

Translations from Vazha Pshavela

[B.] George Hewitt

Between the late 1970s and the mid-to-late 1980s I was commissioned to perform several tasks for the Georgian publishing-house *Nak'aduli* by its then-director, the writer Archil Sulak'auri. Amongst these was a request to translate 15 stories by one of Georgia's greatest writers, Vazha Pshavela (*aka* 'Lad of Pshav'), the pseudonym of Luk'a Razik'ashvili (1861-1915), a master wordsmith whose works are infused with affection for nature and love for his motherland, especially his native region of Pshav in Georgia's mountainous north. The plan had been for these translations to be published in Georgia, but that plan was never realised¹, although one of my translations, namely 'The Wedding of the Jays' (*čxik'vta korts'ili*), did appear in an illustrated bilingual (Georgian-English) brochure for children in 1987 (published in Tbilisi not by *Nak'aduli* but by another house, *Khelovneba*). A further three of the translations were included in my *A Georgian Reader (with Texts, Translation and Vocabulary)* (1996, School of Oriental and African Studies, London University), namely: 'The Mousetrap' (*sataguri*), 'Nature's Songsters' (*bunebis mgosnebi*), 'The Roe-Deer Fawn's Tale' (*švlis nuk'ris naambobi*)².

During those same years I was also asked by the Union of Writers of Georgia to prepare interlinear glosses for over 70 of Vazha Pshavela's poems. At this remove I am unable to say what, if any, use was made of my labours. But I began and ended my above-named 1996 *Georgian Reader* with two of these verses in full translation, namely 'The Eagle' (*arts'ivi*) and 'Tell the Lovely Violet. Song' (*ias utxarit t'urpasa. simyera*).

In the hope that my translations of Vazha's prose and verse might be of some interest several decades on, I have decided to make available below the 11 unpublished renditions into English of Vazha's stories (plus that of 'The Wedding of the Jays', since the 1987 publication, though afforded a print-run of 50,000, might now have become a bibliographical rarity, if copies have survived at all in Georgia!). Some years ago I also produced full translations of 15 more of the poems for which interlinear glosses were commissioned and submitted, and these too are included below.

I believe, I always have believed

(Song)

I believe, I always have believed
In the eternal life of the soul,
The good, the lover of the world,

¹ If memory serves, my translations were shewn to a Russian lady, who was a professional translator living in Moscow, for her assessment. Though she knew no Georgian, she ventured to question the quality of the translator's competence in English, of which she took a dim view!

² Eight of the stories I translated are available in M. Ahashba's Abkhaz translation in the book *Važa Pšavela. Až'v abžk'a* 'Vazha Pshavela. Stories', published in Sukhum in 1987.

Scarred by the fate of this same world.
I believe that, though the ashes of kind hearts
Be scattered over the land by the wind,
Yet in each of us there will burn
Hotly a wish forlorn —
To repress evil, and that this
Will ever be a defence of the good,
Help, succour and saviour
Of the downtrodden and needy.
Nature does not totally extinguish a kind heart,
She carries it along with her from the very dawn of time.

February 1888

Bak'ur

Tell us, Elizbar,
In Eggho what did occur.
How did the Daghestanis fall upon Bak'ur's fortress-home?

I do not want old sorrow
Our hearts again to furrow.
Who am I to speak? It is for Bak'ur
To vaunt his own valour...
The life of me and others
The grave extinguishes.

That why say you, man?
A kick upon yourself why land?

In truth this is all I want to say,
Or should I boast while lying, pray?
I was unable to take his side,
I could not give up — so sweet it seemed — my life...

Bak'ur's skill in the fight
You should have seen with your own eyes!
I'm pained at heart; alive, I ask,
Why did I fall into the enemy's grasp?
Because of this my present thoughts
Well up inside my throat.
To lift my head I do not hasten,
Nor seem I able my waist to straighten.

At least you didn't flee — so why cry?

They robbed you of the chance to die...
Why judge you as a cause for shame
That in which there is no blame?
We too know, thus did we discover
This news by some talk or other;
None censured you — by God's grace —
None talked of you in disgrace.
We entreat you, the news of the war
To tell us now just as you saw.

A huge enemy-force descended
And like a fence all round we were encircled.
For seven days with guns we kept it at bay,
And many besides we managed to slay;
The women were measuring out our powder dry —
In truth no praise for them's too high! —
On day eight powder and shot dried up,
Completely did they run out.
Our labour then and there
We deemed to be in despair.
Without sleep, food or water —
How we were then, one day the enemy will ponder! —
We were betrayed by cruel fate,
Put under pressure, left isolate.
Ever forward advanced the enemy-station,
Till it quite engulfed the fortress-foundation.
Finally there remained only our walled castle
For Gud-Xadara and Dido tribes to grapple.
“Must we be left with women and children to the mercy of the foe,
Must we this shame upon our necks bestow?!
Thereafter how could we ever hang again
Our armour and weapons about our frame?”

Bak'ur turned to flame,
From him just sighs and moans there came...
His heart turned to flint,
His eyes took on a steely glint.
“A curse upon the mother of the foe!” he swore
And across his sword his hand did draw.
Then saying: “Now see your fate!”
His wife and child did instantly decapitate.
The enemy he went forth to meet at the castle-gate,
I too followed after him in his wake.

He leapt at them, his sword a-brandishing,
And his blade from France a laugh began a-flashing.
Twelve he slew at the castle-door,
One was laid to rest, then on top one more.
At length the tiger's claws were spent,
And Bak'ur too to sleep he went.

March 1899

Some day it will happen — I shall die

(Song)

Some say it will happen — I shall die,
I shall be consigned to earth,
My heart and feelings I shall intermingle
With the sands of my cold grave...
Frenzied worms
Will wrap themselves about my heart,
No longer will my beautiful, lush-haired one
Be able to succour me with her sobbing;
My friends the violets
In vain will be indignant.
In vain will the stars
Descend to earth from the sky.
A mourning-siren from the river will burst,
Swiftly bounding from on high;
The fissure in the rock will break
And embed itself in the gorge...
Alas! these I shall no longer be able to see
Once into a corpse I have turned!

May 1886

I feel like singing and I shall sing

(Song)

I feel like singing and I shall sing —
Three sores pain my heart:
Thinking about the past upsets me,
In the present there is no meaning,
And my thoughts for the future
No-one has made them shine!

In mists it is wrapped,
Feebly does the star flicker,
No longer can I tear my eyes from it
Once having seen it.
By stubborn gazing at it
I have been turned into an object of reproach.

And in my heart an ulcer grows,
It confines my soul and saps my strength,
I have no desire of death,
Though my torment makes me think of that,
And this existence of mine
Reminds me of poor Amiran.

His sword lies at his side, and his dog
Faithfully gnaws at his iron chains;
Neither does the sword come near this hero
Nor can he himself reach over to it.
The gnawed-through chain is whole again,
He sees it so every morning;
The fire of torment and misery burn
Both master and his abode;
The ray of what's to come dissipates
The hero's sighs and groans.

May 1903

Voice from the grave

Sharpen your sword, little brother,
The enemy has taken up position on the mountain;
They will lay waste our land,
They will fall upon us.
Sharpen it, so sharpen it
That it suspend its blade on a hair.
If grace there be, the short sword will again
Be worthy of the enemy's blood on its edge!
Here they come, the cursed ones,
In ranks, fearless along the road.
Very soon guns will thunder,
Smoke will settle on smoke...
They will devastate our land,
They will set sister crying over brother!...
Sharpen it, sharpen it well,

Let it not be blunted on bone.
The blessing of the Lord is lit
On the shield of the motherland's defender...
The kiss of Queen Tamar
Is imprinted on his sword as a seal.
Be bold, brother, do not waver,
What, pray, makes you hesitate?
A sudden death is preferable
To a bleak existence on earth!

My heart too is surging, but what can I do?
I am just insubstantial bones,
By the earth I have my arms
Held firm, now bereft of strength,
My soul is with God — there, where
The heavenly powers shine.
But remembrance of my country
Lies buried right here beside me,
Constantly before my eyes is flashing
The image of my motherland.
Forgotten the Iberians will never be
By this your small citizen of K'axeti.

December 1893

That in truth is not manliness

(Song)

That in truth is not manliness
When someone eggs you on and makes you brash.
A man would I call you only if
Of your own inclination you shew your worth.

Nor to call it manliness would I wish
When you throttle the one you vanquish.
A man would I call you only when
One throttled by another you were to tend.

Tell me, who has styled it manly virtue
When it is oppressors that you nurture?
Rather is it true manliness
When you suffer for the oppressed.

And no manliness begins
When with full stomach you sing your hymns,
Or when you behave as superior to others,
And because of this despise us, your brothers,
When from your minstrelsy you give none peace
But ever vaunt and overheat.
A man then surely would I call you
Were you to sing in spite of thirst and hunger.

June 1900

The law of the world is thus

(Song)

The law of the world is thus:
We depart, others remain;
In place of the dead right soon
Replacements come.
Life loves life,
And that is why it established this as law:
Apparently it created death
Itself just to restore.
For that reason the weak it loathes
Just like some old clothes;
Since it loves the young, the new,
With them may each year be adorned.
We shall perish — love,
Our own, secreted in our heart,
We individually lose, and we suppose
It to be a universal loss.
After death we are lost to love,
Yet love remains alive as before,
It flits around like a butterfly,
Agreeable, entirely good,
It has as its kingdom the beating of hearts,
The arousing of passions it has as a parent.
It sets the hearts of the living beating again,
Planting violets and roses within.
Because of love the buck cries,
Because of love the nightingale sings,
And because of love the meadow greens,
Because of love Nature thrives —
Down to the final fly...

In the sea a youth is drowned,
Crazed for his own beloved.
Glory to the world's creative force,
How well it has framed its laws!

August 1985

Amiran

Amiran, arise, why do you sleep?
Scatter shallots to your steed!
You who are of woman spurned,
Surely it is tears (not sleep) that by you are yearned.

(Traditional)

Huge of body,
A man can be seen in the rock,
Gall that melts the heart
Silently boils in his breast.

An unfeeling chain around his arms
Is coiled like a snake,
And a cobweb over his eyes
Has fastened like a net.

Upon his body hang ice
And moss of black hue,
He stands upon his knees
Awaiting the one who'll break his chains.

Set straight ahead of him
His sword grows rusty.
Rest he spurns,
Shedding his womanly tears.

This slave seems forgotten
By man below, on high by heaven;
They no longer recall his
Slaying of demons and devils.

Sharing the fate of the tormented one,
Faithful Pinia has lain down at his feet.
This tiny being

Has a strange obsession:

Unceasingly with its tongue
It licks the chain — it strives to break it,
That the tortured one may himself release
And tear asunder those foul smiths,

Who hammered on the anvil
The chain to keep him bound,
Who took no pity on this righteous man
But sent him, a prisoner, to the mountain.

