

Sulkhan Zhordania

APRICOTS IN BLOOM

*I have given and taken bribes,
I have been in the company of thieves and prostitutes,
But I have always known that my place was in the temple.*

I found most difficult to express with adequate force that shiver of emotion which the herald of freedom sent through my body. The three hour restless drive through the age-old Bulgarian wood, full of fear, fatigue and exasperation, tapered off to a shimmering point and was no more. My cornflower princess bringing me home from Germany came softly to the striped bar and stopped. My whole body tense, I leaned back with my hands clasped on the wheel and pressed the buzzer. The loud, long drawn-out wail made no impression on the guy in the pea-green uniform. I pulled the lever of the brake and opened the door. A puff of wind blew a faint cool spray in my exhausted face.

---What's the matter? I said in English, my heart thumping terribly. Why don't you let me in?

You could escape from beggars, thieves, racketeers, maniacs, hitchhikers; you could escape from prostitutes and road police, there was no escape from tax collectors. All the scum of the world seemed to swarm on the frontiers. Suddenly, I felt sorry for Jesus for sharing a meal with them.

He was short and slim, but his slimness did not mean that he was devoid of physical strength. Harsh and agile, with soot-black eyes and shoulders a little bent in an instinctive aggressiveness, he looked like a falcon swooping down on a pray. His eyes flashed with a hideous light as Turkish words came out of his distorted mouth with outrage so violent that he almost spat them into my face. I did not have to understand the language. His shaking body spoke for him effectively. I did not think I would be mistaken if I said that the message I got could be put in the following way:

---What the hell do you want of me? How come you have turned up at this particular place? Get your ass out of here. Go back to where you've come from and never, ever dare to turn round!

There are foreheads that proclaim their owner's bad temper. The guy's forehead was like that---just a narrow lined stripe of amber skin between bushy black eyebrows and cropped hair of the same colour. I have always been inclined to give a special psychological importance to people's foreheads. If there is a criminal tendency, it will reveal itself there. The man looked like one of those outlaws who have a parole officer keeping an eye on them. Who would tell what his excited imagination was picturing? Perhaps his friend or relative my compatriots had fleeced, robbed or killed, and how rich, godless and brazen I was to drive a car like this across his God-fearing country? Oh, it was, and still remains a source of great and unfading wonder to me.

The closer I was to my homeland, the more impossible it was to disguise my identity, to pretend to be English, and I had no doubt now that the guard guessed where I was from. Clouds seemed to gather over my dream of stepping on that unattainable soil. The idea of

going back through the Bulgarian ordeal was mortifying. Could it be fate scheming? I thought I would probably have a breakdown if I stayed any longer on the threshold of redemption. I was afraid that the horrible insane resentment that nearly palsied me might endanger my journey, and desperately devising a means to escape the snare, I heard my voice telling my tormentor:

---Look here! I am not one of those snivelling wretches who buy and sell cars. I've bought it for myself. I'm a writer, a professor. If you keep me out, I'll go straight to the Turkish embassy in Sofia and complain to the ambassador about you. I'll go talk to the police, I'll go...

Who can understand how dejected a motorist gets when custom-house after custom-house he has to crush down his feelings into himself. One man's honey is somebody else's poison indeed. If the threat of complaining to the embassy had somehow worked with the Czechs, this man did not give a shit about it. His eyes were telling me that he was going to listen to my fucking English for a while, but he was under a tremendous pressure and may blow up at any time. And he did blow up! Organized physically with a kind of violence, he took a tremendous kangaroo leap at me thrusting his right hand with wide-spread fingers into my face.

---Vaiv andrid dolas! He yelled.

This was immediately followed by a curtsy-like gesture saying I would be welcome to the country if I paid the sum.

---Five hundred dollars? This car is not worth five hundred dollars! All I have is not enough to drag myself home, I yelled in return.

And let's not have any bullshit about it, I thought, you know perfectly well you can't keep me here forever. This was a mistake. He could. Wasted and besotted from a continuous pressure and fatigue, I was unable to understand that it was not a custom house, but a customs post that I got to, and the man just had no right to let me cross the border without a special pass or certificate. With my blood pounding deafeningly, I tried to keep my temper well. I looked at a black patch of sweat on his back. He seemed to me now one of those spotted green spiders I had watched as a child in the cracks of old countryside barns, sitting in the dark, giving tremulous jerks to the web, waiting for the prey to come. I was thinking frantically over the physical management of the journey, the innumerable ways I might be hurt---an unusual line of thought for me---when I heard someone address me in my native tongue:

---You would better pay him right away. He won't let you pass until you pay.

Only now did I notice a lovely Georgian girl who had found a perch by a flowering hedge in the mellow remnant of the summer day. Waiting for me darling?

---Five hundred dollars?

Somehow, I was surprised by her butting in, her harsh high pitched voice.

---Yeah. We've been kept here since early afternoon.

The girl was not alone. There was a bus of Soviet make in the languid, fragile-leaved mimosa shade not far from the fringe of the forest. She had on a pearly summer dress. With her sleek bronzed limbs, a sharp-cut nose and sunshine head of hair, she looked perfectly charming. Another girl, with chestnut hair and fancy straw bonnet trimmed with field flowers, came and sat by her side. I found her luminous green eyes probe mine. It was the time I got out of the place as soon as possible. I deliberated over the price the guard was demanding.

---Here, I said holding out two twenty-dollar crisp notes to him. That's all I can give.

It seems quite difficult to describe the transformation that the sight of the dollars caused in the man. One moment he looked like a tyrant with a noticeable sourness coming from his sweat soaked clothing, the tyranny imprinted on his face, another recklessly kind and joyful. It was as if the tension in him snapped, and anger drained out like rain.

---Sakhol, he said beaming at me with perspiration on the wings of his cigar-coloured twitching nose.

This was one of the few words I had learnt as a child in my old neighbourhood populated by the Turks at the time. It meant 'well done' or 'that's a boy' or something like that. The guy could not have a grudge against me personally. He was a live man and as a live man wanted more money than he could make honestly in public life. I could understand him. Naturally, he like so many of us, ambitious and greedy people, chose a slippery road of extortion. How queer life is! At once, I felt as if my heart was going to burst with joy. Never in my life, not even after escaping from the nightmare on the German-Polish frontier did I feel so elated. The road home was open. My heart was still thumping with joy when, from the open window, in the apple-green air, I saw a grass-stained round seat of the sunshine-haired girl's white shorts. It was not more attractive to me than the fat rump of sheep in the slaughter-house.

