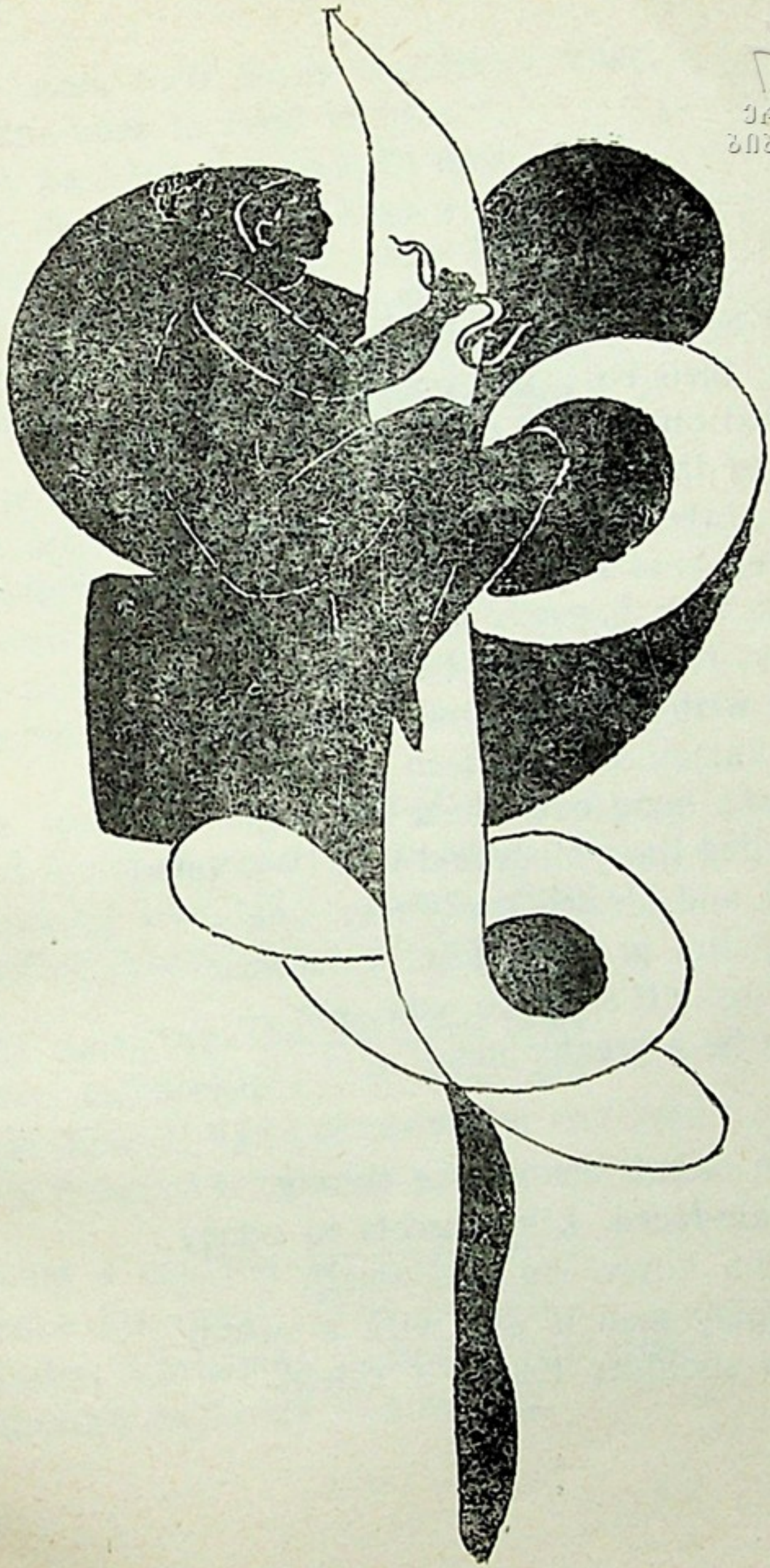


ქართული
ნაციონალური
ბიბლიოთეკა

THE SNAKE-EATER



ქართული
ენების ინსტიტუტი



I

The Khevsuri had come as guests,
Tsika, their host, had brewed the beer.
They sat on the flat earth roof and drank,
downing the beer, cup by cup.
Some played the three-stringed panduri,
and sang loud songs as they plucked the strings,
putting their listeners in the mood
for tales of heroes and their deeds.
Ablaze with worship, the verses spoke
heroic names; the old men smoked,
the smoke hung over them like fog,
they puffed their pipes and told their tales,
invoked and blessed the heroes' souls,
recalled and praised them, to arouse
the young: "It's up to you now —
who can be a greater man!"

One man stands among the throng,
quiet, pale-faced. Like insects to honey
round him hover big and small.
This gloomy man is girt with a sword,
from his shoulder hangs a shield.

Two men, their heads uncovered, kneel
on one knee in front of him.

They pass the cups and fill them up
with deep black beer from a giant trough.

“Drink up, Mindia,” they say.

“It’s good strong beer, with plenty of hops.
Give us a story, for heaven’s sake,
something artful and good to hear.”