As soon as Pinia to breaking-point
Brings the wire of iron,
A stony-hearted smith emerges
To start his hammer a-clanking on the anvil.

And as before the chain's made whole,
To extinguish the heart of the slave.
This godless torment, pray,
When will it sacrifice this hero?

When Amiran arises,
Girt in his chain-mail,
Then will the ice melt away,
Then will his smile return again.

In his hand he will hold his sword,
He will gaze out over the valley,
The mountains and rocks will echo a roar,
To him their heads they will bow once more.

The earth will tremble, the clouds
Will billow up and bounce in black,
The comely, tiny stars
Will settle in ranks upon the mountains.

Wherever the sea perceives the news,
Devoutly to be desired by all who are good,
A sweet instrument it will play
And stretch its hand up to the sky.

Thence will the clouds descend,

In profusion will come both hail and lightning,
The crucifiers of the righteous will cry:
“Alas, how great his suffering!”

The smiths will repent their sins,
They will shatter their anvils and hammers,
Over the remnants of their tools
They will shed many bitter tears.

13 December 1884
December 1885

The old song of cavaliers

For one thing only did our mother raise us,
This is why she would chant us our lullaby —
That we should don our armour,
Always be sharpening our blades,
So as to cast constant fear into the heart
Of our posturing neighbours.
Let us not allow our country to be trampled
By one thousand different rivals!
We have bidden farewell to kin,
To wife, to child and field;
To death we have promised our lives,
To a bathing in blood we have promised our faces.
As long as we live we shall not grant
To the foe the right to harvest our soil.
Will mothers ever again rear
Warriors to be our peers?!

For the motherland our lives
We shall consume in flames, like straw;
With hearts at peace we perish
While singing words like these:
“If mothers die, it matters not,
For sons remain to their fathers —
New wings will sprout upon
The army of this earthly existence;
It is the rule that the son of a good father
Will again inspire fear into the foe;
Tomorrow and two days hence none will dare
To invade our homes by force.
All succumb to him who life

Does not throw away like straw.
While we breathe, we concede to none
The right to harvest our native soil.
To death we have promised our lives,
To a bathing in blood we have promised our faces.
Will mothers ever again rear
Warriors to be our peers?!”

From no-one shall we snatch their homeland,
So let none dispute with us over ours,
Otherwise we shall bring upon them such a day
That even the dead will burst out laughing.
We'll not give our land to another
As long as life remains to us —
You'll never be able to make us retreat
With poison as the gift presented to it.
We shall be drawn towards the foe,
That we may burst forth like lions.
Of our backs no opponents will ever have sight —
Were you to see us, I trust it meets with your delight!
Our children will find the stuff of legend
In the battles and wars we wage!
Rather than betray our country to the foe
We'll plunge a knife into our hearts.
To none of foreign stock will we grant
The right to harvest our native soil.
Let this be the lesson for all mothers
When they sing their children a lullaby!
Will mothers ever again rear
Warriors to be our peers?!

November 1904

Conscience's Song

I know not where to turn,
To whom to tell my torment,
Conscience burnt in fire
Who will pity, pray?!

Where have I offended, Lord,
That you have set me as a cross upon mankind,
And my whispers
You have laid upon men's hearts as a tithe?

Men suffer, cannot bear me,
Seek hurriedly to cast me out...
But many are those who, neglecting me,
Have blackened their reputation.

I shall not leave men's hearts alone,
This is my eternal obligation,
I shall reveal absolutely all
The faults residing there.

To one official I paid a visit,
A receiver of bribes, a corruptor of the world;
He said to me: "Where do you think you're coming, foul pest,
I'm too busy for you today!..."

I answered thus: "Hold your tongue,
You should be ashamed to rob the needy,
With no morsel to eat you sacrificed
A mother of four small children!"

He rose and let fly a kick at me,
Again and again he beat me:
"You rotten thing, how dare you
Speak to me like that?!"

To how many others — who will count? — have I said:
"How could you sell your mother?"
All to a man rained upon me kicks
And the words: "How dare you say this?"

I beg you to remove me from the world,
You, heavenly Father, who have no overlord.

1886

As once you did, o lady, as once you did

(Song)

As once you did, o lady, as once you did,
Cast me a glance, shew me your laugh.
You, at least, do not betray me,
I shall die — weep for me then.

On top of a lofty mountain
Dig for me a grave,
The sands of my motherland
Cast upon me in profusion.
Already forgotten by the world,
You too will soon forget me,
Soon you will find a fiancé,
Whom tomorrow you will be marrying.
To these crags, at least, cry out
These my last instructions:
Let them stand proud, bare of chest,
Let them not admit any enemy!
Let them not start to fragment...
Let the eagles rear their chicks,
Let them whirl around my grave,
Very soon let them raise their call;
Let the mountains give joy to the flowers,
On their necks let them carry the mists,
Though I'm dead, let them spread dew upon me,
Then shall I be alive as before.

February 1886

Loneliness

The eagle has ceased to visit me,
No longer does it bark at me from above my head,
Now that a creature of goodness no longer enthuses me,
I no longer feel anger at the evil in the world;
The foe divests me of my soul and flays my skin,
As an executioner he stands at my door.
My eagle is nowhere to be seen
To beat its wings upon my shoulder
That I might flare up like a container of lime,
That I might burn over my own flame,
Or that I might pull the trigger of my gun
Or set my hand upon my sword.
I am no longer any good at anything,
Utter cowardice seems to be my lot.

Come back, o eagle, where have you gone?
From afar I recognise you by your call.
As soon as I sense your approach,
That instant shall I change for the better;

Immediately I'll leave the earth behind,
I'll take up residence in the sky.
Sometimes I'll strum my *panduri**,
Sometimes I'll sing to the accompaniment of a *tari**.
Sometimes I weep, sometimes I pray,
Sometimes I pour forth anger and venom upon venom.

When the eagle is by me,
It sits upon my right shoulder —
The kingly crown rests upon my head,
I am seated on the royal throne!
Who would dare to insult me then?
I am offered greeting on the point of battle.
When the eagle leaves me,
I am a limp rag, less substantial than a rag.
Hide me, do not reveal me,
Don't make the mistake of setting me among an army of revellers.

April 1912

* Georgian instruments

What created me a human being?

(Song)

What created me a human being?
Why did I not come as rain,
That I might forever have been
As a bead on the bosom of the clouds,
Or to benefit the earth
As dew or ice-cold snow?
My master would not have abandoned me then
Thus desolate and forlorn!

Into the very sky he would have snatched me up,
He would have borne me along as his child.
I would not then have needed like this
Always and ever to be on my guard.
Enamoured of the sun I might have journeyed,
Putting death to shame.
On high the sky, below dry land
I would have had at my command.

I could have rejoiced, mountain and valley
When verdant I'd have seen,
Watered by my sweat,
As well as flowers, inside and out.
I'd have thrust out my bosom,
By night to moon, by day to sun.
I'd have given a taste of life's sweet thrill
To the surroundings all too mortal!

In a heart turned to snow
Would have remained to me the firey hope
That still my death
Into life would be transformed
And embrace around the neck
Mother Nature now renewed.

December 1913

Yet again shall I see the spring

(Song)

Yet again shall I see the spring,
The violet with neck upstretched,
Death into life transforming,
Its divine loveliness,
The mountain and valley greenness,
Beautiful, all blossoming.

Yet again shall I see the sky thundering,
Rain in place of snow cascading,
The soil replenishing,
The rivers babbling,
Torment no-one any longer suffering
Or the pangs of hunger feeling;
The victory of truth then being
Hailed by eagles over the mountain;
I too shall echo the refrain,
My heart no longer feeling pain.

Two days ago and yesterday too I met
A snake trying to poison a violet,
Venom and poison spreading,
And yet no harm inflicting.

Today I see the violet's full mantle,
Sweet of scent, all gentle.
I gaze upon and remark quite simply:
"How exquisite it is, how lovely!"
Snakes on their bellies crawl,
Choked by bitterness and gall.

Yet again in profusion shall I witness
Roses and blooming violets,
The transformation to dust and ashes of those
Who only yesterday were full of boasts;
I'll see spreaders of venom and strife
Destroyed and giving up their life;
Desirous of our death I shall spy
Ravens no longer with the power to cry!

I'll see life's breeze a-blowing
Upon these environs that are dying,
The light a thousand-fold intensify
For the sun and moon up in the sky,
As their beneficence they generously bestow
Upon our land oppressed down here below,
And we, the victims of harsh force,
Will shed no bitter tears henceforth;
The sweet singing of the birds
In every quarter will be heard.

The longed-for visage I'll be viewing
From the land of the dead arising,
At his side his sacrificial lambs standing,
There too to his allegiance sworn,
Devoted youths
With love beyond the norm,
Their bodies adorned with wounds,
This the fate of our country's faithful sons,
And angels setting wreathes
Of laurel on the heads of our heroes.

January 1906

Thrush, it's the same song you sing

(Song)

Thrush, it's the same song you sing
You were singing one hundred years ago!
You neither curse nor mourn any man,
Nor from any do you ask anything!
Whether dusk is drawing on or day is dawning,
There you sit, sweetly crooning...
You resemble a babe lying in its cradle,
All ready for sleep.
God you have already acknowledged to be your father
And yourself His child!

But why should you complain? At what
Should your mind be troubled?!
If you desire, you will live in the valley,
If you desire, to the mountain you will journey.
You have no yearning in your heart, beautiful one,
For conflicting thoughts and beliefs.
Hungry? You will not grieve
But feed on what you've stored away.
You will pass away without ever once
Fussing over the way you look.
Not for you the grief of grey hair
That snows upon men's heads.
Never once have you looked back
Along the path at your own trail.
Not once will you ever say:
"For what have I exhausted my youth?!"
You sing with heart at peace,
Gently you place wing on wing.
You have never thanked
The tree that provides your food,
For you view all as under obligation
And consider them to be your servant.
You have never needed to ask
Of God assistance,
Just as you gaze upon sheep in the meadow,
You apparently view wolves even so!

Your calm, child-like temperament
Has never been perturbed by a foe.
For a moment only lasts your anxiety
Over hatred or over love.
No yoke of obligation

Is set upon your neck;
Not a second's thought have you given
To either another's or your own fate.

But what should bring weariness,
I muse, to your heart and mind,
When you yourself are joy incarnate
And know not what it is to be a slave?!
None can snatch from you your motherland,
Nor can any take issue with you over hearth and home;
Were such to happen, you still
Will sing and burst into laughter,
And at some isolated place
In a branch you'll have sleep's grace.
A blanket of carefreeness
Will blissfully you encompass.

Never have your tear-free eyes
Been bathed in tears;
For twenty years no wounded heart
Have you had to carry in your breast.
You will have no fancy
When dead for resurrection —
For death you turn into life
By implanting freedom of spirit.
You are ignorant of the sufferings of men,
And of that for which we perish...
In many things I envy you but in many
I cannot speak of you with praise.