Warm mid-summer dusk deepened into blissful darkness. I turned my back to the customs post, drove for a while along a narrow road and swerved into one of the widest and perfectly paved highways I have ever seen in my life. Again, I was heavenly alone. Again, strange feelings overwhelmed me. I was climbing to the summit of the mountain where nothing mattered. In the place of anger, resentment and humiliation now came confidence and joy. There was a thin sickle of moon in the velvety sky reminiscent of the heel of a boot in the littoral sand. Rolling eastward, I held the nutshell-coloured steering wheel with loving hands. Turkey had after all lots of charm. The warm breeze blew gentle in my face. The macadam seemed freshly watered. The feeling of security made everything so beautiful that night, so calm and soothing. It was quite late, and there were few cars on the road. As usual, I hit the accelerator twice as I made up my mind to overtake the red stars of flickering tail-lights, and as usual, the mighty motor roared and my indigo darling leapt forward with the grace of a young predator and left the lonely vehicle far behind.

I passed an Opel trailing the sounds of oriental music. I passed daffodil-coloured gauze glowing low over a lighted town that stood up incredibly into the night sky. I passed--- to untimely quote Emily Dickinson:

The school where children played,
Their lessons scarcely done;
I passed the fields of gazing grain,
I passed the setting sun.

I wondered if the soul-shattering, unearthly peace descending from above was not somehow enhanced by the thought that once I was in Turkey, I would have no problem with racketeers. Racket, I had been told in Tbilisi, practically did not exist in this country.

I had planned to spend the night at a filling station in the vicinity of Istanbul, afterwards to go straight to Bolu, then to Arac, Bafra and Samsun. I did not think I would pass over sixteen hundred kilometres from Tarnovo to Sarf in less than three days, so I would have plenty of time to enjoy stars. In Georgia, I had been nostalgic for space and driving at nights. Here, I had everything I loved. I could measure silence by the melodious swishing of tires on the smooth surface of macadam. The great silence of Turkish night.

I staggered as I got out of the car with a bottle of Scotch camouflaged thoroughly within a black and golden plastic bag and made for a half-open glass door of what looked like a combination of shop and small café attached to the filling station.

---May I come in? I asked a man standing in the doorway and pointed at my white sneakers and peacock-green shorts I did not think decent enough for meeting people.

There was a woman in the room with a couple of kids dangling around her. Quite a family, domestic atmosphere. He must have seen me turn sharp onto the asphalt ground glowing with fluorescent light and draw up by the side of a claret-coloured petrol pump with a 'Super Leadless' sign. He waved friendly meaning 'no problem' and let me in. There were four tables there, and he told me with a smiling gesture I could sit wherever I liked. I chose the one which was in the corner somewhat farther away from the door and the lady and the TV set fixed high above the counter.

I thought that with the formidable customs post overcome, and a prospect of drinking unlimited amount of whiskey with soda and sleeping safely in the car before me, I would heave a sigh of delicious relief and surrender myself wholly to dear reminiscences and expectations, but, alas, instead of basking in the rays of bliss, I got obsessed by a purely ethical uneasiness. What if by some unforeseen circumstance these people learnt that I was Georgian and a friend of Son Of Buffoon? I tried not to think of possible consequences. Perhaps it is not very tactful to dwell on my friend's weak points, to wash our dirty linen in public so to say, but something pertaining to his relationship with the country I was travelling across still has to be noted.

Curious sight to watch Son Of Buffoon. Feeding habits amusing and disgusting at the same time. Never drank mineral water from a glass, drank it from a bottle. Used to have big cleaning job after him: crumbs of bread and pieces of grilled meat and sausage under the table, booze sprayed out on the tablecloth. The nastiness of his cigarette-butts and ashes on his plate. A chain smoker---never used an ash-tray either in the restaurant or at home. Courses rejected after one bite. Picked bones and rinds of apples and peaches heaped on his napkin. Stopped asking him to dinner long ago. Sententious old sport Son Of Buffoon. Speaking mainly of his own doings, of his own accomplishments and triumphs. Used to boast of friendship with Akhmed from Rize, a businessman trading in suede topcoats. Robbed him of twenty grand as the curtain fell.

Son Of Buffoon was not the only Georgian who duped the Turks. Child Of Kidney did too. So there was but one thing in my mind and heart---namely, the thought of passing myself off as a West European. In Germany I had had to say I came from the universe. Let Socrates forgive me this plagiarism; in Poland, I had pretended to be a Swede; you could fool nobody in the Ukraine, so I had been there what I always was---Georgian. In Turkey, I firmly decided on passing myself as a Finn. The Finns were great drunkards. I had had a chance to share a table with some in the Intourist and Metropol restaurants in Moscow. I liked them. They had no enemies in Turkey, and what they might get away with the Germans or the Armenians and the more so as the Georgians might not. Now, I was going to get tight in the Turkish café infringing upon the Moslem law as a Finn.

I got rid of my chum, bandaged up with the plastic bag like a new-born baby, by putting it at my feet under the chair and looked up at my host. It was obvious that he owned the place and hardly knew more than a dozen of English words.

He was tall, highbrowed and distinguished looking man in his late thirties. He had arched eyebrows, dark-green eyes and broad shoulders. I remember him far less distinctly than I did four years ago, but I think I have called up his portrait quite well--- an open hearted self-reliant species of human beings. I had no problem with making him understand

I wanted a bottle of soda and ice, but as to salty peanuts, well, no matter how hard I tried using gestures and facial expression, which since I had left Germany I brought to perfection, all my efforts were in vain. Lost in conjectures and not devoid of the sense of humour, he began poking his forefinger now into a plate of sliced salami on the counter, now into the olives, now into the cheese, and each time I cried 'No, that's not it!', we laughed wholeheartedly at the funny side of the situation.

I was already thinking I could do without the ill-fated appetizer when I heard someone call me in Russian:

---Colleague!

The first thing I thought was how come a Russian turned up that late at this spot on the globe. But the man at the table next to me was anybody but Russian. He smiled and said in heavily accented English:

---What is the matter, colleague?

He was Turkish and pronounced the word 'colleague' in a Russian manner which in Turkish meant 'old chap' or 'buddy'. Feeling quite at home, he seemed to be a friend or relation of my host.

---Peanuts. I want peanuts, I said.

---Peanuts? The man emitted a short hyena laugh and in no moment a tiny plastic bag with salty roast peanuts was on my table.