“I’m too drunk to tell you tales,
the drink has overcome my wits.
Let it keep for another time,
if death is not to call me yet.”

He raised the last drink to his mouth,
poured it down and drained the bowl.

He had escaped captivity
and found it sweet to be again
drinking beer, like many others,
getting drunk with his fellow men.

His name was Mindia: the tales
were unbelievable — it was said
that wizards had captured him and held
him prisoner for twelve years.

Being a captive, far from home,
broke his spirit. Time ran on,
Easter, Christmas passed many times,
Mindia’s captivity had no end.



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Slavery sapped his will to live,
he longed to be released from life.
His mind recalled his snow-capped peaks,
deep-shaded gorges, winding tracks,
his mother, father and his brothers —
all of them mourning his ill-starred fate.
His austere house seemed paradise lost.
Many a time he heatedly begged
God and his shrine to come to their aid.



At last he said: "I'll kill myself
rather than live a life like this."
He saw the cauldron the wizards put
over the fire to cook their meal.
He knew that they were cooking snake:
this was a food they often ate.
By sorcery the wizards could
eat snake flesh and stay alive.
Mindia thought, if he ate snake
he would be free of his troubled life.

With stealth and loathing he took a slice,
ate it, and then the heavens looked down
with merciful eyes on Mindia.
His spirit flooded back renewed,
his bones were clothed in flesh made new.
Sight was given his heart and eyes,
as though hitherto he were blind and deaf.

From that day on he understood
what birds sang, plants and animals spoke
when they were glad or suffering.



Everything that the Lord had made
had language: all was within the law.

The prisoner felt his nature changed.
Stunned, he grasped that snake-flesh was
the ploy and secret of the wizards.
Though they had said, "Eat some, Mindia,"
they kept their wisdom in the flesh of snakes,
knowing that Mindia loathed its taste.

The captive had the wizards' wisdom,
Sky, earth and forests spoke to him.
His heart was closed to evil alone:
every other wizard's trick
he learnt. What can he fear,
though he be struck by thunderbolts.
The wizards raged when they discovered
a simple peasant had grown wise.
Captivity holds no more terrors,
nor do the tricks the wizards play.
Sooner or later Mindia hopes
to give them the slip and get away.

Quick as a bullet, wise as a snake,
Mindia is worshipped: he comforts all
Pshavia and Khevsuria.
Queen Tamara often says,



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“As long as Mindia stays with me
and the mountain tribes remain with him,
my enemies cannot weaken me,
however fiercely they attack.”

Mindia has stratagems to crush,
utterly defeat the enemy:

if he reaches the wounded in time,
they forgo the sorrow of death.

His incomparable healing herbs
cure a warrior hacked in two.

Wars cannot lessen Mindia's troops:
his army's numbers never fall.

Far and wide the stories spread
of his adventures and his powers.

II

But when spring is in the air,
the land wakes up; freedom and joy
waft everywhere, young buds appear,
the green grass hugs the flowers close,
then Mindia, all eyes and ears,
roams the mountains and the fields.
Every creature, plant he meets,
he greets. Nature calls out, “Hail,”
decked out in flags. The flowers throw
their proud and painted heads up high.
As one they clamour, “Long live Mindia.”

The trees begin to rustle their leaves,
the grass and herbs sway in the breeze,
each herb sets up a murmur, a din,
“I am the cure for this disease.”

The next calls, “I am that ill’s cure.”
Mindia plucks them, takes them off
before the morning dew has gone.

It is as though the flowers think
nothing of their seething life,
so long as they may heal disease.
They yearn to be of use to man,
to flesh and bone beset by ills.
Thus act the flowers, but the trees
weep and Mindia alone
understands their moans and cries.

Their weeping made his life upset:
he took his axe up to a tree
Said, “This is the one that I must fell,”
Swung the axe and in mid-swing
Heard the tree beseech him, “No,”
don’t kill me, Mindia, I beg,
don’t blot out my life, don’t stun
a helpless and defenceless tree.”
His arms went limp, he blankly gazed
up at the sky and turned towards
another tree: it moaned still more.



Empty-handed, he made for home,
he could not cut up wood to burn
and, not to have a cold, chill hearth,
he gathers hay or withered stubble
or straw or dung. He now makes do
with any fallen twigs he finds,
nevertheless gives thanks to God,
when the day begins and when it ends.

He urges others: "Men, don't do
a sinful thing; don't fell trees,
make do with stubble or dry twigs."
No-one listens: his advice
seems to them a madman's speech.
"God made trees to meet our needs."
And to this day, who thinks twice
to spare the aspen or the beech.

III

When he starts to reap the corn,
his mind is utterly deranged,
his shirt hangs open as he cuts
one stem here, another there.
He tramples down the field of corn,
crushes the stalks and lays them waste;
while his arms have strength to swing
he whirls around, a human awl;
at last, tired out, he folds up, falls
and prostrate sprawls down on the earth.

Should you ask him why he behaves
like this, the answer comes:

“You cannot grasp what you have said,
that’s why you think my actions mad.
If only you knew, how they themselves
plead with me to mow them down.