July 1899

The Violet

I have sprung to life in a dense forest... While I live, with my beauty I shall bring sweetness to the forest, the grass and that rock which gazes over from across the river, with its bosom clothed in moss; I shall spread my delightful aroma all around. I am loved by all; just here that rotting tree-stump has its eye constantly fixed on me; it laughs in my direction and wants to come over — to kiss me, but it can't; only from a distance will it continue to laugh and smile at me, poor thing; it may be ugly, but in general there will always be a wealth of kind-heartedness depicted on its face.

And do you think it's only that stump which rejoices in my existence? The trees too with their dry, beard-like foliage joyfully look down on me from above — themselves bare-headed, they cover me with their branches: "Our little violet mustn't catch cold; nothing must upset her," they say. The cascading rain they don't allow to fall directly upon me, for in a moment the rain can strip me of my leaves, and leaflessness means death for me. No, the trees — birch, beech, the nut, wild pear and elder guard me on all sides; droplets of rain on their branches they hold and then slowly sprinkle on my face, just two or three, to produce a dew-like effect, and thus bathe my face for me. I gracefully bend my neck and yearn that I could only sing and that he who gave me life had endowed me with the talent to praise on high the sky and clouds, the sun, these trees that protect me, these mountains, those groves and fluffy-chested birds who hop about amongst the withered, yellow leaves with their red and green plumage and from time to time chirp right in my face; they embolden me and themselves rejoice in my being alive. My single month's existence betters another's two-year span; nevertheless a long life is indeed the object of my desires. This morning a beech-warbler sang away close by me — it was a thing of beauty, red-necked and fluffy-chested; it too, just like me, took pride in itself as it looked over its breast and shoulders; everything takes pride in itself, everything enjoys life, everything loves nature.

Yesterday there was thunder in the heavens; but thunder and lightning cause us no fear — thunder portends rain, and rain, after all, gives us suck at the breast of Mother Earth. The sun is a father who looks down on us from above, caresses us and keeps a watchful eye over us. Plants rejoice at the coming of rain — they rejoice and are full to overflowing with joy. Shortly they'll be donning new dresses and jackets. Look, it's two days since my companion, the foxglove, sprang up; she rejoices, she rejoices, poor thing, forever shaking her head, now way down low, now way up high, now bowing to the earth, now saluting the sunshine; she whispers to me and tells me tales about life and love. Now and again she'll even let forth a peel of laughter, embrace me and kiss me. Yesterday morning both of us, my companion and I, wept.

How pitiless is man?! Whatever he sees, he wants to use for his own advantage. Probably he can't properly evaluate our beauty! In front of us there passed a man — on one shoulder lay an axe, over the other hung a rifle. He approached a magnificent beech

with its branches spread all around, laid into it with the axe and brought it tumbling down. The pitiable thing let out a moan as it fell. Beyond us a wild paeony had sprung up and had not yet risen clear of the dry, fallen leaves. When the tree crashed down, the paeony shook off her covering of leaves and shone forth in a blaze of red — her heart sank, and tears welled up in it.

At midday a tired and exhausted pigeon came, perched in front of us on an elm-branch and began to coo. It also rejoiced in the coming of spring and in the fact that once more it saw a familiar location where all was at peace. Suddenly, a gun went off; the pigeon ceased cooing, for a moment held on to the branch with one foot then fell to the ground, landing in front of me. Blood trickled from its beak, and it closed its eyes; the blood which had spilled out settled in spots on the leaves. This sent a shiver through me and the foxglove... I hear nothing distinctly now; only some kind of heaving, rumbling and dull hullabaloo is all that I perceive...

Alas, how wretched is the violet,
sprung to life on the mountain-side!
Poor thing, she is frozen by the cold
and struck about the head by lightning.
God has given to the wretch
a short period of life;
the adornment she brings to the world
is but a pitiful moment long.
When the violet's death approached,
she sobs out: "Alas!
Lord, if thou bestowed life on me,
why didst thou not grant me a long one?"

The Withered Beech

Everyone, including me, adores the lofty mountain, bedecked with greenery and flowers; the smell of spring, the newly risen grass which, having got the better of the recently melted ice, has sprung up stain-free and unharmed and which now gazes upon the sun and the world; it conceals itself and holds its breath in silence, though across its

gentle, tender face is spread an indescribable vision of love. “I am alive again, by the grace of God, my Creator!” it seems to murmur. what a pleasure it is — the frost on the trees yields to the warmth of spring: some are coming into leaf, others bursting into blossom. Nothing can compare with the misty, dense, dark, shrouded forest...

But at this moment I forget everything; in front of my eyes there stands only a single, withered beech. It too is standing in the dense forest at the head of a crag. and this crag is covered with a green velvet-like moss. The other trees stand at a distance from the withered beech, as though purposefully distancing themselves from it and haughtily looking down their noses at it. Nearby the withered beech have grown up a few clumps of raspberry, their leaves nibbled by roe and buck. They have extended themselves and peer down into the river, whilst within its roots some liquorice-plants are growing, evergreen throughout both winter and summer, their leaves indented.

All trace of life has drained from the withered beech; a mere three branches are left in the centre beneath its waist — its upper portion has broken off and plunged down the ravine, coming to rest like an improvised bridge. Each year only three or four leaves sprout on these three branches, and they are pale, dessicated and yellowed. But if you were to look at the other trees, you would see that they stand weighed down with the nourishment that Nature has endowed. They count the withered beech a mere nothing and pay it no attention. Only in winter-time when they themselves are stripped of their wedding-garb and more or less approach a dried up state, coming themselves to resemble the withered beech, only then might they snatch a glance at it (and that obliquely)... This occurs just at the moment when the full-faced ‘Mother Goddess’ of the place with her shining visage and flowing locks relates them a tale of love, purity and life by way of a consolation for the realm of Nature. Then it is that they jibe the withered beech: “Why are you staring, wretch?! Listen to what Mother is saying!”

The withered beech breathes a deep sigh and, with neither bad nor good grace, refuses to listen to these conceited plants but lends both ears to the tale of the local deity; each of her words pierces its heart like a spear as it quietly pours forth a torrent of tears.

Pitiable beech! Time was when it too stood with branches proudly spread; it used to tower high above the other trees and cover the entire forest with its own massive leaves and branches like a shelter. The eagle passing down from the mountains to the valley

used to rest on its top and start to screech in pride. But now it resembles someone about to breath his last, ever on the verge of total collapse. Here and there the dry bark has peeled off the poor thing's trunk, and its bare flanks stand revealed. At one spot a longer strip of bark has come away and lies dangling down towards the ground — you would think a dagger had been plunged into it and its insides ripped out! And it must have a good few worms, for I pass close by it several times and always see a woodpecker perched upon it. This cursed bird is forever sitting upon it and, with all the strength it can muster, rapping at it with that damned, accursed beak; all the while it even shrieks and squeals at it, as though hammering home a message of some sort. Just look at how many places it has holed out the beech right to the core. It's all set to start grinding out its very heart. The beech remains standing, standing unalarmed, with brow unruffled, saying nothing, kind or unkind.

When the wind blows, the other trees rock in response to it — only the withered beech does not move; but in the past, when it was healthy and full of life, at the blowing of the wind it would begin to heave like the sea, its leaves and branches producing claps like thunder! The withered beech's branches used proudly to beat the ground and break upon it. Yes, now the withered beech can no longer respond as of old to the wind like the other trees, can no longer courageously turn its breast to the assault of a storm. The withered beech will bend no more, and, if it snaps, what can we say about it?... It will crack, come crashing down, lie on its side; its roots will be exposed, raised up towards heaven, as though praying and beseeching God, appealing for help.

In summer-time the withered beech is even more to be pitied — the other trees are adorned with leaves of green, unharmed and with no thought of grief. On them a thousand birds perch to sing; wood-pigeons coo on their branches; the grey warbler strikes out a never-ending song; the rock-bunting fills the surrounds with its shrill whistling as it restlessly flits from branch to branch. With straining neck the roe and buck seek the shade that they afford. These leafy trees proudly look down upon the sad, withered beech; it's an embarrassment to them, and they say: "Would that you were not ruining our beauty!" They have no idea that the withered beech is more spoken of than they are — that there are and always will be those who like and love the withered beech, fallen upon misfortune as it is... In the village they think of it at least three times a day.

Should a father ask his children: “Where did you have the cattle today?”, they will point out the general area around the withered beech.

Word has it in the village that in the rock at the base of the withered beech a leopardess has made a lair and produced a litter. They say that hunters have seen the tracks of a she-leopard and her cubs around the tree.

Another tells how he cut off from the withered beech the mushroom from which tinder-wicks are made.

In truth, the foolish trees do not know that folk have not yet forgotten the name of the withered beech and still recall its glory.

Is everything that's withered really
to be despised by man?!

A thousand of the living are frequently
surpassed a hundred fold by one now dead.

One look at you, deserted one,
and a bitter grief lies upon my heart,
for I see that you are sad
and bereft of protection;
it's as if they have struck the alarum,
the bell that calls for mourning.

I wish to share with you
the woe that has simmered and boiled
within my heart for so long,
and to feel the stream of tears upon my face.
For what purpose were you born, poor thing,
when in death you are not mourned?!

For you there is no death,
neither is there redemption!

Who will seal your coffin?

Who will light for you a candle?!

Alas! how difficult it is for one to die
and for one's name to disappear forever!

Perhaps once in a thousand nights an owl will perch upon the withered beech and in a forlorn voice begin her heart-broken cry: "Could you not find it then?", and, when worn out with crying she hears the reply: "No, no", the poor creature hangs down her head and in a low voice hoots into her own bosom.

Of a winter a wolf usually visits the withered beech; hunched up at its side, he bays, pained with hunger. The withered beech stands unperturbed, motionless, uttering nothing in praise or censure; it knows neither pity nor hatred; its heart boils neither with hostile nor with friendly feelings. The withered beech thinks only of itself, the past, the present and future. It is as though sorrow has been hammered deep into its heart. Occasionally it glances at one small, hoped-for shoot that has sprung up at the far end of a root and which is waiting for the sun and rain in order to grow. This alone is its consolation...

The Weeping Rock

With firm and unbending foot stands the rock, a scowl on its face and angry. Thus it stands, unchanging through winter and summer. This rock is an entire mountain transformed into rock and stone, face to face with the sky, the sun and, down below, the earth. At a casual glance how disgustingly, how unattractively deformed it is, with boulders irregularly and chaotically heaped upon one another; in some places blackened, here and there yellowed, elsewhere blue, scratched, scarred, worn and channelled by heavy rain and mountain-currents. But if you gaze up at it and keep on gazing at it, observing it carefully, you'll see it as a thing of beauty, like a real man who has passed through a thousand wars, cut and wounded by a thousand foes, still looking just as confident, valiant and proud, and still the warrior. Perhaps it's because enemies are legion that it's necessary to be constantly vigilant, constantly looking in a single direction, with neck strained and tense of face, no doubt because that is the direction from which the foe is expected.