I was thirsty and strained, and all my body ached from a twelve-hour drive. I dropped three lumps of ice into the tall wine glass and poured out a little soda. I looked around. Pending something important, the host was preoccupied with the TV set; the woman was having trouble with the kids. The only problem now was my kind dragoman who sat at his table with a vacant look of a man who had nothing to do in particular. I bent, unscrewed the bottle under the table, took the wine glass carefully down with my right hand, and, bent and breathing heavily, filled it to the brim with whisky. I did not drink it right away. I put the glass on the table again, bent again, screwed the lid on the bottle tightly, and let the ice thaw in the glass for a while. I drank it in deep gulps, sweet and soothing to my parched throat. Damn it all! I was going to get drunk. This was no night to be lying in the car with open eyes. I sat there watching a cartoon film on TV through a dim haze of beatitude. Scraps of low-voiced foreign phrases were coming to me from other corners of the café. On my second glass, the booze burnt hard in my stomach sending a crazy flush to my fingertips. On the third, the bottle was on my table peeping out of its black-and-gold pelerine, and I was talking to the only man around who spoke English, to my well-wisher and volunteer interlocutor.

His hair was cut close to the skin, and no matter how close he shaved, his chin still seemed to bristle. He had sad eyes, and his hawk-nosed face told me he was prepared for an exchange of extraordinary ideas. A dark stout woman with a patch at the corner of her mouth passed us. Her black eyes, sharp and suspicious, looked me hard in the face.

---Bulgaria's very bad. Racket, mafia, I said trying to dispose him to a free and easy conversation. I like Turkey.

I could be quite smooth-spoken depending on circumstances. The man did not fall for the flattering though. He just sat in front of me like a stuffed mummy, and looked into my eyes pensively as if trying to understand what sort of a queer fish I was. I wondered whether he had anything to do with telepathy or psychoanalysis.

---Rumania, Ukraine, Poland very bad. Racket, road police, customs officials all after your money, but Germany is good---law and order. Germany and Turkey---fantastic!

I poured more whisky into the empty glass and added some ice.

---Here's to friendship and to Turkey, I said putting my left hand to my heart and holding the glass in the right in a Finnish manner.

You'd better have a hundred friends than a hundred roubles. I liked Russian proverbs. But right now, just one friend was quite enough for me. I drained the glass in one gulp, placed it on the table within hand's reach and drew in a long breath of satisfaction. The four big whiskies must have gone to my head.

---You never get drunk, do you? I asked him

---Religion forbids. I would rather watch others. What is the point of spending money and having a headache in the morning? The doctor in him made himself felt in a curt tone.

---Well, I like whisky. Whisky for me and hashish for you, 'kolega', OK? Said I slyly trying to incline him to a more friendly conversation again.

The owner of the place came, glanced at the bottle, flung a remark at the psychoanalyst and leaned towards me with smiling eyes.

---Football. Turkey Germany, OK? He turned and looked at the box on the wall.

It was an invitation to watch a game. Of course, I liked soccer, and I liked the Turkish Galatasarai. 'What do you think of the two Georgian brothers playing for your team?' I nearly blurted out but held myself by a miracle. Soccer obviously was not a safe subject to discuss. When the game began, I watched it for a while, but my taciturn interlocutor did not. He just did not care, and I turned to him and said:

---Germany's OK, but Hitler's very bad.

I knew the Turks had some problems in Germany, and I thought he would comment on this, and I would side with him saying how much the Turks had done for Germany after the war---restoring the country that had been razed to the ground---and how hard-working and assiduous they were, never for a moment forgetting that I had to spend the night by the petrol pump.

---Hitler was homosexual, spat the doctor.

---Oh really? I did not know this, I said quite frankly, for I knew that Hitler had actually never married, but as to his homosexuality...

I also knew that a companion of fools may suffer harm, and that I was drunk, but not so drunk as not to know where I was, and what I wanted. All of a sudden, I decided to avail myself of the opportunity. My ruse was as simple as that: I would ask him about Stalin now, and by making him talk about the leader of the people, I might as well make him comment on Stalin's nationality, and learn what he thought about us the Georgians, about me, for at the very moment, I did not care about anybody or anything but myself, my safety and my advantage.

---And what about Stalin, he was very different from Hitler, was not he? I said.

The man raised one eyebrow and lowered the other.

---Stalin was homosexual, the psychopathologist commented on the Great Helmsman nonchalantly.

I felt insulted. Not to betray my feeling, I busied myself with the ice and whisky. Stay away from a foolish man, for you'll not find knowledge on his lips, I thought. Silence seemed the beginning of wisdom to the lone voyager. As to the man versed in the nature of sexual abnormalities, he was sure that Roosevelt and Churchill were as perverted as their offshore counterparts. I put my left hand on my heart, tossed my glass to my mouth and finished my drink. So artistically did I impersonate a Finish travelling writer that I decided to discuss my itinerary in detail with my unsolicited enlightener. I said it had been a long way from Finland to Turkey, and I have not yet made up my mind whether I should first visit

Syria and Iran or go straight to the Siberia via the Caucasus. Without ever mentioning my homeland, gropingly, cautiously, looking round every now and then, I was trying to bring the doctor on the hidden issue.

---Poland, Ukraine, Rumania, Bulgaria very bad, very dangerous, said I once again losing all hope of learning what his idea of Georgia was. But it was then that he roused himself, shivered all over like a foal shaking off water, and with his coal-black eyes wide open, rolling his whites and breathing through his jet-black nostrils heavily, hissed into my face:

---Gurji, Gurjistan very, very bad!

This made me wonder if the primacy of the Word in the Gospel was not exaggerated. It seemed that no words whatsoever would convey his idea of the Georgians as vividly, as exhaustively as the language of facial expression. The man was sure that all the horrors of the world were nothing in comparison with the danger of travelling across my country, for 'Gurjistan'-- anyone in Tbilisi knew this—was the Turkish for Georgia.

I drank two more whiskies with no ice or soda, and my head dropped on my chest, and recollections trickled like warm blood. Not pleasure but freedom from pain was what I aimed at the moment, and I filled my glass with whisky again and drained it in one gulp. Shame and humiliation was felt very positive, painful, and hence its absence seemed to be the true standard of happiness. Privacy, oblivion, silence! That was essential to my enjoyment of the moment. *When words are too many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise.* Again I stretched my hand for the bottle, but even before I touched it, someone tenderly tapped me on my shoulder. Showing the gold teeth in the sides of his mouth, the host asked me courteously:

---You OK, mister?

Yes, I was OK, and I was drunk as a lord. Immediately, I realised it would be reckless to try to regain the bottle floating away from me before my eyes. Only one fourth of the booze was left in it, but it would certainly kill me. The man has been kind to me, forbearing. With a drunken smile of gratitude, I thanked him for the peanuts and soda and hospitality.

---Well, I must be getting to my car now, I mumbled with a taste of groundnuts and whisky in my mouth.