You should see ten thousand stems
offer themselves of their own accord,
set up an uproar on seeing me
approach like a God, sickle in hand:

“I’m the one to cut down, Mindia,
I beg you, do not pass me by.”

“No, me,” another calls out,” for
I am more frightened by the sky.

When I see a patch of mist

my body crumples, limp with fear.

Woe should the hail slash at my throat.”

Still louder, yet another flower

cries out: “Do not abandon me,

I pray God give you strength and joy.”

They drive me mad with furious sounds,

I am bewildered with compassion.

Two hands, two eyes are not enough

to take them all; and I myself

am on the brink of breaking down.

Hailstones make the corn afraid,

as men fear being left to starve,

and yet the sickle cuts a swathe

far more deadly than the hail!



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The ripe and golden ears of grain
save themselves for men to use,
they do not wish to rot and waste
for crows and kites to peck at them.
That is why they urge us on,
in one loud roar, to reap them down.
They yearn to be our food and bread,
to sate the hungry so that we
can pray for rest for the deceased
and call upon the heavenly powers.”

IV

The sacred shrine of Gudani
draws in pilgrims by the score.
To mark the day, the Khevsuri
celebrate by drinking beer.
A host of people gathers round,
their elders argue many things.
Some tell the story of others' lives,
some their own adventures tell,
of manly deeds, of guns and swords.
Praised is the man whose sword will cut
chain-mail. Deference to him
who talks of battle and of war.
Meanwhile a quarrel is flaring up
about the snake-eater and his powers,
whether men committed a sin
if trees were felled or grass was scythed.

Chalkhia speaks to the gathering:

“Your thoughts amaze me, I’ve said before
many a time, I say it again:

if trees and rocks have language too,
why don’t they speak to us as well?
Mindia, I say, has concocted a lie
to lead us astray. We’re men as good
as he. We’ve ears to hear.

I’ve nothing to hide; he can listen too
and think in his heart whether I’m right.
Let’s say that it is good to feel
pity for trees, stones, herbs and beasts...

But killing a man outweighs all these,
though he be everyone’s enemy:
then we ought never to kill a man.

Listen now to what I say:

I have seen Mindia pile up a heap
of enemy bodies hacked with his sword.

What is he up to, if his faith
forbids the taking of others’ lives?

But we kill anyone who breaks
our peace, takes our wives
steals our patrimony or offends
against the laws that we hold dear.
Not even God can then condemn us
for striking back at an enemy,
nor for felling, in order to live,
the forest beeches and the elms.”



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“No, Chalkhia’s right, he’s not mistaken,
Mindia is lying, that is clear.

He has built up a thousand falsehoods
like a stone wall before our eyes,”
said some of the crowd, hesitantly.

“If, God forbid, we followed your teaching,
what would become of us, how would we live?
Why should these things be sinful, when
the Lord did not tell us they were a sin?
Mindia does wrong if this is how
he wants to order our villages’ life.
Help and profit, not ruin and harm,
are what we hope for from our betters...”
Such, in the end, were the common thoughts
uttered by the Khevsuri gathering...

Mindia was sitting there,
tears were flowing from his eyes.
No-one knew what made him suffer,
his eyes seemed fixed on something apart;
deaf to the arguments, he awoke
only when Berdia broke his thoughts:

“Mindia, why don’t you lend us an ear?
Tell me why you are crying. Not
that weeping — yours or anyone’s —
surprises me, though you should change
nine times in the blinking of an eye
from merriment to bitter tears.”

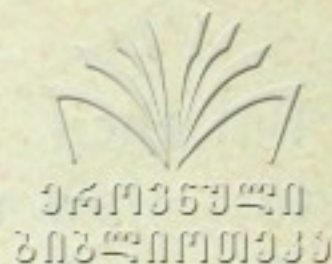


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Then the whole Khevsuri mob
turned towards the snake-eater...



“Speak then”, once more Berdia says.
“What grief grieves you?”

“Over there
two birds are sitting. I have listened.”
He pointed his finger and showed them where —
(two birds, with wings drooped down
sat on the smooth stones under an ash).

“One is telling the other the news
how its children came to die;
the mother bird is on the left,
the bringer of bad news on the right.
God protect us, how it rends the heart
when a parent weeps for her children’s death!”

All the assembled Khevsuri
stare at the birds. Then one of them,
as though overcome by a drowsy sleep,
toppled off the polished stone,
its soul departed. To see it die
left them unable not to believe.
Khevsuri stared at one another,
their eyes wide open and aghast:
“Can such knowledge have been gained
by human forces?” They were convinced
of Mindia’s powers, for the bird
had died in front of everyone.

But their minds have not the strength
to follow up what their hearts have sensed:
they still scythe grass and plants, kill game
and stoke their fires with living wood.
Well, what would turn a fox's heart
against the taste of chicken meat,
and who would sit down by the hearth
with no log burning on the grate?

V

Again and again the Khevsuri clash
with Lezghi, Persians, Chechens, Turks.
Each time, victorious, their troops return
strengthening the walls of Georgia,
sewing a shroud for her enemies;
a people wants but little, if
it sees its enemies subdued.
While Mindia leads their hosts in battle,
no harm comes to the Khevsuri,
no-one dares now to attack,
peace and quiet reign everywhere...
Blest is he, whose land gives him thanks.