A double ache gnaws at the heart of the rock, one pertaining to the sky, the other to the valley. It looks out upon the valley, the rolling meadows, such lovely vistas. The valley appear to the mountain like one who has lain down in repose to sleep. This is what eats away at the heart of the rock: "Why is it not forever standing on its feet like me? Why is it not vigilant?" It curses the valley for its useless riches. Yet it also loves the valley,

constantly staring into its face; unable to get its fill of the love it feels towards it, it wants to go down to it and embrace it. But it cannot but comply with Nature's immutable laws — it is a rock and cannot move close to the valley. Not once does it merit, poor thing, the taste of the sweetness of love. This fact merely adds to the numbness and aching in the rock's heart, but by the same token it has apparently strengthened a thousand fold the love it feels in that heart.. How desperately it yearns, poor thing, to pluck just one rose or violet growing on its own beloved breast! Gripped by a love for which there is no hope of consummation, it overcomes its hopelessness by regularly asking the eagles, children that the rock itself has reared, for news of the valley, when they, returned from their peregrinations, come and are perched upon its rim...

Ah, you wretched, wretched rock! I do understand — I do — your plight and your yearning. But you are nevertheless a rock — a rock you will remain — you will never waste away for the simple reason that a rock you are...

Yes, the eagles, sporting around the head of their parent, tell it: "This or that day blood was shed in the valley, or this or that day love revealed its face"...

The rock weeps by night in order that none may see and none may censure. Its weeping is greater than that of the heavens. Even so, it does not pour forth as many tears as it might — it is afraid of inundating the valley. No-one knows this, and therefore you regularly hear them say: "It's a rock, it's strong, it knows nothing of weeping, it will never succumb to distress!" The mountains listen to the rock's weeping with heads hung down and don like a helmet the black mist of their black thoughts. With tears in its eyes the tall, evergreen mountain-grass, suspended on the rock's summit, heart-rent hears its mother crying and itself takes up the refrain in muted tones, but its voice is swallowed up by the weeping of the rock. The eagles, their hearts untouched by sorrow, learn through the rock's weeping the essence of that feeling and cover their heads beneath their wings. The rock is usually the first to welcome the moon, and the moon for its part, as soon as it peers over its head, will murmur to the rock: "Why do you weep, why, my poor friend?"

A tear will fall upon the rock's face, wash down its bosom and continue downwards with a sob. On it goes, bewailing the rock like this:

I am the rock's tear-drop, Mother Nature,
product of its misery;

the mass of flowers upon your bosom
are the product of the moisture I bestow.

The valley also questions the rock, and a tear-drop replies thus:

Firm it stands, my sister, as of old,
rock-like, as befits a rock,
though finally yearning for you
has reduced it to these, its customary tears.

Else it is well, whole
in head, in breast and foundation.

Imagine a fortress built of lime
kneaded with milk coming
to the rock — impossible! — even so immovable is the rock
with its face looking so morose.

The valley senses the rock's tear-drop on her bosom, sips it in and assimilates it. When the eagles relate this to the rock, it will find a little solace. But is it really only the rock which groans and weeps — within its heart someone else, incarcerated in darkness, is groaning. An excess of misery has dried up the tears in his eyes, or perchance he has cried so much that he has quite drained his reservoir of tears. What has the rock to cry over? It can at least see the sky, the sun and the earth, but that living being groans away within its heart, deprived of everything, save torment. Bound in thick chains, dejected, his beard is layered with moss, and moss is plastered all over his body too... His groans are heard by none but the rock. Straight in front of him leans his sword; right there lies his flail. Beholding these causes his heart to burst all the more. Once upon a time he used to use them, but now he, together with his weaponry, has become prey to rust. Day changes into day, night into night — the sun rises and sets, but no respite is afforded to this man. Century follows on the heels of century, but nowhere is there succour for him, nowhere any release...

Who is there to aid this hero? No-one. Only one small dog attends to him. The whole year through does it unceasingly lick the chain, but, when it is brought to the point of snapping, the smith hammers it on the anvil, and the chain becomes whole once more. Cheated of hope, Amiran [the Caucasian Prometheus] utters a groan — the rock is set in

motion and addresses him thus in an aside: “Do not despair, do not lose hope! Surely you see how many storms pass over my brow, and yet I stand firm as ever.”

Of a night the sprites gather at the foot of this rock and sing:

It upsets the angels, but we love
to witness another’s torment.

May your torture continue, you deserve it!

Why did you interfere with the abode of the ogres?!

You brought a sea of blood down upon them
and piled up stacks of corpses.

Your sword was continuously cutting to pieces
the ogres’ bodies and the armour on their bodies.

Now get you gone to Daredzhan
and to sister Tina.

Since you have not had your fill, Amiran, of groans,
implore your whelp

to lick and gnaw through the chain;
stretch out your hand for your sword...

You who seek goodness for the world,
your glory is passed.

Ten thousand times more groan on,
you have as yet sighed but little,
in such bitterness as this consume
all the days of your life!

When the sprites compete this song, a bird the size of a warbler will emerge from the rock, follow the path of light and shriek at them:

May God on high bring his wrath upon you
through the power of the Holy Trinity,
since the torment of Amiran
has not enthused you with pity.
Once again you will see Amiran
sword in hand, armour on his body;

may he pursue you, may he make you squeal
with his own mighty arm!

The Lofty Mountains

Standing and expectant! Boundless is the mountains' sense of expectancy; like a limitless sea it lies upon their heart, clotted red, the colour of blood, quivering in their bosom. But yet, from without, their countenance reveals nothing — nothing but an empty stare. And this is indeed a sign of expectancy. Who knows what mysteries reside in the heart of mountains, what fire boils within and spills out?

O mountains, mountains! What is it, who is it that you await? Can it be that you have a beloved, for a long while unseen? Have you lost a son perhaps? Perhaps you have a brother or a mother who has journeyed far and of whom no news has reached you? Answer comes there none! They stand with brow unruffled. Expectant in the past, expectant now, and again in the future expectancy will be their lot. What will dry up that sea of expectation in their heart? It has no end, no fulfilment, like a deity...

When every living creature, every insect, the grass, flowers, river and the restless, unwearying breeze fall asleep, then and only then will they breathe a heavy sigh and shed a tear. We, mankind, in such circumstances, are wont to say: "Ah, what sorrow lies upon my heart like a heavy boulder!"

Mountains, why do you not sing?! Must I really die without being able to hear your voice, your singing?! Why don't you laugh? Shew me your smile at least, my dear ones! How could a single thought have so enslaved, ensnared and beat you to its will that every other force and sign of life have been trampled down within your heart and mind?! No, no — from time to time you too rejoice — and to think that the world supposes you feel nothing! I do know, don't I, that torches are lit in your heart whenever a proud eagle in freedom wheels around your summit and descends to rest upon your lap? How lovely you are then! How fitting for you it is that that child you have reared is so bold, unbending and beautiful! I am right, am I not, in thinking that he is also your messenger who reports to God and brings Him your news...?

Have you no opinion, no feeling? Do you not dream? Of course you do! What else are those beautiful flowers that adorn your breast? They are your dreams, hopes, consolation!

Why do you shroud your head in thick mists if you are not silently contemplating something and are not concealing that thought from us, the sons of men?! Why do you produce the grass? Why do you pour forth the cold springs? Why do you send rock-falls crashing down? Why do you nurture buck-ibexes? Whom are you seeking to deceive, you noble ones?!

They stand expectant. The rain pours down on their head; the lightning sings their golden crest; the thunder-bolt plays around their eyes and frequently even embeds itself like an arrow in their breast. All this is a mere nothing. Often half a mountain crumbles and slides down into the ravine in a fall of rock. This is nothing — if only a crag and the boulders remain thus expectant. Go, whoever among you does not wish to be with me here, high up, close to the sky, and live out your life in the valley below!

It's snowing. It's freezing. It's cold. The stones are cracking. The mountains have donned, as it were, a shroud, as though they were dead. They call upon us to bury them, to bewail them. Yet *we* rather expect to receive burial from *them*...

They stand expectant. Their heart aches; it aches a lot. But they do not perish; they do not pine away. They are waiting — but for whom, for what? For something, surely, for something. And this something must be the sight of something not yet witnessed. They have seen and exhausted everything within the reach and compass of their eyes and heart. It is for something other, something new that their eyes and heart now thirst. This is surely the insatiability of their eyes and heart, isn't it? Yes, it's precisely that.

The Vulture

I

It was summer. The mountains were beginning to turn green. Only high up on the peaks could snow be seen; down below in the ravines there were piles of rock, fallen in rock-falls. The shepherds had driven their sheep and cattle up to the mountains for pasturing over the summer but were bitterly reproaching Fate — pestilence had broken out, and countless sheep and cattle were succumbing and perishing. They were no longer able to keep up with the skinning; rivulets of blood had merged with many a stream. In the gorges lay carcasses sadly scattered upon the piles of fallen rubble all around the shelters and sheep-folds. But for the birds and game-animals a blessed time had been

ushered in. The monstrous vultures, red kites, bearded vultures, crows and ravens were having a field-day; full to bursting and bloated on carrion they were sitting landing there on the rocks close by; with every movement of their feet and wings they were spreading blood around and flecking with red the rock-rhododendron, coarse-grass and viburnum.

II

One vulture with a full stomach was perched on top of a rock. Through over-eating it was breathing only with difficulty, but it was rolling its eyes more boldly and had fixed its greedy gaze on a pile of carrion down in the chasm. “Ha, ha, ha!” it said with a laugh at length, “just look, just look at that idiotic non-entity, that maggot, that miserable wretch! Would that she were to provide me with one good meal, and then we’d see how she’d malign and censure me! Place us on the scales, brother, and God shame me if I don’t outweigh two thousand nightingales. When I soar up into the air and spread out my wings by my side, a man’s eye can spot me from a thousand versts away, whilst, as for that bit of fluff, unless you stumble upon her, you simply can’t see her at all. No-one has ever seen her on the wing — apparently she creeps in bushes and thickets, gibbers away, and for this they heap praises on her. It seems she sleeps, has her eyes shut, while gibbering. Neither are they any match for my eyes, which never shut on me — I have them ever on the look-out for food and carrion. She just gibbers and gibbers away, has no thought of food and drink and at the same time fills the surrounds with curses aimed at me...”

Suddenly a ‘caw, caw, caw’ rang out — a black raven was making its way toward the vulture. First it sported with the vulture, which was perched haughtily there, and smashed it on the wing, wishing thereby to force it up, but as the vulture, which was weighed down by over-eating, could not move from the spot, the raven landed close by at its side and seated itself on the rock.

“Raven, raven!” said the vulture, turning to the raven, and began to ask in an overweening tone, “how did you put it, what were you telling me that day about the nightingale? — that she sang beautifully?...that you wished you too could be transformed into a nightingale? You brainless moron!”