My hands in the pockets of my shorts, I walked through the middle of the café staring straight ahead, reached the door and went through it. I walked staggering to my arctic-blue darling. She was only twenty metres away from me now, yet I was moving in a sleep-walker's ecstasy in which the soul seemed to have passed out of my body, and there was neither time nor space.

---Hail, macadam! What is easier to embrace the infinity of your body or that of man's heart? Time and time again, scrutinizing the distance with road signs saluting me in a flash, and great flaming candles of minarets, and the white sky over the roofs, and chimneys flying past with a lightning speed, I caught myself at asking this question:

---Yes, what is more unyielding, more mysterious, the infinity of your length or that of man's heart, macadam?

The answer was always the same:

---However mysterious the infinity of the macadam is, it is nothing in comparison with man's heart. But you are more dangerous to me than I am for you, macadam. With a single breath, you can stop my run. A grey patriarch, majestic observer, you smile and look with pity at the bustle of people. I wonder how many of us have you taken into your bely. Your grasping gullet gains in breadth downwards. The

*grandeur of your spirit is as beautiful as the summit shrouded in purple clouds, as the touch of woman, as a divine recovery of sight, as an eagle circling in pale-blue sky, and you are more beautiful than a starlit night.
Tell me, macadam, do you want to be my friend?*

I have a vivid urge to ride my lilac puma faster, to rush past the flaxen lakes of towns in the dead of Arabian Nights, to scud along the whisky-yellow, salmon-red, milky-white lights of the streets I will meet on my way across the Thrace, and the coastal areas of Anatolia, and Pontic Mountains, to scum over the sun-scorched steppes of white mosques, to sail up the wooded flanks of littoral hills, and on and on on north-east cutting across meadows and rivers until at last, I stop at Sarf with my queen's nickel-plated prow pressed forward towards my homeland.

I was again on the road, again at the wheel of my ultraviolet sparrow-hawk, again alone. What? Did I say alone? Sorry, I let it slip. Never in my life has anyone kept me better company than this thirteen year old Mercedes 190 E of mine. I dug out the old tour map and traced my route with immense gusto. Samsun and Trabzon were my main reference-points. The journey had taken about a fortnight by now, for my natural speed being eighty, I seldom made more than a five hundred kilometres per travelling day. A fifteen hundred kilometre stretch of rich reality separated me from Georgia now. Having a whole day ahead to get to Samsun, I drove very carefully. Traffic was light. The road rolled across open country. Summer was ringing in the air. Gently was I driving eastward my faithful German car working for me with a kind of quiet merriment. I heeded black wiggles of curves and speed limits on the white shields and spared shifty animals and slow geese. Cars now and then passed me, but they were either BMW 500-s or Mercedes with much more powerful engines. The rest were obviously weaker than my lacquered machine, so that they did not even attempt to overtake me when I was going hundred, hundred and twenty.

By the time dusk touched the landscape with mauve, basin-blue and green, I was quite tired. Samsun was still far away, and I decided to look for a shelter. In an anonymous little town, I pulled at the curb and drank deep from a friendly bottle. The air, despite a light breeze, was warm, and people, mainly youngsters, were queuing up at a movie house. I drove on slowly. I felt I would lose all control over my Pegasus if I did not stop at an appropriate place outside the town, but the passers-by I applied to for directions were either strangers like me or did not know English. As I crept along the sidewalk, I saw a turbaned gentleman who looked like a retired executioner. He sat by a fountain reading a newspaper by the neon light absolutely lost to the world. When he stopped winding his pointed beard around his finger, I decided to risk and pulled up. He shook his head and waved me off even before I opened my mouth. Looking forward to a big meal and sleep, I was gliding through summer's black night. A few places saturated in neon lights proclaimed their readiness to accommodate both me and the most vigorous couples, but I, for no obvious reason, ignored them. The miracle I hankered for did happen after all. As I was driving through a speechless gorge at a ninety-kilometres-per-hour pace, I become aware of a diamond glow in the dark over an elevated clearing on the right side of the road. I missed it, and now had to return. With a graceful backward movement, I turned off the macadam and rode up the driveway. A filling station, spacious and quiet, met me with the smell of petrol and warm asphalt. It was a pretentious place on a landscaped ground, a semi-darkened palace for enchanted motorists and writers. I pulled up at the only lighted petrol pump. I glanced around and satisfied myself with what I saw. The last diners, an elderly gentleman, a lady and two children, a boy and a girl, were getting into a huge old-fashioned Audi at the far end of the ample square that would house fifty automobiles like mine. By a tall rectangular glass box, shining from

within, there were a few white wicker chairs and two tables---something like a bistro in the open. A gas station attendant appeared from nowhere, greeted me in Turkish and examined my features with a smile. Everybody seemed to be polite and efficient in Turkey at roadside localities of this kind. Intrigued by my accent, he wanted to know what part of America I was from.

---Texas, I said.

My cash was cracking from the blissfully insane ride. True, I clung to gas stations for shelter for the night and had my meal in the car, but still I have already spent three times as much as a professional driver usually did. I had only two hundred and thirty five dollars left and had to pass about fifteen hundred kilometres to get home. I took a hundred dollar note out of my pocket and held it out to the man.

---Full tank, I said opening the filler cap.

---No dollar, mister, he answered shaking his head, only lira.

Something in me was on guard ever since that awful day when the Gipsies had robbed me of the last farthing in downtown Constansa. Broad daylight then, midnight now. And nobody around to ask after the rate of exchange.

---Can you convert it to lira? I asked.

---OK, mister, he said without understanding the words, just guessing. 'Extra linguistic factor', scientifically speaking.

---How shall I know you'll not dupe me? I said screwing up my eyes and waving the note with distrust in front of him.

He got me all right. A shadow passed over his face as he looked straight into my eyes, then threw back his head and shoved his forefinger into the starry sky. There was only one word in the outburst of his resentment that I understood, but it was enough to tell me that he was not alone in these backwoods. There was Allah high above, and Allah saw everything. Confused, I gave him the note tacitly, and knew as clearly as I know that some day I am sure to die that the man did trust in what he said.

I have parked my darling a few steps away from the table I sat down and put my elbows on its cool surface. I was tired, unshaven and unusually happy. A lanky young fellow, wearing his shirt-tails outside his jeans, floated up to me from the dark, and asked what I would like to have. His English was poor, and he was blond, almost albino, with hazel eyes and small ears. I pointed to the enormous glass refrigerator all bathed in neon light.

---Grilled meat, I said. And salad, cucumber, tomato and soda water with ice, OK?

---OK, mister.