VI

A house is perched on a rugged crag,
its flat roof pressed against the sky,
gigantic mountains all around



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thrust their massive bodies up,
their sharpened edges iced with snow.
Their might and strength can never tire.
Once you have seen them, then your eyes
must gaze for ever on their beauty,
a beauty even greater now
than when they seethe with greenery.
Though the sun should light their breasts,
the avalanche comes thundering down
and the gorges begin to cough
like a man sick with consumption.
But the heavens bless them for
their loveliness. The cool breeze swirls
moaning often round their peaks.
In summer thunderous clouds light up
their candles with their flint and steel.
Here no-one ploughs or tills the soil,
nor does the sower scatter seed;
only the wild goats leap about,
sharpening their horns against the rocks,
And the bare and sullen rocks,
arising from a bottomless pit,
neither fatten on the corpses
nor think of any living spirit —
indifferent, unfeeling, surly
they scowl as they survey the world.

A tower is built onto the house,
blackened with smoke, shattered by muskets.

What can give that tower peace,
so long as enemies surround it,
so long as human beings thirst
for vengeance. Many enemy bullets
have spent their force on the tower's breast!

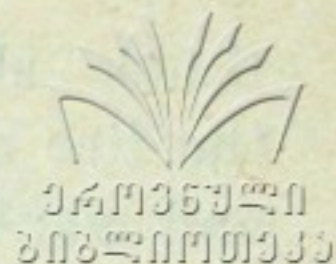


Sounds of angry quarrelling,
of fury, curses, come from the house:
this is no brawl — only two voices.
Inside, a fire burns on the hearth,
the flames are fuelled with forest wood.
A woman, her children next to her,
stands on one side. On the other,
a Khevsuri man talks alone,
bitterly bewailing many things.

Husband

“I curse the day I married you!
Before that day, not a man alive
upon the earth could equal me.
All thanks to you, I have become,
damned woman, a stinking clumsy thing.
What am I now? Am I a man
worthy to walk beneath the heavens?
What herb exists to turn me back
into the man I was before?
My life is useless; I am less
than black rocks broken from a crag.

You have given me an incurable ill,
because of you I have sinned against God,
I look on my children as a plague,
they have made me betray my faith,
now I cry by day and night
for the flesh and spirit I have lost.”



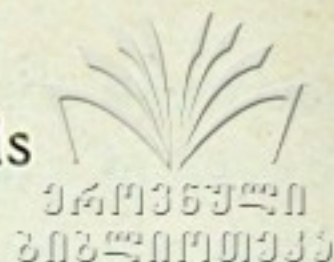
Wife

“Why do you put your blame on me,
did I ask to be your wife?
You wouldn't let me move a foot,
made me sorry: “Mzia, I love you.”
You let the tears run from your eyes,
and for my sake, you burst in
confronted my brothers with a sword.
You found me sweeter than sugar; why
do I taste so bitter now?
Why lament begetting children,
why speak reproachfully to God?
Who ever cast out wife and children
on others' mercy? Why hold us
to blame for the changes in your mood?”

Husband

“Because, you feeble-minded woman,
you kept on whining, you complained;
'My children suffer from the cold',
you shrieked as if they lay there dead.

'Look at Berdia's stack of wood,
the fire he's lit.' You pointed out fools
and wanted me to live like them.



In simple language you led me on,
you longed for the good life and you baked
a poisoned cake for me to eat.

And little by little, with each day
I slowly drifted away from my faith,
sly as a fox, I have felled
a plane tree, though they pleaded,
"Why do you do this, Mindia,
you whom we thought to be our friend?"
The next day I cut down two, and so
I've placed a stone heart in my breast,
I have asked God to give me strength
not to feel anything any more.

Wild goat meat you wanted. If you heard
one had been killed, how you pained
my heart with your incessant whines:
'How can children grow to be brave
if they don't get meat to eat?
I've never heard of anyone's child
brought up like this'. "Oh I wish
you had dropped dead, before those words
were said. I yielded, slaughtered game,
fattened and pleased you with carcasses.

You rejoiced in your children, whereas I
was left distraught. Better for me
to be struck by thunder than suffer this change;
I can't retrieve what I have lost,
not by any stratagem."

Wife

"Why should such a thing distress you,
why do you torment yourself,
why don't others think it wrong
to fell the trees or slaughter game?"

Husband

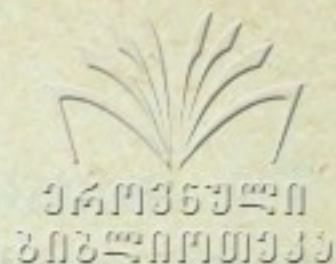
"No, you don't know, you bird-brained woman,
shallow, unfeeling chatterbox;
of life on earth you understand
only things that give you pleasure!
You don't see why I should mourn
the powers and knowledge I've forfeited,
when not a single one remains
in my possession. Idiot!
You don't see how a dead man knows
that he has died, since he is dead;
nor how a corpse might mourn itself,
or the horror of its state?
Show me an existence that
compares with the bitterness of mine.