“Yes, I say to you again precisely what I have told you already — I shall never forget her singing as long as I live, and, you had better believe it, I infinitely prefer hearing her sing to that pile of carrion over there!”

“Well, what was it like, what? Tell me now!” the vulture enquired again.

“She sang quite splendidly, splendidly! How often have I gorged myself on a carcass, be it the meat of different animals or birds, and yet never in my life have I experienced such a moment of sheer delight. But then, when I began to listen to the nightingale’s singing, my heart started to pound so that even I myself could clearly hear the sound of its throbbing; it did not subside or rest the whole night. Apart from this, there was nothing in the entire clearing by the river.”

“What were you doing in the clearing at night?” said the vulture in annoyance.

“Before carrion appeared on the mountain, I used to go into the valley to forage. And, as God is my witness, I used to find many a good picking. I couldn’t be bothered coming back up to the mountains and spent one night on top of a huge maple in a clearing by the river. That night I heard something I had never heard in my life before, and perhaps some day I’ll be judged worthy of hearing the voice of the nightingale once more. This very night perhaps I’ll go — I’m no longer hungry or anything. I’ll just go, perch upon that same maple and listen — in the morning I’ll be back with you here. On the second branch of that maple was sitting a crow. Although he was out of sorts, he nevertheless translated every word for me. I was attracted just to the voice and didn’t even hear the words. The crow had apparently come to understand the nightingale’s language well and translated it in great detail. Don’t you know that the crow hangs about the valley throughout the whole year and will easily have learnt the language!”

“What did it translate for you? Why won’t you tell me too?” the vulture asked again.

“Many things; who will count them?! I couldn’t memorise it all,” replied the raven. “But I do recall a little. This, it seems, is what the nightingale sings: ‘Burst through you lovely, beautiful flowers, you angels of the earth; I have sacrificed myself to you, my darlings. Without you may God grant me not a single day’s existence — you, you are my life. O forest, crown of the earth, may you forever rejoice in your leaves and fruit, stay ever green, be ever merry, and may I, your humble songstress, go on serenading you, praising and glorifying your beauty and creativity. May your purity be not stained by any

sin, so that there may be no reason for you to make me shed bitter tears and consume my heart in flames!

“Mountain-springs, ever flowing in glistening purity! Nature makes you flow as milk that you may quench the thirst of all creatures, that you may water the plants when they are on the point of drying up and withering, that you may cause them to rejoice, refresh them and make them hold their heads up high. Do not forget, I beg you, each and every grub, each and every worm, for they too thirst for life. And do not run dry — flow and ripple on! When I behold you, there ripples in my heart, just like you, a purity of feeling and boundless love. Lord God, bless the mountain-springs, bless the flowers, worship my forest, I beseech you by your grace and glory!

“O sun, the consolation of all living things, give warmth and heat to all with your benevolent rays, but do not burn, do not scorch, do not ruin the good deeds of man’s and Nature’s right hand. You, heavenly breeze, aid the sun, blend together and sow grace upon the earth! Forces of Nature, gather around me, hear my supplication: here the villages, here the shacks, there the orphans are crying, unfortunate and unhappy. Give succour — bring laughter where there are tears, bring fullness where there is hunger, I beseech you by your power and charity... Woe to the wretched! How many are crying! How many are sighing! And their tears well up in my heart, stifle my spirit and poison my being.

“How many shepherds are crying! Vultures and ravens drag away their livelihood, ugly, merciless, evil birds which find nourishment in another’s tears and find cause to shriek for joy at another’s grave. It terrifies me, it poisons my soul to think of them.’ And so on and so on.”

“What was that about vultures and ravens?” asked the vulture irately. “By the sun which she adjures, the vulture and raven are just as good as she is; like her they merely gibber away and cannot delight in the pleasures of this world! What spirit addled your brains that you didn’t jump upon her that very instant and batter the head off that miserable one, that wretched one, that...? Do you think that I would have let her get away with so much talk about me, had I been there?! Would my body not instantly be shewn to be unworthy of life, were I not straightway to tear her in two?”

“Had she directly spoken as she did in a formally dry speech, I too would simply have done just that to her, but she spoke in such a lovely and comely way that I lost control of my body — my talons stuck to the branch of the tree, my beak became numb — she enslaved and drained me of my strength. I am convinced that, had you been in my place, you wouldn’t have been able to find your voice, you wouldn’t have been able to raise even a chirp. Far from tearing her to pieces, this very evening I must go there and hear again the nightingale’s singing, and, if you wish, you come along too. Get your own back on her. It’s easy to kill her or to catch; she always sings with her eyes shut; with my own eyes I saw her in the morning — her eyes were closed, and thus was she pursuing her lament.”

“I’ll come along,” said the vulture, “and it’ll be a black day for her — you’ll see, I’ll shew you what I’ll do with her!”

“Well, just let’s see — follow me then, let’s be off!” replied the raven. A ‘caw’ went up as the raven flew off. The vulture too began to flap along after it, and they set off together.

III

A thick twilight fell when both the raven and the vulture swooped down into the great clearing onto the huge maple, alighted clumsily and unperturbably folded their wings.

Night well and truly began to draw on. The raven, with eyes staring and neck strained, was impatiently waiting for the nightingale to strike up a refrain. But the vulture had indecorously relaxed his food-pouch, shut tight his beak, spread out his wings and placed them like a white sack upon the maple-branch.

“Why doesn’t she sing? Where the hell has she gone, that damned ugly creature?” said the vulture at last. “Shout to her to find her voice.”

“Patience, be patient a little while,” replied the raven. “If I were to cry out, what message shall I impart? What’s more, who knows if she’ll sing to order?!”

A short while passed, and they caught a sound, at first resembling a moan.

“There! There! She’s begun, she’s begun!” exclaimed the raven joyfully. “Listen — That’s it! Like that! She’s singing, she’s begun — Well, now it’s up to you as to how you’ll settle the score!”

A ringing sound followed after the moan, at first slowly, slowly, calmly and finally there arose a sound that was absolutely divine.

The vulture lifted his head and opened his eyes. He leaned into the sound. It was midnight. the nightingale was singing, and the vulture too was proclaiming: “Oh, oh, oh, yes indeed, indeed it does cut into one’s heart, as you say, raven!...”

Morning broke; twilight merged into light; the raven stared at the vulture and observed that two tears had become stuck to his sleep-smearred eyes and that his mood had mellowed.

“Well, old fellow, what do you aim to do? Kill her, if you can. Why have you quietened down and grown silent?” queried the raven, self-satisfied.

“I was thinking — my thoughts quite carried me away. I’ve changed my mind.”

“I told you, didn’t I, that you wouldn’t be able to dare to move against her? Do you remember?”

“I remember, and you spoke the absolute truth,” said the vulture with a sigh.

It must have been midday when the vulture and the raven found themselves perched in the great ravine side-by-side, shredding a piece of carrion.

The Forest Was Crying

A great hullabaloo could be heard in the meadow, which was surrounded by thick, dense forest. Women, men, children and dogs were all mingling together like flies! The greater part of the gathering were armed with rifles. The bloom of joy and happiness was bursting out on the faces of them all; all their lips were sparkling with smiles; the folk were looking over the buck-deer, which lay sprawled out, having been killed by the hunters that morning. In silence lay the scion of the forest, nurtured in liberty in the lap of the forest; his eyes, now dead eyes, were swimming in foul liquid; his tongue was lolling out.

When the hunters’ horses saw the dead deer, they moved away, snorting violently, and turned their backs on it — they didn’t want to look upon the sight. And so, they started grazing at a distance at the bottom of the field, tight on their tethers. The children couldn’t yet bring themselves to go right up to the deer and were only now stretching out their arms to the branches of its antlers.

“Hurry up and skin it!” the women were whimsically shouting. “Let’s see what a deer-kebab tastes like!”

Someone yelled out: “Come on, you women, before the kebab’s done, let’s breathe in the air, let’s get the blood flowing, then we’ll eat all the better. Well, then, before the kebab’s done, bring on the tambourines, the drums and the bongos!”

“That’ll be very good — better than good,” cawed out a chap with a huge moustache and was the first himself to begin kicking and capering like a bull returned from the summer-pastures. He generously first took up the invitation offered by the sound of the tambourines and bongos. Others followed his lead and began prancing about on the green, in full enjoyment of life’s sweetness. Some had no time — they were skinning the deer. The killing of the deer was having the effect of increasing tenfold this gaiety; everyone’s longing was fulfilled — they had killed a deer; wasn’t this the idea behind so large a gathering coming out into the country, that they should kill a deer or roe? — and they had done precisely that. Their heart’s desire was satisfied; today, all present there were happy. Only the forest, all-encompassing Nature was not sharing in the happiness; the forest was weeping — yes, the great slope, the hem of the mountain, which looked down upon the meadow where they were skinning the deer, was crying. The ridges, hidden by the black forest, were wafting their sighs and moans about, snatched this way by the breeze, over the meadow where the buck-deer was laid out.

The grey-haired trees — limes, oaks, elms, maples, poplars, beeches, birches, ashes and many others were sighing in grief; all as one had learnt, although they stood at a fair distance from one another, of the death of their beloved child. The forest is the deer’s mother; the forest used to cover it like a blanket. The forest used to watch and gaze lovingly upon the buck-deer and felt pleased with itself for having raised such a stately, beautiful child.

The beauty of the very forest itself was interwoven with the beauty of the deer. The loveliness of the deer affirms the beauty of the forest. Do you suppose that the untidy and the ugly can ever bring forth beauty? In the deer the forest could see itself. The deer is the forest’s good deed. Well, go on and say now whether the forest has ever been stingey with anything at all that fell within the deer’s compass of desires?! The deer held sway over the intractable forest, as though it were his complete possession; this only gave the

forest delight and no displeasur at all; it wished the child that it had itself nurtured to stand out as a fine, stately, intelligent, strong and famous warrior.

The deer's good fortune was the good fortune of the forest itself, just as a child's good fortune is the eternal glory of its parents.

“Alas, pride of my eye! Woe is me! A light would shine in my heart whenever he would pass in front and roll at me his lovely, undeceitful eyes,” said in the forest a rock, overgrown with green and yellow moss, and branded and entangled with the roots of oaks and beeches.

Who would have allowed the deers, the slaughtered one's comrades, to come unmolested to pay their tearful farewell? In alarm they were racing away — they had their own lives to think of. In the forest just a blackbird's stirring is deemed to portend potential death. They roll their eyes hither and thither, they prick up their ears, sharpening their hearing. They sniff the breeze; the smell of man fightens them more than that of the wolf.

The forest was crying...

In the shade of a massive oak a long table was spread — the serried ranks of men and women had themselves adorned the edges of the table. There was much drinking and eating, tremendous feasting — the clinking of glasses, the sound of singing and merry-making was everywhere to be heard. Hot upon the heels of singing came the games and the bellowing of laughter.