With my right hand clutching the muffled bottle of Scotch and my left toying with the key in my pocket, I was exploring the contents of the wonder fridge: two beautiful carcasses of sheep and half a carcass of cow. The waiter, who proved to be an expert cook, was kindling smouldering coals in the gridiron under the open sky. Using expertly a whetted kitchen knife, he had already cut off a solid piece of mutton and a smaller piece of beef, sliced and mixed them with green pepper and put them into a mincing-machine. I watched his measured movements, and knew I would not have to wait long for my supper. I poured soda on the whisky, and the foam rose in the glass, trembled up, sloped over. I drank it very slowly, relishing each gulp as if something unpleasant was waiting for me when I finished it. As I went for my second glass, a hot smell of burnt fat and smoke eddied through the fresh night, cut the odour of the Scotch and silence and oblivion. Presently, the waiter brought me my order: a plateful of succulent flat cakes of minced meat grilled on the gridiron. I ate them happily, tasting thoroughly every mouthful. I would do anything in the

world to revisit this place once again. Perhaps the luckiest and most poetic people have their meal here at this hour of night.

With a terrible din that mingled power with threat in one frantic and convulsive honk, a vehicle passed along the macadam. It was a tremendous trailer truck moving off, lighted up like a New-Year tree. It sobered me up. I had been running my memory over the kaleidoscope of recent events. With an amazing clarity, I had seen myself debating with my friend.

When Son Of Magpie said:

--Do you know that Georgian songs are sung by thirteen different voices? I knew that he was beginning a conversation that would displease me, and one that, for this matter, he himself would just as soon avoid. Why talk about a spook? But he could not always stop himself. Moments of maniacal patriotism occurred, moments when a morbid desire to rehabilitate his own miserable existence through a brazen glorification of the past or a champion weight-lifter or a ballerina of the Moscow Bolshoi Theatre overwhelmed him.

When Son Of Magpie put me a rhetorical question:

--It just shows you, does not it, buddy? He was making a statement he might not believe himself. Look at his family! Once a successful physicist, a university reader, he was dragging out his life in his one room flat. His half-brother, a thief and alcoholic, had strangled to death on his own vomit, and he, penniless as he was, could not even attend the funeral. And there was his sister, thrice divorced, prostituting in Greece. If she had had any luck at all, with her figure and charming features, she could have been somebody. After all, it was painful to confess that he, like everybody else around him, must have deserved what he had, especially if whatever was wrong with him was a thing he was born with. As to his closest friend and next neighbour, Mr. Coming From Green Meadow, he lost all his money and house, and everything he had in a newly opened gambling-house and hanged himself in his own lavatory. It was sad to think of Mr. Coming From Green Meadow stand on a stool and put his head in the loop. So every now and then, spells of revelation dawned on Son Of Magpie, and he remembered that in the twelfth century King David the Builder had consolidated all Georgian princedoms and brought to it unheard of glory and material well-being, or that the son of his acquaintance played soccer in the Netherlands and earned a hundred thousand dollars a month, quite enough to feed two thousand famished refugees for a couple of days. Stalin was his favourite subject too. They all were great people and they like himself were Georgians. The fact that Stalin was dead and the lad-- in the Netherlands, while he was alive in Tbilisi did not matter.

When Son Of Magpie said:

--My boy, Georgian folk songs are unique on a world scale, I answered by asking:

--How about the Pipers' Company?

--The Pipers' Company is different, he cried blushing. They don't play our music. It's the mixture of Asiatic and the nineteenth century urban tunes.

As if he was not Asiatic, as if he was a pure-blooded Aryan. The comment, the perplexity with which it was pronounced made me ask him again:

--Come on, old horse, tell me frankly, do you like folk songs?

Of course, he did not. But it was a significant question, for my original friendship with him was based on our mutual love of English and American songs and literature and the movies--Elvis, Hemingway, the Beatles...As to me, I saw in folk music a supreme symbol of inconsolable grief, expressing in a brilliant way the longing for the other world, the mysterious self-torture and self-renunciation. It was all Georgian and only Georgian. Subconsciously, many of us knew this but never admitted. The passionate language of folk music was that of folklore too, for the music and legends were alike in the explicit realization of the Destiny-idea. Of such a world experience no other people knew anything whatsoever. Lend an ear to the duet of Absalom and Murman in the opera 'Absalom and Eteri'. Both the music and the libretto are steeped into the folk feeling. There is the same adamantine will to break through all resistance of earthly life and enter the

beyond. No melody ever imagined radiates such immensity of grief and despair. Here is expressed all the pain and humiliation that the Georgian people had come through and would have to endure. That wondrous scene when Absalom, dying, sends Murman to bring him water from the spring of immortality takes us to the heart of Georgian attitude and Weltanschauung. I used to ask myself if the plaintively-feverish will of Georgian folk music was anything other than bemoaning itself, and those for whom it was destined. I had very painful doubts too concerning our character, for it seemed that it was eternally twisted round, in fact became one, with music and painting and poetry. A manifestation of the essence of national character in the transitional period was something that required a serious meditation on the fundamental connections between religion and morality, traditions and literature, politics and the state. What we needed was not a romantic exploitation of the past, but an iron will of the leader who would unite with iron blood all the sound forces of the nation and help it out of the quagmire of crime and corruption.

Now, it dawned on me to my horror that in the analogical situation in my homeland, I mean in the dead of night at an unprotected filling station on the outskirts, I would sooner find two skinned gentleman than two animals in the fridge. I had more enemies at home than any normal man would like to have, and I knew the book I was going to write would increase their number, for it is no small matter to oppose the authorities and national obsessions by saying exactly what you think about them, by saying it in your own words without compromise. I determined on tearing away the veil of Maya from the bedimmed gaze of my fellow countrymen, to put in the pillory the corrupted president and his criminal henchmen, and I was prepared to hear and to stand the worst that they would say about me, for that was how I was made. Slipping back from such melancholy tones into the mood that befitted a free thinking wanderer, I stopped drinking, opened the car, tore off my sweat-drenched shirt and jeans, dropped them on the back seat and went to the tiled shower room. I woke to a clear sub-tropical morning with the distant cries of cocks and the sun burning like a heart in the detached coolness of horizon. I did not go to the shower room. I went down to the macadam and beyond it to look at the sea. A rather bitter and sour smell of nutskins was like a punch on my nose. They were heaped on the narrow strip of gravelled land between the highway and huge blocks of black rock sloping gently down the water. The blocks, squared and fitted neatly to each other, made a solid belt of armour protecting the coastline from tidal waves. Straight in front of me, a seiner was towing a baby boat. Its wailing over the surface of the sea faded into the crisp petrol-blue air. A buttercup-yellow cab hissed rasping past, and a huge trailer truck jangled shattering along the road. Muffled sounds of the waterfall cascading from a mossy cliff for a hundred of feet, the rustle of the little waves against the shore intensified the peace of the early morning. The air savoured of faint smells of brine, decayed crabs, seaweeds and medusas. Happiness hovered in the silence-soaked space.