Now I am like that same dead man,
what pain do others feel from death?
They rest, their senses sleep unfeeling.
How can I be of help to my land
now that I am empty of knowledge;
the flowers speak no more to me,
nor do I understand their being:
could any man bring on himself
catastrophes as bad as mine?
I cannot understand the birds,
I cannot understand the corn,
nor have I heard, after this,
the greenery's sweet voice of greeting.
But this apart, in every way
I have lost my former worth.
Whether I stay among the mountains,
whether I go down to the valleys,
nobody will give a straw
for something as useless as I am now.

No more can I help my country
and its army hurl back invaders,
for the skills that once I had
have left my head. If only my star
had died in heaven long ago.

Hitherto, fear has stopped
the enemy breaking through our gates,
but if they hear of this, they'll come

to turn our land to earth and dust
and they will make a wilderness
where once our homes and towers stood.



I cannot live to see all this;
your days, too, have reached their end.
Because of you I've lost my insight
and I have sold my sacred faith...

Am I to let my country perish
so that you can stay alive?

Why should I live or keep you living
if all my soul is mortally sick,
how can I have the face to live
or justify myself to God?

I have been humbled before the world,
before the living and the dead.

What do I need my armour for,
what use have I for my sword,
if I lack the strength to kill
an enemy that I've struck down?

The goodness that springs up from the earth
is to me a loan and debt.

How am I to swallow bread
how am I to drink its water?"

He rose, his arms clasped to his breast,
he rushed out to the open air
and when he looked at the lofty peaks,
bitterly began to sob.



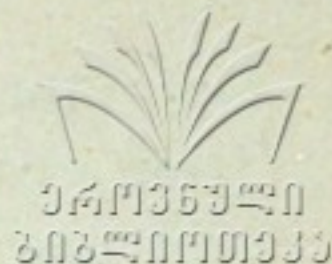
The mountains dry out, and the torrents
 come rushing downhill with a roar,
 falling rocks crash down like dragons,
 petering out as they reach the gorge.
 The limpid dropping of the rain
 splatters on the alpine daisies.
 The flowers glitter in the fields,
 Queen Tamara's very eyes.
 How lovely is the heliotrope
 growing from the crumbling rock-edge.
 Travellers from the other side
 cross the mountains safe and sound.
 Sheep and cattle dot the slopes
 like a beautiful woman's beauty spots,
 mountains and valleys after the pains
 of winter have come to life again.
 Many a pitiful sorrow besets
 our land; we see one at best,
 our eyes must overlook the rest.

The villages are in uproar; men
 loudly call out to each other,
 "Go and tell him, where is he,
 Mindia, the snake-eater?
 A Chechen army's invading us,
 they've broken down Arguni bridge,
 a clash with the enemy is at hand."

They were ready, eager to fight,
as restless as the swelling sea.
Everywhere the sunlight flashed
on sword-blades and on rifle barrels.
Much time had passed since the Khevsuri
had mown down troops of enemies,
trampled over ruthlessly,
laid waste their camps. Thirsting for war
they could barely wait for day to break.
Everyone's heart was full of thoughts:
whoever was first to kill a chief,
cut off his head and then his right hand
would come home to fame and a bowl of wine
encircled with candles at the shrine
— a brave warrior, whose family name
would everlastingly be praised.
The women take their children off
to fortified towers. They have left
for their husbands and their sons
leather bags with food and drink.

VIII

Twilight comes. The gorges darken
into blackness, and they seem
as though sick to the human eye.
The lofty mountains and the rocks,
the river Aragvi's proud free source,
everywhere is disconsolate,
I can see them quietly weep.



Only the couriers boldly run
from village to village, calling out:
“Anyone missing from the army,
may he perish with all his kin.”



No light, no fire can now be seen,
the shepherd's whistling dies away,
not even a needle is left outside.
The villages shelter everyone
behind the walls of fortress-towers,
their treasures and their sheep and cows
are gathered into secret places.

In the shrine of Khakhmati
a pale fire solitarily flickers;
lit candles stand on the dry stone wall,
the flames reach up to the tall ash trees,
sometimes flaring like the dawn,
sometimes waning, sinking down
like a man sick unto death,
dying away in anguish and grief.

Two men alone in the open air
stand at the shrine. One clasps
a bloodstained dagger in a bloody hand;
before him lies a slaughtered calf,
collapsed and sprawling on its side.

Berdia (the chieftain-priest)

“God show you mercy, Mindia,
for your heart and ritual,

may you hope to have from God
the thought behind your offering.
May your name remain unblemished
while your loins are girt with a sword!



You are the hope of Khevsuria,
I pray the shrine give you its blessing.
Lead your army out and back,
always victorious! Isn't this
the tenth calf that you've sacrificed
this year; you've killed all your cattle:
for what do you implore so much,
what sinful things can you have done?
One, perhaps two, suffice for the rite,
your imprecations go too far...
May my foolish words not offend God!"

Mindia

"Two pairs of oxen, three or four cows
I still have; I'll offer them
if only I can heal my wounds."

Berdia

"What wounds, man? None of us
has heard of them. Others' wounds
you heal by the thousand, I believe."