The sun was extinguished over towards the west; evening was drawing on; the hunters prepared to depart for home; the women settled themselves in the cart; the youths began to vie with one another on horseback. They hung their rifles about themselves as elegantly as possible; without words all their actions gave expression to the following message: “We are slayers of game, jolly handy rifle-shooters, and therefore good chaps to boot!...”

The hunters returned home satisfied, joyful. The field was abandoned like an orphan; upon it could be seen merely what was left of the fire where an hour before the flames were crackling and over them was roasting the kebab of deer, strung up on wooden spits, there where the long table had been spread and the bellowing of the laughter of women

and youths and their merry-making had been echoing. Here and there lay the thoroughly gnawed bones of the deer, chewed by dogs after men's teeth had had their fill.

But the forest was crying and muttering: "Alas, my renowned child, 'Old Antlers', when, oh when, shall I rear another child like you, so beautiful in antlers and body?! I was so proud of you, and after today who on earth can fill me with such pride?!"

The forest continued lamenting and shedding tears as well...

The Coarse Grass

I am the mountain-grass, sprung to life in the centre on the side of a huge, bare rock. No other plant can prosper here apart from me. For me alone has Destiny written: "Coarse mountain-grass, let the rock be your father and mother, your fate and fortune, your past and future!"

"O rock, is it really true that you are my father and mother, my guard and protector?"

"It is true, have no fear, my poor one."

On all sides I am girt with boulders tightly jammed. Who knows how deeply they have fixed their roots? Some of them do not listen to me, as though I did not even exist; they stare fixedly at the chasm. What are they searching for there? What have they lost down there? They would not tell me, were I to ask them a thousand times. They are contemplating something; limitless is their musing, unknowable their heart's desire. From time to time the rock breathes a sigh — probably some affliction is causing it to grieve. Otherwise my mother is inflexible and stout-hearted; no fear has she of rock-falls, which regularly in winter-time with thunder and lightning lay themselves down upon us — they come and fall down with a crash into the abyss; plummeting down they sigh heavily, as though they have taken a rest.

The rock sometimes actually weeps. I too cry then, for I see my mother's tears. My mother weeps for her own dead children, who ever lie before her eyes. However much she may want to, in no way can she take her eyes off them. The rock's children are the boulders which lie upon one another down below, plucked from the rock's breast, wrenched away from her bosom...

Just look here how from below they gaze up at their parent in a way that melts the heart, as though they are beseeching her: "Why will you not lift us up? Why are we not

up close to you?" Useless would be their begging, their supplication, even supposing they were able to yearn for this, but of course they cannot. I too look down upon them and shed dew upon them drop by drop. For them this is particularly pleasurable.

I wish someone would give me just one friend, to whom I could chat from time to time. May God succour the flowers which look across at me from the slopes of the mountain opposite. They murmur and sing sweetly in a low, gentle voice. They, forlorn just like me, greatly love the mountain-heliotrope. O lovely heliotrope, how far above me you are, and yet how you pierce my heart!

How adoringly I gaze upon it — both my eyes and heart hunger for it — I cannot take my eyes off it for a second. I love it so much, but it will never once glance across at me to regenerate this heart of mine, perishing and consumed with ardour; no, it peers at the sun that it loves. The heliotrope is the sun's lover. From east to west its whole face follows the passage of the sun. When the sun sets, it sobs away, upset at this separation from its beloved. The crying of the heliotrope sets me crying too. Yesterday, I believe, it shot a glance at me as well. No, the heliotrope is pure and free from sin, whereas I am ugly and sinful. Must I really always be encased in blood and down? This is all the fault of that old eagle that nests alongside me. As soon as she awakes of a morning, she starts a horrible barking; she is evidently threatening someone — she flashes those gigantic, blood-loving eyes and then takes off to forage; no bird blocks her way. She brings back her catch, perches on one of the boulders she has usurped above me, and then she tears it to pieces; blood drops down and falls right on top of me. How can I avoid it? I am coated red with blood; then the sun peers down at me and dries the blood all over me. No doubt it is because of this blood that the heliotrope averts its eyes from me, otherwise it would probably call over to me just once: "Grass! Child of the rock, good morning to you!"

I love this flower... You men call it the heliotrope because it constantly has its face turned towards the sun — it is the sun's lover. Just as a child's eyes follow after its mother and try never to let her become hidden from them anywhere, just so the heliotrope's eyes. The sun is its mother — the heliotrope is the sun's offspring.

Who has any idea that I love the heliotrope? And yet what is this kind of love? I cannot go across to it; it cannot come to me; we cannot kiss each other. Love such as this is an exquisite torture. I wait impatiently for each dawn, for then I can see my sweetheart.

When the winter sets in, my heart turns black, and the heliotrope also melts into the soil. Would that I too might melt down in order that perhaps one part of me might meet part of the heliotrope face to face down there. Spring comes, and the heliotrope comes back to life; so do I. I forget about the moss and mould congealed on my neck; I think myself to be the heliotrope and, like a madman, say: “Darling, you beautiful creature!”

Would that I knew it — where do the flowers go in winter? I believe that this is called ‘death’. Who taught me the word ‘death’? Ah yes, this boulder here, which has thrust out its snout at my side and angrily looks down over the earth — it and that 200 year-old eagle. No, ‘death’ cannot be anything good. Yesterday when that restless old creature up above me swallowed down a grouse, what a commotion the poor thing made, while the eagle un pityingly was ripping and tearing it apart with its diamond-sharp beak.

“Grass, you dunderhead, that’s what’s called ‘death’!” the boulder whispered to me. I began to cry through pity for the grouse. If this is really ‘death’, it certainly cannot be anything good.

Once I saw a horrible sight, which also resembled ‘death’. You see down here the meadow which is visible in the distance — well, it happened there. Two groups of people came into view from different directions. All were handsome, beautifully decked out. Seated on horses in a fine, comely manner, they were moving at speed towards one another. Because of the distance, I could not make out what they were saying. They fell upon one another; I could not look directly at their flashing weapons — it burnt my eyes. They were unseating one another, trampling one another and striking one another with swords.

At length, as though a mist had shrouded them, all were concealed. When the mist lifted, evening was drawing on. I could see that the horsemen were lying lifeless, just like those boulders, together with their horses upon the meadow. This picture was enough to reduce one to tears, and I actually wept. They had lost their beauty and handsomeness. This upset me and reduced me to tears.

O sun, look down upon me! O rain, moisten me! O lofty rock, preserve my roots! Do not allow the life to escape them! Do not uproot me! Do not cast me up!

Beautiful, darling, heliotrope! By the radiance of your beauty, just once in a thousand whiles glance nevertheless over at me! Deem me worthy of your smile! I am just poor,

miserable mountain-grass, take pity on me! O mountain-breeze, Nature's life-giving spirit! Breathe upon me and cool my burning heart!

O eagle, you magisterial bird! By your faith in God, try not to let my eyes see it when un pityingly you spill the blood of living creatures; let my ears not hear their moans, for their moaning is my moaning, the sighing and suffering of *my* heart too! And you who gave me birth, protect and preserve me, coarse grass that I am, suspended on a barren rock!...

The Mountain-spring

I have never committed any sin in my life. No living creature, or even inanimate object, will ever be able to name any sin or evil deed of mine. Thus have I been appointed by God — I am destined to flow and flow; everyone is to quench their thirst through me. On a hot summer's day how many hunters come and drink my waters? How many weary and exhausted workers will come and bring their scythes or sickles to sharpen? Men drink, and is there one in a thousand who ever says: "God bless you, cold mountain-spring! What wine can ever be compared to you?!" Most of them spit on me! What can I do? I can't spit on anyone. Go on, let them continue spitting on me! How fortunate, God, I feel myself to be! What good friends I have at my side! Look here; first there are these boulders, covered thick with green moss; then again, over here, there's this yellow-faced rock, nestling, as it were, above my head and gazing down at me — I wear it on my head like a helmet. These spirit-like maples, how they've shot up to the sky and don't allow a single ray of the sun to reach me! Their thick roots, twisted like snakes, they've sunk deep into my bosom. For a distance of a mere two or three versts I am fortunate and free of blame. Then the monstrous river drinks me up and absorbs me; my name, my own identity is then lost. It forces me to sport at its whim, while itself it howls, rages, clashes hither and thither, destroys the earth, tears up and drags away the trees, involving me also in these crimes. But at that stage I am no longer what I am now at this moment when I first burst into life out of the boulder. Oh, I'm terrified of this river! How many times do I hear thereabouts folk flapping around agitatedly: "Someone's drowning, help him! Isn't there a Christian among you?!" And a portion of the blame rests on me. Woe is me!

Would that I had not been so appointed by the Creator and might have flowed on and on unceasingly, watering plants, the beautiful heart of the earth, quenching the thirst of both man and beast! How happy I feel when I flow down amongst the butter-burs that are all about to wither, and they bow their heads to me, salute me and simultaneously weave for me a dress of their leaves. Then when I ripple down among the fern-beds, and they surround me and lovingly call to me: "Greetings to the mountain-spring, greetings!" Now I'll soften the dried up roots of the hazels and viburnums, squashed in a rock-fall, and give them the chance to look up at heaven again!... O God, why do you permit that empty, boring, inconstant, restless river to ruin my good work?! Last night what a horrible dream I had!... God who gave us birth! Lord! Protector! Be kind to me!... I seemed to see myself perishing. A drought, a severe drought had set in. The grass, the trees, our parents, had withered; I too had all but dried up. A pretty, fluffy-chested beech-warbler flew down from a poplar-branch, wanting to bathe in one of my puddles but could no longer wet its wings and began to weep. As I watched this, my heart began to break: "Where will you go, my little friend?" I murmured. The withered yarrow and milfoil, the reeds, the birch, lime and viburnum — all, all as one were a-flutter: "Let's get some water to aid the spring! We mustn't let it dry up!" They began offering me each a drop from their leaves, branches and roots, but they couldn't help me. At the same time it was as if the earth swallowed me up and I should have perished in the bottomless abyss! I grew frightened and suddenly woke up. My heart was beating fast, sweat had poured out over my forehead. I looked up — the ravines had become congested with mists. the maple folded its branches over me, rocked my cradle and murmured to me: "Don't be afraid, little one, you won't dry up, you won't be lost!" At this moment, a beautifully headed deer, with antlers spread out across his back, by day ever alert and on the look-out, suddenly appeared, thirstily bent down to my crystal-clear water, drank and satisfied his need. Then, with a tranquil heart, I proclaimed: "I am not dried up, I am not!"

Roots

Don't be afraid — we're not snakes! What would a snake be doing up here on this lofty mountain?! Your momentary alarm was groundless — we do man no harm; we shan't poison him. Was it our outer covering of dry, wrinkled skin that frightened you?

At one time we had a different colour and air about us altogether. Time, the onward march of the seasons has changed our appearance, and now, if a shepherd or hunter stumbles upon me, he must suffer a pang of dread, until he sees me at close quarters and perceives that we are the dry roots of a single oak and nothing more. At one time we used to feed a mighty oak; we provided it with nourishment; we gave it suck. It was thanks to our sweat, thanks to our good offices that the oak proudly used to hold its head up high. And we too were pleased with ourselves for having raised a beautiful, proud child with such an unbending heart.