The sea, with its restless scaly surface and a predator's fascination, has always been alien to me. Its blue infinity stirred up distrust and anxiety, attracted and scared at the same time. I stood in the light breeze. The blinding sun was warm on my face. The light flashed in swaths of rippling gold and silver on the blue water. The breeze stirred my hair and dried tiny drops of sweat on my forehead.

It is easier to swim in the sea than in the swimming-pool or lake. Salty water is more buoyant, you do not have to use much your hands and legs to keep afloat. But I was not here to conquer the sea, I was to enjoy it, to swim and float quietly near the coast. I undressed and dived stark naked to wash the night's sweat and a three day fatigue off. Waves of blood came throbbing to my temples as I dived to the bottom and fetched a handful of slippery pebbles to the surface. My ears buzzed. There was the taste of salt in my mouth, and I swung my arm and threw them as far as I could towards the shore. Then I turned and used

breast-stroke farther into the sea. I swam stretching my whole body forward with a twist of all my muscles. I put my face into the water, and the horizon disappeared. I breathed out the air with noise and bubbles, opened my eyes and tried to discern pebbles at the bottom. There was nothing but a greenish-grey blur. Then I turned over and lay on my back.

Besotted with joy, I occasionally opened my eyes. I floated absorbed, face to face with the sky and silence and the green hills framed with cypress-trees, eucalyptus and tea-bushes. Mushroom-white houses, planted in the verdure, looked like swallow's nest from a distance. I drank my fill of bliss tasting of security, and the cry of gulls, and a faint odour of aromatic plants coming from afar. I lost myself in the music of long-desired peace, a music in which feelings were dissolved, transformed into pictures. Then for a splinter of a second, I was back at the Tbilisi International Airport going to emplane.

A young man in a snow-white shirt and black trousers is sitting on a sulphur-green plastic bench with his face in his hands. The young man is sobbing through his fingers. Once in a while, he raises his head and shouts shrilly in Russian at a plump broad-shouldered blonde in the zinc uniform with golden-yellow shoulder-straps and the Medal for Distinction in Labour:

--For God's sake, let me board the plane, aren't you Christian? Let me board the plane, please!

Middle-aged people look the other way. Startled, a young pretty-faced English woman, all alone in the corner by the bar with an open book in her hand, looks aside too, then continuous to read. A country lout, who told me yesterday in front of the German embassy that his name was Child Of Hornbeam, enjoys the sight with his companions. There are three mugs of beer in front of each on a round white plastic table. They are chatting and giggling spitefully as they fix their eyes at the man in grief. The man lets his wet, swarthy face with prominent cheekbones out of his hands and looks round the waiting room with the eyes of a little boy who has been hurt wrongly. A thickset gentleman with a beefy neck and a hooked nose a little crooked comes up to the woman in zinc and takes a cigarette out of his mouth. He starts to tell her something in a low voice.

--No, in no case. First, set down those two, then we may talk. Yes, take them out of the plane first, she says in a deep rumbling voice.

The young man jumps to his feet, darts to the woman, falls on his knees before her. A few gapers back off, step on the feet of those who are behind them.

--My four year old son is dead. I must bury him. Please, let me board the plane for Christ's sake!

The voice is inhuman, like the howl of the wolf. He tries to kiss her hands. Frightened, she dodges, turns round briskly and makes for the door leading to the airfield.

I did not seem to be able to rid my mind of the young man at the airport. I will not mention him again, but I think I have somehow connected him to the fundamental flaws in our character. Floating on my back with drops of light and colours twinkling on my eyelids, I could not study the Turkish sky without thinking of the answer I have been looking for. Could it be a congenial predisposition to anarchy and masochism that degraded us to the state of desperadoes? Scenes of blood and cruelty are no longer shocking to our mind. And yet, these things are done daily under the shadow of freedom and democracy! And the great deserter, Mr. White Fox sees them and keeps silent! Hidden under socialism, disclosed under democracy. The flood of corruption swept over the country; independence turned into hunger-strikes, self-maiming and self-immolations. With a kind of sadistic indifference, men are shown on TV sewing up their lips with a coarse needle and thread, pouring petrol over themselves, nailing themselves down---strange it may seem, but it is not so much a twelve centimetre long nail's piercing the striker's foot as the dirty and coarse log the nail goes into that fills me with indignation. That day, at the airport, people tried to have their passport and ticket checked without waiting for their turn, and an employee wriggled through the queue

to exchange whispered secrets with the girl at the desk. Then, a major in the faded khaki trousers scurried down the wide staircase with his hand clutched at the holster that bulged on his loose-hanging buttocks. Having failed to strike a shady bargain with the man on duty, he turned in motion on the landing, craned his neck and swore like a trooper. Behind me, a tall smart German with tow-coloured hair and heavy muscles of his jowl tightening under the clean-shaven skin grumbled at the sickening disorder. You can punish hundreds of corrupted officials and criminals, you can carry the strictest law into effect in the country, but can you impose a fine upon the habits of the heart of a whole nation? This is the question.

Tired of the sea, I swam to the shore and flopped down on the flat rock. I began doing exercises. On the hands down. My tight round muscles were bursting heavy from swimming. I rubbed the bristles of my chin with the wet back of my hand. My breast, indrawn abdomen and thighs---bronzed all the way down. Some of the sun-tan left over from last summer. I glanced at my biceps where the water dried and blots of white salt appeared on the smooth brown skin. Then, I sat up and put my hands on my knees. I sat in the sunshine staring at the horizon that stood out dark blue against the sky of crushing indigo.

Who am I? Where am I? I am a free thinking Georgian. I am in the vicinity of Samsun setting out on a long happy journey in my dearest gain, my Mercedes 190 E, the dream of my life. I, as a free thinker, am distinguished from the philistine by possessing more ideas than he who on his part thinks of much less as signified by his wife, family, boss, clan of like-minded men, party and government. Consider the hypocrite, one of the commonest types of philistine. He does not labour or spin, yet not even Solomon in all his splendour is dressed like him. He is a slave to his needs, I am a master of my thoughts, a creator, for I subjugate them, never let them subjugate me. The hypocrite takes care that free thoughts never come at all. Having gone through a brain-washing meat-grinder, he never can be free, and such moralizing concepts as dying for one's cause, party, government; dying for one's neighbour, race, religion, civilization remain to him fixed ideas against which no change of political system, no freedom of choice protects him. Stay away from me, you hypocrite, I am a selfish man!