Mindia

“Berdia, this is something else.
I cannot talk of it easily.
Easier for men to talk of others’
than about their own defeats.
A man with a bulging purse, you know,
cannot open it everywhere.
In a day or two you’ll understand
when the messenger comes over the pass.”

Berdia

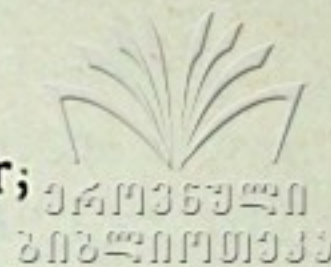
“Khevsuria’s fate depends on you.
You are our hope, our trust, because
you can speak with God himself!
The shrine’s victorious spirit goes
with you, everyone everywhere knows.
May your destiny not be doomed,
by the powers of Saint George.
And if the Lord will not protect you,
then may he leave us all to perish.”

Lifting the chalice in his hand,
Berdia begins again:

“O shrine of St. George, whom we magnify,
show this man mercy. We pray to you,
which God created for our aid,
not to let one single man
of your enemies be left alive.
In a day or so we have to meet
the enemy in deadly combat.
While you still live and stay with us,
what evil can befall our men?”



When he had finished, hot tears welled from Mindia's eyes. He stopped his prayer; said, "Pay no heed," and turned away, to wipe the tears away with his hand.



He fell before the inner sanctum, like a straw or wand scythed down for wicker work. Tears fill his eyes as he prays. The sense is hard to catch; never had Berdia seen a man so burningly pray at any time — he is aghast.

It is the agony of mourning, anything but a request for grace from a heart that is at peace.

Tears pour down; chain-mail creaks and the sound is mingled with voiceless sobs. He goes down on his knees, praying still.

Time runs on. Berdia adds, "Hear him, shrine of Khakhmati, let his pleas be not in vain, order everything for the best."

IX

The clouds burst at midnight, the rain swelled the streams, they smashed the gates of boulders leading to the gorges.

Now no messages could pass from the mountains to the valley.

The green grass felt again and again
the teardrops falling from the clouds.
The candles are out, flicker no more
on the rocks of Khakhmati.



Nowhere can the chieftain be seen,
nor the man who prayed and wept:
just the dry stone sanctuary walls
survey the world with sullen wrath
while the Aragvi batters the rocks,
disconsolate and plaintively.

X

Night made them weep, but the morning saw
the mists fall asleep on the mountain tops,
with folded wings and shrouded heads.
The mists which sometimes enliven us
with life-giving moisture are the same
that sometimes make us curse our fate
for the evils that pour down.
The groves by the river, the gorges too
yesterday strewn with fallen stones,
are now overflowing with greenery,
and the tower, plunged deep in thought,
gazes down on the valley sides.

Women appear in the tower,
like flowers that dot the high slopes;
they talk of one thing only:
can the Khevsuri win the fight?



Restlessly watching the groves
through the loopholes, the women beg
the might of God and the shrine
to come to the help of their men.
From here they can see all around,
the mountains and each mountain ridge.
Not the tiniest creature or insect
can hide from the keen human eye.
Some women are talking, sitting
on planks and knitting stockings;
they too are uttering a prayer,
a holy prayer for their homeland.

Sandua

“You, Mzia, are far more distressed
than anyone else. Fair-eyed beauty,
do you miss your husband, can't you
bear to think of his being killed;
you must know that only in war
can Mindia find fortune: and the man
who can kill him has yet to be born!
What of me? Of my menfolk
so many have gone off to fight:
my husband, all three of my brothers
would not leave their friends in the lurch
But none can outfight your husband,
he'll do what he has one of old,
striking a blow at his enemy
as always, for he who has killed
the proud antlered stag, will do so again.

Mzia



“But woe, if his prowess is gone;
he has dreamt such frightening dreams,
a whole year now he’s been a sick man,
picking and tearing at his flesh.
“I’ll wipe you all out”, he would yell
though somehow these words remained threats.
He has clung to the shrine and has killed
all the cattle we owned as an offering.
He’d come home and spurn all food,
no matter how often I asked him.
How many times have I seen him
crying quietly alone, like a child.
“I have lost a treasure without price”,
he kept on saying to himself.
He spent whole nights up on the roof.
blankly staring at the sky.
Arriving or leaving, not a soul
got a word from him any more.
He didn’t want guests; as for us,
he hated the sight of his family.
Could worry have ’urned in that short time
his beard and hair grey? Many times
stealthily, silently, in the dark
I’ve listened, but could not penetrate
the inner loneliness of his mind.
I fully sensed that he was crying
for himself and for his people.

“I’m no more use”, he secretly wept,
“to my homeland.” Lately, however,
he has treated us like his enemy.”



Sandua

“Your words are the first that we have heard
of this. The very same Mindia
is in my eyes a shining sun.

If you repeat it a thousand times,
the country still won’t give you credit.

I am astonished you have not told
other people what you’ve just said.

What sort of knowledge was he mourning,
what knowledge was he grieving for
and, as for you, what have you done
to pain his heart in such a way
that he should reach out for his sword
to put to death his wife and children?”