“You and your oak had need of my strength and caring attention, mind!” the earth has said to us on many an occasion; but we nevertheless on bended knees and with the hands of a suppliant would beseech nourishment of her for our favourite child. For his sake we observed no difference between night and day. “Let us try not to deprive him of nourishment,” we used to say to each other in encouragement. Rest, earth, rest. We shall now trouble you no longer. We no longer have him for whom we used to flatter and entreat you; we too are drying up — what need of sustenance have the withered and the dead? Man, un pitying mankind, tore out our heart, murdered our child and left us to shed tears. He set to and began to chop at him with an axe, hearing neither our nor our child’s groans. When they strike us with an axe, we groan, and you, men, call this the axe’s ‘thud’. Our blood seeps out, and the name you give to our blood is ‘tree-sap’... Simply because we won’t raise our arms in self-defence, because we don’t scratch anyone’s face, because we don’t abuse anyone, because we don’t pursue the departed and don’t greet the newcomer with anger written across our face, for that reason do you really suppose that we feel nothing? “I’m chopping down an oak,” the man was calling out to his friends, as though it were nothing. He could not see that we were even then silently shedding tears onto the earth, and that our misery had started the earth crying too: “Unhappy wretches,” she groaned, “for what, for whom did you torment yourselves? Or I — for whom am I tormenting myself? Who has any thanks to offer?...”

Even though the earth was expressing these sentiments, nevertheless at that same time she was putting out food for the beech-, birch- and poplar-roots stretched out in front or grown up at a distance... Blessed of God, she will never be able to refuse anyone. She’s

the mother of everyone; she cares for all; all are suspended upon her back. Blessed be your breast, mother of ours, you who nourish us and give us suck!

But what's she to do, poor soul? Fate has cheated her too. Yesterday and today we did a lot of crying; we regret our separation from that spot where we were born, grew up and felt the rhythms of life. Who knows what awaits us?! Every day our abode suffers more destruction and disintegration; the gully is extending its domain, and we are left without a roof over our heads, bare and hungry. In the end we too shall crumble away, sink downwards and descend into the gloomy ravine. Who knows what awaits us there? Who knows what sort of soil will greet us there? Shall we perish utterly, or will perhaps the earth cover us up again and make food for us?! Who knows — perhaps the crazy river will cast us up somewhere at a deserted place where the rays of the burning sun will wither us, dessicate us and extinguish all memory of us.

God, don't let us disappear! Fate, don't cheat us! Earth, create again for us an abode! We thirst for life and toil. We want to labour again; perhaps again we shall rear upon our roots a child; perhaps again we shall feel joy. O forces of Nature, grant this supplication of pitiable roots!

It's Rising! It's Getting Light!

Who was saying this? Where or when?

It's night. Mountain and valley have been coated with snow; they are so stifled, so much in its grip that the earth's very bones creak and crack. It's as if Nature lies at rest in her coffin — as if she's been wrapped up in a shroud. Not a sound, not a movement, not the ripple of a mischievous mountain-stream is anywhere to be heard. Even the breeze has evidently ceased on purpose so as not to break the all-encompassing stillness, in order not to disturb Nature's slumber, her repose. The forest is layered white with snow; the trees' trunks and branches are no longer distinguishable... Yes, this was the moment when on a clump of hills a pack of wolves was massing. Some had arrived early and had to await the others. With their howling in the register of a determined base they were informing their comrades: "Come on! Don't be late!"

From below, from a village far away an indistinct hullabaloo could be heard; the smoke that had risen from the houses had come to lie upon the village like a pall of mist

or fog — it blanketed it; high above, the sky, glowing and studded with stars, but silent and with fixed stare, gazed down upon the earth.

The wolves tonight must pay a visit to the village — such is their thought and intention. They were gathering together for the simple reason that they no longer supposed there to be any food in the forest. It's a week that they have been shambling about ravenous — they could no longer even paw the ground for food because of the snow and ice. They came together; a mighty pack was formed. They were all gnashing their teeth — they were hungry, terribly hungry! They kept a sharp eye on one another, each longing to observe a mere drop of blood on another's frame in order that this would give them the excuse to pounce on him and tear their fellow limb from limb. But which individual would be satisfied with just a single wolf? — they wouldn't all get even one portion each! Maybe not, but they would at least still the pangs of hunger just a little.

It was indeed a sight to be seen — the gathering of the wolves at this time: some were lying on the snow, others had sat down on their haunches, whilst a group were standing with their tails down, but all had their maws open. Thus were they debating the question of raiding and marauding.

“It's a fine time we find ourselves in, lads, a fine time! How dark it is! Well, whoever has confidence in himself must now put his confidence to the test!” were the words of the old wolf, T'ot'ia.

“Yes, provided, provided,” added another, “that, if we can't grab anything else, we carry off the dogs at least. You know how I operate, don't you? I'll position you in an ambush, then I'll entice the dog out; by sporting with him, by feigning death under his nose, I'll cast the proud creature right amongst you, and then you know what job is that you'll have to do!”

“We're hardly children that we don't know how to devour a corpse!” said the others with a laugh. They discussed how to break open the sheep's winter-quarters. At the mention of sheep they all opened even wider their maws, lit with fire, and displayed like burning embers their huge fangs. They ground and rubbed their teeth together, thereby creating a grating sound, and in their mouths was ignited a general, horrid flame that lit up the immediate neighbourhood.

They broke up in the hope of a satisfying meal. They proceeded downhill, T'ot'ia leading the way. They filed along the hill, all in line, with hope aglow in their hearts. But just watch how fate betrayed them! That which they weren't expecting occurred: that occurred which always ruined and confounded their enterprise, and it drove them to despair. What could this be? Their hope lay, did it not, in the darkness? But they faintly noticed that in the east the edge of the sky was growing light. All bunched together and turned their eyes in that direction. After a while the moon peeped out. The moon rose and lit up the forest, the mountain, the dark recesses; it lit up the entire morass of darkness. The wolves, massed in a bunch, were crying out, unable to control their anger: "It's rising, it's rising, it's getting light!" The wolves fixed their eyes in the direction of the moon, and from these eyes streamed arrows of disgust, of hatred, of vengeance. How they began to curse its appearance!

"A blight on you! May you know the wrath of God! Cursed be you and the day of your creation!" was the chorus of the wolves, gnashing their teeth at it at the same time. "Ah, would that God would let us get it down into our paws and devour it, that we might bring its life to an end!" One old wolf ranted and raved more than all the others.

"Many a time you've stung me to the heart," he intoned. "Many a time you've brought me to depression, you cursed, you damned orb! Many a time you've brought me to depression and filled the days of my life with bitterness. Many's the time, having painted red my whole face, paws and breast with the blood of many an animal, I've carried for two entire weeks this blood as a decoration and, when catching sight of it upon my body, have quelled the yearning for the days of my youth. O moon, would that once I'd sunk my sharp fangs into you too! Would that the grey-caparisoned lad T'ot'ia had adorned his shoulders and paws with your blood also!"

The others too were thinking the same, once again with open maws, and had fixed their gaze on the moon. But the moon continued remorselessly to rise to its zenith in the sky; it lit up in the forest the roots of the trees and the rocks, the dark ravines; it also lit up in the village the dark recesses of the castle-towers and the ruins of old buildings; it set alight on the black tombstones of the cemetery a candle of its own rays, thereby lending an aspect of grace and life to even the graveyard. All hope of booty and marauding was cheated. The night is just like the day. What on earth are they to do? Their hope was

dashed, their expectation lost — they began merely to flash glances at one another; they were pondering, they were picking out which one among them was dispensable and thus to be devoured. Each was ready to pounce on the other and disembowel him.

Old T'at'ia, his head and face all swollen, was squatting behind a bush, sunk in thought. To him the sight of hunger was not new — he had experienced much misery, but he was not troubled to that same extent for the reason that even now he relied on others to do his hunting; the young wolves used to share their food with him.

“Eh, T'ot'ia, don't you hear? Why've you gone all quiet? Can't you see what the situation is? We're perishing of hunger; the race of wolves, all of its kind, is about to vanish from the face of the earth. What does your almanac have to say, Uncle?!” said one wolf to him, simultaneously fetching him a blow of the paw to the head.

“Hey, what do you think you're doing, you brute, you uncouth ass?!” said the old wolf angrily; the other wolves pricked up their ears, sensing the course events were taking.

“Yes, and what of it?” they all howled in unison. “He's giving you exactly what you deserve; a single paw-blow for an incompetent like you is nowhere near enough. Sink your teeth, your teeth into him, lads! This light's all his fault!” they were all growling. In a flash they were upon him, tearing at him with both fangs and claws.

“Lads, shew some sense, some reason! What are you doing, you idiots?” groaned T'ot'ia, flashing his teeth now at one, now at another. But who would be scared by him baring his teeth? In a second T'ot'ia's life was over — body and soul extinguished together. Not a bristle remained anywhere of his much tormented pelt. Perhaps you might have noticed the odd blood-stain here and there, and that was it. The wolves' hearts were tempered slightly, but they were still ravenous. They looked at one another, each afraid of the other, no doubt because each thought he'd be the pack's next victim. They were afraid and wary. As each raced away from the others, much cracking was to be heard in the bushes, much crunching on the snow... And the moon came up, sailed high almost to the centre of the heavens, where it sparkled brightly and from where, like a sentinel, it continued to strike alarm into the enemies of the earth... The wolves careered any way they could into the forest, continuously mouthing the words: “It's grown light! It's grown light!”

A Small Shepherd's Thoughts
(From the Life of the Pshavs)

Wretchedness has been my nurturer, dear brother. Ever since I could walk on my own two feet I have lived as someone else's son. When I was seven years-old, my father set me up as labourer to the Didq'ura family, and throughout these past five years he has been using my wages to pay his annual tithe. At the end of each year he comes regularly to collect my wages. As for me, he's never even bought me a tiny pen-knife to pare my nails! Eh, just let me continue to have living parents, and never mind anything else!

Loneliness has brought me strength: frequently I won't set my eyes on a soul for up to four months; and what sort of comradeship does old P'ap'ua shew me? In the evening I am sometimes actually reluctant to go to the hut — no sooner am I inside than he starts up at me — all the time he's on at me and cursing under his breath: "Your eyes must be transfixed on the devil and demons, for you simply can't drive the sheep to decent grassy spots." By the grace of St. George³, on these mountains of ours you don't have to go searching for grass — it's all around!

My one companion is Q'urshia⁴ — he never leaves my side, night or day. Even if a new master were to take him over, he would never allow anyone to oppress me! One day T'ighuna from the P'ap'ureli family had gone off hunting grouse, having sneaked out of the hay-field away from his father. I had just spread the sheep out over a nut-filled plain, when from above I heard: "Tilo, hey, Tilo!"