I, as a free thinker and a writer, am a dissident. Your thoughts are my thoughts which I use as I like. Compare me with the philistine, and you'll understand how superficial is his thoughts, how much is beyond him, and how deep I penetrate into the heart of things, how perfect is my vision. The relationship between me and the philistine is the same as that between strong and weak, resolute and hesitant---the philistine is always relatively less substantial, more immature; less sure of himself, more frivolous, less trustworthy. Today, when I hear army of politicians talk about their duty as patriots and citizens to help in cleaning up the filthy conditions of corruption that exist in the government, I know they are up to some kind of monkey business, and I do not believe them. Only in a flaming tribune, in a hero, in the philosopher-king, to use Plato's language, can I put my trust.

An uncommonly wide, lighted up tunnel, cool, laden with damp air sheathed me for a couple of minutes. I was travelling with very little money now but in a kind of rapture, feeling infinite strength within me. I hated icebergs on the road, but not the road itself which I worshipped as a savage worships his idol. The obstacles lay rather in the stupidity and greed of road police and custom officials not in the journey. Money was no problem either, for the great free love of macadam, and the unbearable grandeur of the heat-soaked Turkish

sky cost me nothing. Far from my people and my language, wrenched away from all support and completely relying on myself, I felt free and joyful. And, believe it or not, it was a bit of anxiety lurking in my heart that gave a unique charm to the driving of my ultramarine princess. Six hundred kilometres from Samsun to Trabzon, two hundred and fifty kilometres from Trabzon to Sarf, four hundred kilometres from Sarf to Tbilisi.

The suffocating smell of hot dust and crush of bulldozers and dump-body trucks seized me by the throat as I emerged from the velvety blanket of the tunnel. They were reconstructing the road. The scope of the work was startling. The roadside hills hiding countless riches of many-coloured rock under the orange topsoil had been disrobed, and great trucks were carrying even greater boulders into the heart of the country. I greeted the driver who looked like a toy in the cabin of a gigantic vehicle growling under the exorbitant load. Struggling with the steering wheel, he managed to smile at me in return. The road-metal pad and the asphalt over it made such a solid cover which would last for many a year. Highways in the Sudan, built by the English, had lasted for a century. I wondered if they had been as thick as this one which was two, three times thicker than anything in Georgia. No yearly repairs for it, I guess.

I pressed down the accelerator, and my darling got off with a jerk on the road burning with dust and din. Her elegant sky-blue hood sailed into the gentle rise of the road, gulped it down with gravel, tar, sand and crush and spat it behind her. Through the dusty windshield, I could discern the black of the macadam, straight and smooth like a gun tube. I was approaching Trabzon, and I decided to stop in the town before crossing the Turkish-Georgian frontier. The sun was still brimming over from every corner of the greenish-blue sky when, on my right, I glimpsed red poppies spilling their blood on a bright-green meadow. I assumed them to be the sign of luck. Then a sheaf of wild pigeons rose up against emerald hills, and, almost immediately, a road sign popped up from a sharp curve---Welcome to Trabzon, professor!

I arrived in Trabzon in the evening and began to look for a parking place right away. I stopped next to a graceful mosque fenced in with a cast-iron grating. Full of the strange feeling of being close to my country, I got out of the car, slammed the door and found myself thrown into the middle of the square swarmed with people. Around me were faces whose lives never impinged against mine, and whose language I could not understand. I cling like a miser to that kind of liberty which disappears with much cash about me, Civil Service, the idiocy of everyday work and inappropriate society. With just enough money in my pocket to take me home and a prospect of enjoying a two-month vacation, I thought that Trabzon was the town that fitted my soul. For the first time since I had left Germany, I could leave my horizon-blue chum without anybody's care and roam freely, calmly about exotic streets that smelled of roasting coffee mingled with quiet talk of men's voices. I was hungry, and I set out to look for a cheap café in the open. I followed a quiet street dotted with brass stop-cocks and quadrangular sinks standing like guards of honour by shop-windows. A passer-by bent and drank from one in front of me. Soon, I too put my hands on the wet slippery edge of the sink, its walls bluish-green from within with fine and bright moss, and fell on rather lukewarm but uncommonly sweet water. Then, I washed my face and neck, and felt as if I became weightless, nothing but the rustle of a poplar on the other side of the street or a cloud, floating from the sea, great piled cauliflower with the afterglow crushing through its fleshless body.

I was still dizzy from that wondrous journey of mine, my head full of the wind and plains whirling with heat, of the white minarets and sapphire-blue sea, when I saw a place where I thought I could rest and eat. There were a dozen of lemon-coloured chairs and

tables under striped umbrellas in a small cosy park full of dining and chatting men. The only woman, preoccupied with a little pretty-faced girl, wore a silk scarf round her head. I wondered if she felt comfortable in the light-grey man's coat in the summer evening. At the entrance stood a display of deep-purple roses, their petals thick and heavy, bejewelled with drops of water. Coffee, hamburgers, ice-cream and soft drinks were for sale in the stall that looked like a carriage of a suburban electric train.

I sat alone at the freshly wiped table washing down a rather dry and hot hamburger with fragrant but too sweet coffee. Every town I've met on my way has taught me something. If I was ever to understand my people, I ought sometimes to hold them at a distance, if I was ever to understand myself I had sometimes to turn aside from my friends. Anything seemed better for us than that demoralizing unemployment in which we lived. Look at these people, look at the Turks! Brisk, purposeful, energetic. Look at the way they walk down the street---they have goals, they have jobs, they have no time to lose, they are in a hurry. True, there are those who sit in front of their shops clasping their hands round their shins, but they are drinking tea not vodka.

Already in Samsun, I had made up my mind to find my Riviera in the vicinity of Trabzon, closer to Sarf, in the Kingdom by the Sea, and spend the night there in the car. Driving across Georgia at night was out of the question. A fat chance I would have to get to Tbilisi safe. Nine times out of ten, I would not reach home alive. Methodically exploring the town, I walked around it for an hour or so. Already the dusk began trembling, and the day dipped away. All my problems seemed to melt into the sweetish, tender air, like birds of passage in the hazy sky. In Tbilisi, encircled with hills and cleft by a treacherous river, I felt cramped in a cage, but Trabzon lay open to the sea. Its streets breathed with oriental perfumes and the sense of tolerance and security.

My darling greeted me with the brilliance of her turquoise blue gloss and a yellow ticket between the wiper and windscreen when tired but happy I finished wobbling down the streets.

---Trabzon, Rise, Hopa. Yes, Hopa, which way? The shortest way from here. 'Short', you know 'short', 'straight'? Yes, which way to Hopa? I asked a small skinny man who had a baseball cap on backwards but was quick in uptake.