Mzia

Simply, — these were his very words,
may my children die if I tell a lie.’

(She laid her hands on her children who
were both of them standing by her side:)

‘I am caught up in sin thanks to you,
I’ve done what I should not have done,
I’ve slaughtered game and cut up wood,
as though these things were ordinary, right.

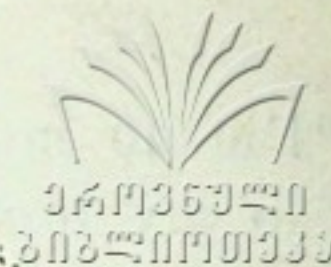
The flowers no longer speak to me,
nor the stars in the sky at night.
Both the great knowledge and the powers,
which the Lord conferred on me,
I have lost by heeding you.
Why do I wear a sword at my waist?
He said a thousand things like this,
raging, scolding me to my face,
two or three times I was lucky to live,
he raised his gun to fire at me.
Perhaps he still felt a glimmer of hope,
he implored the shrines, he tried to work...
And as he felt sorry for us as well,
in the end he spared our lives.”

Sandua

“If indeed what you’ve said is true,
you are the reason he fell into sin;
let your tongue be cut out and you be hanged
from a hook high up, underneath
let a fire be lit to lick you with flames.
You have sinned against our land
and brought us also into sin.

Mzia

“If I’ve done wrong, then I deserve
punishment; but was it a sin
for me to suggest that he should work?
A man who wants a family
should have the grace to provide for them.



We women know what our duties are —
what do we know of war or armour?
He shouldn't have needed to be told,
that's what makes a man a man.



Why should the guilt be laid on a woman
who's committed no sin, done no harm
and never stolen anything.
Where, by what grace, when was it said
that one should atone for another's sin?
Nevertheless, he had premonitions
which saddened him, unlucky wretch.
Sensing what was about to come,
he let loose his anger on us in the end.
Last night I dreamt a dream that bodes ill,
I wish I knew what is to pass!"

Sandua

"Tell me, Mzia, what you dreamt,
it may come true but happily
and we shan't be abandoned by God
to perish."

Mzia

"I dreamt something bad,
horrible, heart-rending, Sandua,
that shook my body and my spirit
and filled my mind with dread and loathing.
The streams, I dreamt, came tearing down,

like snorting demons, smashing up
the mountains and valleys as they went,
an upheaval started, a roaring noise
then a thundering like the end of the world,
the collapse of the heavens and the earth.



The peaks of the mountains crumbled down
and tumbled to the gorges below,
mountains and rocks crashed like guns,
the sky turned black as blackest pitch,
the dark air swirled, a squall began,
pitch rained down onto the earth,
hot droplets poured down and the streams
ran so horribly and violently,
people shouted from thousands of places,
'help us, we are perishing'.

And indeed I watch the water
carry down people, a shield, a sword,
the fort disintegrates all over,
the houses, great stone walls all fall;
all that is missing in this sad sight
is a woman to stand there and lament.

We seemed ourselves to be out of trouble,
as though we had escaped unharmed...
Then I saw us too cast out,
swept away from house and home.
The streams burst into us from above,

tore out the fort's foundation stones:
the fort toppled down to the Aragvi's bed,
the waters took our upper storey
and our house pursued us into the torrent.
I try to call, 'help'; my tongue won't move,
I clasp my children to my heart,
I call on the shrine of God for help,
I tried to get away from the water.
I struck out for a bank of dry land.
I covered up the children's faces
with a corner of my black veil.
Every time I came near the bank,
foul and fearful faces of men
as black as tar would meet my eyes.
They grabbed me, flung me back in the water
and, as they threw me, shouted out,
'Where are you going? Off, with the water!
that is God's command to you.'

And then I saw in front of us
the water sweeping my husband along.
He turned to face me and he spoke
(he had a sweet voice, a tender voice):
'I beg you, Mzia, to forgive me
for cursing you, for angering you.
I have deserved the trouble I'm in,
do not let my children suffer,
I beg you, look after them well for me'.
I wish my enemies could undergo
what I went through in last night's dream."

Sandua

"So you couldn't escape, you were rushed away?"

Mzia

"No, Sandua, we were swept away,
mothers, children, all of us."

Sandua

"May no evil ever befall you,
God protect you and leave you unharmed."

All the women

"They are coming, the army is coming.
Mark them, God, with the sign of the cross.
Mzia, get up, there is your man,
following the standard-bearers,
shoulder to shoulder, like the rising moon."

One woman

"Over there I see my boys,
a mother's love give them strength...
Oh what fine good-looking lads they are,
who can think of them among the dead?
God, may I never have to search
for news of them as long as I live!"

Second woman

“Look, there is Untsrua, my boy,
following them, by their side.
How handsome they are, walking along:
a mother’s love give them strength.”

Unmarried girl

“A sister’s love be with Totia,
I can’t spot him anywhere in the throng.
I’ve seen him... I barely knew him
but for his figure and his gait.
His stallion is chafing at the bit,
Totia’s straining with his arms.”

Second girl

“Our fearless Ushisha is close to him,
look how he’s spurring Lurja on.
If it comes to a hand-to-hand fight
he won’t cower or hang back.
If only I could watch him when
he raises up his shield in attle!”

First girl

“I couldn’t bear to look at my brother,
I’d find it suddenly hard to breathe,
I’d turn my face the other way,
I’d close my eyes too tight to see!”

Second girl

“Not me! I wish my brother nobility, wellbeing, fame, as much as I should want, Zekua, a candle in the hours of darkness or as the tired and hungry want rest and food. It’s good when all are talking of one’s brother’s qualities.”



First girl

“Shvena, who would not want that, who would be so feeble-minded? But a sister’s eyes burn with pain at seeing her brother facing death.”

Second girl

“Who will concede him fame without risk, if he doesn’t do what must be done?”

All the women

“God, come to their aid. O shrines, go on ahead, protect the horsemen, let us see them again, as whole, untouched and safe as we see them now.”

Many felt, stirring their hearts, fears of a thousand different sorts.

Let no-one however be amazed:
we are but human; in times of fear
it's human that we should be afraid
for those we love and hold most dear...



XI

The army lined up on the mountainside,
it gathered together on the field.
The flash and glitter of guns and swords
outdoes the very rays of the sun.
Boulders broken by horses' hooves
roll downhill. Here they began
to argue where best to meet the foe:
should they descend onto the plain,
should they join battle on the ridge?
All dismount, then hands on swords,
they fix their eyes on Mindia,
waiting for his answer, but
when he refused to utter a word
the Khevsuri spoke as with one voice:

The army

“We have always taken your counsel
and never have we come to harm;
Tell us briefly how we must act.”

Mirdia

“Khevsuri, I can't give you advice,
I'm no more use as counsellor,

those times are gone, as have my wits.
Now good advice is difficult.
You are many, weigh up, decide,
gather your thoughts together as one.
I, however, must fight alone:
that is why I've come to the field;
when the people made me their leader
they did not choose me to lead for ever."



The army

"The wrath of God and his shrine
fall on anyone moving a foot
in battle, save as you command,
though the enemy's fists should strike him,
let him die and his mouth be filled
with the sticky clay of a chilly grave!"

Mindia

"Very well. What choice have I?
I did not want to help advise.
I shall speak, since you have bound me
by such an oath and such a curse.
This is my counsel: go and meet
the Chechens in the Poisoned Gorge."

The warriors whispered to one another
in dismay. Downcast by the place
chosen to attack the Chechens,



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what could they do? Nothing now
for the words they spoke, the oath they swore
bound them to listen and obey.

They had to go and fight in the gorge
which Mindia's choice had rested on,
though not one man be left alive,
though all should die there on the field.

No more could be said. Setting off
they lifted their banners up ahead.
Their step was light, as easy as
the flight of the peregrine falcon's wings,
and the gleaming steel of the heads of their spears
bore along a ray of sunlight.

XII

War has raged for two whole days
over the mountains: torments,
harsh struggles, a clash of tigers
and lions. A rope of blood runs
from the mountains to the river banks.
The God of the shrine cannot leave
the outcome unsettled, one side must win.

Five or six Khevsuri men,
Their faces blackened from the fight,
carried in their arms a man,
bound up with a kabalak hood.
They brought him around the mountain-side,
flung him down where the ground was flat
and showered him with angry words.

The khevsuri



“Man, why try so hard to kill yourself,
do you want death before it's time?
When you press into the enemy host,
can you not see what they are about?
So far we have trampled them down,
now they are turning on us, perhaps
we may devise another plan, Mindia,
we'll try, for darkness has overtaken us,
to do what we have to by tonight.”

They spoke and straight away turned back,
they fled like thieves. Their swords were raised,
lances clasped ready in their hands.

Difficult, if we think of them,
are the moments of life and death.
What could they do? Shame would be hard:
they'd have been put in women's clothes,
been given kerchiefs instead of hats,
had they done less than ought to do,
had they been cowardly, underhand.

The prisoner gnashes his teeth and tries
to free his tight-bound hands. For hours
he struggles, rolls over the ground,
hot with effort and misery.
He wants to die with his brothers now.
They have suffered losses, are short of men
and cannot hope for reinforcement.



Twilight thickened into night,
the captive, exhausted, has his wish:
both arms freed, he rises up.
And then he saw in the willages
fires — a bad omen. He understood
what must have happened, for no more
did he have need of second sight.
He withered, pale as mistletoe,
but not a tear welled in his eyes.
The tears were pooling in his heart
and overflowing into his arms.

Saying no more, he took off his hat,
put his thumb on the hilt of his sword,
drew it and pressed the point to his heart.
Blood, like a spurting spring, splashed out,
gushing from the wound in his chest.
The moon shed its light upon the ridge,
where alone the wild goats live,
and fixed in its beams the suicide
with the hue of a mourning girl.

And the soft breeze wafted to and fro,
carefree, singing a peaceful song.
It brushed its wings on the sword's sharp point,
which jutted out, a bright red tongue
stained by the juice of the human chest.
It began to frolic over the green,
whistling cheerfully, proud and free.

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Важа-Пшавела

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(на английском языке)

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