I have used gestures and the kind of English I have invented during the journey for such occasions. With a twinkling smile, accurately articulating Turkish words, he showed me the way. Looking through the rear-view window, cautiously manoeuvring the car, I said good-bye to the lovely town and went down a short but wide street leading to the macadam. Soon, I was driving along the dark coastline and the shadows of heavily timbered hills. The wind was blowing in my face, and the stars, silver dust of God's blessings, were crackling in the pitch-black sky.

I parked her on a tiny promontory. We were in the vicinity of Kemalpasha now, a stone's throw to my next destination: the custom-house on the Turkish-Georgian frontier. I looked at the phosphorescing clock on the dashboard. Well after midnight. I scrutinized the distance. Sea, silence, iodine scent of salty water and seaweeds. A limitless sky, magical and occult. A mournful cry of the bird coming from a nearby cliff. A ship creeping like a glowing-worm where the heavens and the sea copulate.

Today was my sixteenth day on the road, and so far I liked it fine, even the discomfort. I spent a long time dreaming, face to face with the world, before I locked myself up in my ultramarine castle. Night has eliminated most of the landscape, but I could discern the black outlines of the road-side hills, blurred horizon and granite armour curbing the sea, a grandiose tortoise shell from which the appearance of many chimeras and fantastic

monstrosities did not seem improbable. These people were winning a strip of land from the sea, were protecting from tidal waves the first-rate highway meant to stretch across the country from Istanbul to Sarf. I wished it went to the very threshold of my home. Black, greyish-black, pinkish-green, green rock was used for dikes and road-metal, and I wondered what other application it might have.

A fairy-tale night. A fairy-tale place. What mattered to me was the here and the now. Not the past and the future. Every time had its own truth, and every truth of a time was its fixed idea, and crowds were stupefied, governed, held spellbound by it. Not so with me. Truth interested me only in so far as it was worth anything to me for my sake. Yes, I have always been concerned only for myself, not for the collective or party or mankind. A truth that I should have to direct myself by, a truth that endangered my unbridled thinking, I spurned. The most modern despots of this kind of obsessions were 'freedom' and 'democracy'. The longer I lived, the longer I realised that these were loose concepts. True, buying a car in Germany, driving it across Europe and Asia Minor would have been a pipe-dream a decade ago, but what about the greedy rascal who built a four-storey palace under my nose? From the balcony of my apartment looking north, on a sparkling southern day, with white clouds hurrying in the intense turquoise-green sky, I used to gaze at the rosy peak of Kazbegi, stately and arrogant, tower above the haze-blue mountain range, and savour the delicate taste of the secret of the world. But then, as if by a satanic magic, in a couple of months, I was deprived of the most inspiring, most sacramental offering that fate has ever bestowed on me. One of the dirtiest crooks, a lousy hard-looking statesman whose legal income did not exceed mine, blinded me with a tall, one million worth wall, and there was nothing I could do about it. In a democratic state, free and independent, did the freedom of contemplating the peak belong to me? I ask you, gentlemen. I think it belonged to the bum who knew how to take it from me, who did not let himself to be deprived of the right to bring about his own wish. If he managed to appropriate that freedom, then not only the view, but the right to enjoy it too was his. Again I ask you, gentlemen, whether the liberty of the rascal is not my thralldom.

I know nothing more hideous than the yard with an adjacent patch of rocky slope which I am doomed to behold every day of the week from the seventh floor of my apartment-house. The yard and the rocky patch lie at the bottom of the most beautiful range of hills around my town. A fearless gloom rises up from the grey setting, abandoned to rats and refuse, where, in aesthetic horror, pettiness of man reveals its true face. Squalid cement sheds, hen-coops and garages huddle together like a company of beggars sitting on the stone staircase of the central market place, waiting for a starless night to bid them arise and vanish from the face of the earth. On a heap of stones, criss-crossed with battered stumps of enormous water-pipes, men, who left their farms to vegetate in the capital, try to lay out morbid orchards and vineyards mercilessly consuming drinking water from the vast, ten meter deep reservoir. A four-metre high spurt struggling from a broken tap spills on a three-metre high cement wall encircling the reservoir and the sentry-box, spills for a week, spills for a fortnight, for a month...

I look at the changing of the sentries and think that we are sick and that the sick is a parasite on civilization. In a certain state it is indecent to go on living. To vegetate on in a cowardly dependence on physicians and medicaments after the meaning of life, the right to life has been lost, must entail a profound contempt of physicians. The world, in its turn, should be a communicator of this contempt: not donations, not grants, not humanitarian aids, not long-term state loans but every day a fresh dose of disgust with nonchalance and animal irresponsibility.

There are sunsets which fill me with fear and trembling, and there are sunsets which fill me with love and compassion. It is at the sunsets of love that I tell myself---Whatever you learn about man, however bad he turns out to be, he has a soul, and once he was a tiny suckling clasped to his mother's breast. I am unusually sensitive to the grandeur of evenings. Neither morning, nor noon is anything to the unspeakable itch of rupture that the painful admiration for twilight beauty provides in me. From the vantage point of my abode, beyond the rusty tin-plate fences, miserable hen-coops and straps of tar-paper that shudder in the wind on the leaking roofs like sails of a storm-beaten ship, I see green trains of hills, and basin-blue mountains, and platinum horizons. A serpentine road runs up to health-resorts, one of which is crowned with a tumbledown but still stately eleventh-century fortress, a regrettable trace of bygone glory.

Twice a month, on week-ends, before dawn, I used to follow the path that starts right from the outskirts of the Vera cemetery and leads to the mountain of Udzo with its whitewashed Russian church that gives to the environment an overwhelming scent of life. It is but a step from the church to the fortress, the northern wall of which stands on the brink of a precipice. On the flat top of the fortress, the wind and the enormous sky speak of freedom and happiness. Black kites circle in the simmering air, and swifts swoop down into the immense cavity of timbered canyon. Hundreds of ravines lead to the city, and the white clouds in the distance, so white that they hurt my eyes, rise over the black and blue Caucasian mountain-range like fantastic snow-capped peaks upon peaks.

The days of my lone trips in the countryside are long gone. The only thing that I can do now without fear is to watch from my study room the sky's veiling itself in blood, and the evening's swinging over into night. It is then that the throbbing of my blood mingles with the desperate pulsation of the dying day, and I muse on the first star shining in the green sky, on the scent-laden air filling my heart with insistent joy, on the warm quiet dawn when apricot-trees on the creased flanks of the dusk-blurred hills are covered with flamingo-pink foam, and wonder if I ever be able to describe the secret of these magnificent instants.