"Who are you, friend or foe?" I shouted back from down below.

"Well, if you think you're a real lad, come on up and wrestle me," was how T'ighuna conceitedly replied. I wasn't afraid of him, and we wrestled. T'ighuna was superior in cunning, I in strength — we were equally matched. At length he threw me and got me in a head-lock. My Q'urshia saw that T'ighuna was no longer joking; he crashed into him and knocked him over, and, had I not gone to his aid, Q'urshia would have torn him limb from limb. No dog has yet had the better of my Q'urshia; he's really proud and confident and won't let even me get away with it if I upset him without good reason — for a full three days he won't look me straight in the eyes but goes around with his tail between his

³ Literally 'by the grace of Lasha's cross', the Pshavs' most revered shrine to St. George named after King Lasha Giorgi, son of the great queen Tamar (reined 1184-1213).

⁴ Dog's name.

legs to let me see he's sulking. And to cap it all, T'ighuna was wearing an almost brand-new costume and red garters! Just imagine me having ordinary white (let alone red) garters for anyone to dirty!

My father's heart is black as night; I have absolutely no pity for him, but my feelings for my mother have remained tender. During these past five years only once has the Didq'ura family grudgingly allowed me a visit home. "Would that his mother could swap places with my poor little darling!" my mother would repeat as often as she showered kisses upon me. She gave me a pair of multi-coloured socks, and she had also kept to one side for me this shirt with its red centre. She plied me with questions about everything in great detail: "How does the Didq'ura family treat you? They don't beat or starve you, do they? Have you been wearing these skins for long, my son?" They never treat me any way other than badly, but how could I have spoken ill of them to my mother? When she saw my clothes, my hides and shepherd's felt-cloak all in rags, she began to take issue with my father: "You scoundrel, why did you cast this lad out into others' hands? Why do you let the world get away with killing him?!" — as she said this, large tears the size of nut-kernels began to pour profusely from her eyes and to fill her skirt. I too, overcome with self-pity and sorrow, began to cry.

Mother washed my pants, sewed up the rips in my shepherd's cloak, lubricated my hides and put them back on me. It had been a long time since I had eaten bread made of pure wheat; mother baked me a loaf; she borrowed the fine flour from the Molodina family, 'capped' it for me in butter and fed it to me. The heart was put back into me there at home — I no longer desired to return to the sheep. Why — it simply amazes me — has father made me someone else's son? The Didq'ura family will never let me go off to attend a wedding or to worship at a shrine... "Your wedding-feast is the sheep," they'll say to me. The moment my thoughts turn to the games played by women in their yellow frocks, to the merry-making and singing of others of my age, my heart just stops.

The wolf is a horrible stalker. Would that I had a pistol if only to shoot at it and scare it off. I implored my mother to buy me some powder and shot by exchanging a pullet and to lend me father's gun. She promised she would, but I don't know whether or not she'll fulfil her promise. If I acquire a gun, then I'll get my own back on the mountain-goats and grouse for teasing me — where I don't expect it, these goats poke just their horns

above the tops of the rocks; sometimes, when massed in a herd, they'll send an avalanche of sandy material hurtling down, whilst the grouse will raise a flap right before my eyes — yes, they'd better not fool with me when I get my hands on that gun!

While I was at home, our priest's son, Vaso, paid us a visit. He told me that there was plenty of powder and shot in the town; if only he'd brought me some!... Ah, would that I too were educated! How many things Vaso told me, both those he'd seen with his own eyes and what he himself had heard about. Although P'ap'ua had told me this stuff was made of sky and black beeswax, Vaso, when I said this to him, burst out laughing and asked: "Then why hasn't it melted before now?"

Vaso was handsomely fitted out: a Caucasian costume [*cherkesska*] of fine material, a variegated cap and silver belt with dagger. His father had also bought him a rifle. Who'll be buying me anything? When I grow up, I'll buy myself everything — I'll have shot and powder a-plenty, a silvery-black rifle, a gold-braided *cherkesska*... Vaso gave me one round of powder and shot, but I fired it then and there at a target. Vaso's a kind-hearted lad. Had I had with me at that moment the grouse which Q'urshia caught for me yesterday, I'd have presented it to him. Why should I want to keep it? It will only die on me to no-one's advantage. Although it's sitting in my basket, P'ap'ua isn't likely to pay it any heed or give it anything to eat...

Poor creature! How its heart was fluttering and beating when I first picked it up. A falcon was on its tail. I heard a roar like thunder and a swoosh. I thurned towards it and saw it — in front the grouse, and behind the falcon were approaching at speed. Both came close to me. At that moment I had the sheep on the edge of a gorge; I was standing beside the water making a reed-pipe of heracleum. The terrified grouse could find no further means of escape and fell down into a puddle in front of me. My Q'urshia pounced upon it and grabbed hold of it. The infuriated falcon wheeled high up into the sky shrieking and was lost to sight. I scooped the grouse up. Unfortunate creature! It was shaking and straining to fly away, flashing its frightened eyes this way and that. Last night it seemed more settled; twice I took a peep at it in the light of a birch-torch — it was sitting with eyes closed and its head muffled under its wing.

My mischievous Q'urshia last year did something even more surprising. One day I had the sheep on the heights of Apkusho. The grass was soaked from that night's rain. I,

already wet, became even more so. The sun had just reddened the tips of the peaks. I sat down on top of a rock and was awaiting the sunrise. In front of me stood a Caucasian ash... Over Raiders' Gullet there appeared an eagle. Full of hubris and pride, it was gliding, only now and again would it bend its neck downwards and from side to side. Two ravens had swooped up from beneath to attack it and were giving it no peace. One of them would shoot past it like lightning, twist back up towards it with its breast facing skywards and screech at it with cawing clamours. The eagle deemed the ravens to be beneath his dignity and scorned the attack they had mounted. Now and then he would merely beat his outstretched wings and veer to one side. One raven was causing him more trouble. The eagle in anger struck out with his talon, and the raven with wings outstretched sailed downward; following after was a trail of feathers — one handful of its feathers was caught by the wind and carried up to the sky. The eagle paid it no attention but continued as before calmly on his way, casting his eyes over the chasms below. The second raven then withdrew. The eagle passed over Sadzeriani and was lost my sight.

Then from over Mt. Akhuni a bearded vulture came into view. In its talons it held a bone with which it began to play; it hurls it onto the ground and then swoops down after it; then it carries it off — up, up high it goes, releases it from its talons and follows it all the way down again itself. It cast this bone down several times and bore it up again. Shortly it drew close to me but could not see me — I was hidden beneath an ash, and Q'urshia was lying at my side. The foot of the mountain above Apkhusho is a rocky-stoney place — the bearded vulture tended to keep the bone on the side where the stones lay. At this moment some divinity must have gawn angry with that vulture, for it cast the bone down near to us. Q'urshia darted after it and, before the vulture could snatch it up, reached it first. The vulture was infuriated, began hissing like a snake and, quick as a bullet, took cover in the rocks. Later I asked P'ap'ua why the vulture was behaving as it did. He told me that bearded vultures make a habit of it: "When they can't split a bone with their beaks in order to lubricate their throats with the marrow, they hurl it down from a height onto pebbles, shatter it in this way and then tuck in to the marrow." Glory to you, o Lord, that birds too should apparently have so much intelligence!... My darling mountains, how many wonderful spectacles there are to behold here among you!... In the spring, when the avalanches of snow melt away, where the avalanche-falls used to lie, the

campanulas and ferns will spring up; I'll pick the tender ferns, take them to the shack, and we'll boil them in milk. Can there ever be anything more delicious than that?!

This is lambing-time, when we have baby lambs appearing around us. I no longer have time to sleep, day or night, through sheer joy. Lambs and ewes together have begun to bleat... But, ach! — a further two years to go and the Didq'ura family will permit me to go home, and how could I go back empty-handed to my mother and not take her at least one pelt to be fashioned into a jacket?

The Wedding of the Jays

This event took place in a large, thick, black forest, far removed from human towns and villages. “What event?” you may ask. So I am going to tell you about the jays' wedding-feast.

Jay Zakara was marrying the beautiful and excessively impish Jay Ketevan, famed for her charm. These two young birds were being married by the venerable Jay Toma.

Toma dutifully lifted his eyes towards heaven and exclaimed: “Bless, O Lord, this couple's crown; instill in them love and devotion towards each other; make them fruitful to be as numerous as the fish in water or as the stars in the sky; let the bed of your servant Zakara and your maid Ketevan be free from stain. Amen!” Saying this, he placed a crown of beautiful flowers on both their heads. “Amen! Amen!” echoed like thunder all around, as the cry went up from the birds invited to attend as guests: jays, yellow-hammers, warblers, finches, partridges, guinea-fowl, wrens, redstarts, chiff-chaffs, wood-peckers, turtle-doves, pigeons and many others besides. There wasn't a space left anywhere, so many were the guests who had gathered at that spot. The flowers too were rejoicing, for they also were invited to the wedding-feast. There was a stream running there of cold, refreshing water. A long spread had been laid out, and upon it were arranged a thousand different types of food and fruit. You couldn't name a variety of worm or fly which they hadn't provided here — as for grass-seeds, there were a thousand types.

The bride and groom they invited onto a flower-strewn couch, and the guests then seated themselves in rows. A great bout of drinking and feasting commenced. A thousand different beverages were under consumption — the ruby-coloured wine of K'akheti

flowed on the table like water... Everyone toasted the bride and groom, and everyone bestowed presents upon them.

A wood-pecker, sitting close by in a hollow stump, gave forth with the song ‘Long life to you both!’ [*mravalžamieri* in Georgian].

“Hey, you, bawler, you’re not drinking any wine, old chap; what’s it all about? Drink your wine, drink!” cried the birds in unison at the wood-pecker.

“Wait a moment, gentlemen, give me a minute or two — bless you! — I’ve just uncovered a nice, fate worm over here; I want to dig it out — then you can pour me as much wine as you wish; my mind will be on nothing else, and I’ll give it all my attention.” Having thus answered them, the wood-pecker began grubbing away with his beak at the hollow tree. Everyone turned their gaze towards him.

“Well, we’ll see if you know what you’re doing and if your manliness is equal to the task!” shouted the birds at the wood-pecker. “But should you fail to draw it out, woe betide your fine feathers, for you should know that we’ll be feeding you no more pickings from this table!”

The wood-pecker spent a good while scratting about on the hollow tree with his beak and feet — and not in vain, for he dragged out a worm of goodly length, which resembled the cast-off skin of a snake, and with his beak offered it to the bride and groom.

“Good health to the bride and groom!” cried the wood-pecker in a loud voice. “Good health to the whole assembled company too, hurrah!”

“Good health, good health! Hurrah! Bravo, wood-pecker! Bravo for disgracing neither yourself nor us!” was the cry that went up from the birds. The toast-master handed to the wood-pecker an ibex-horn filled with wine as his ‘trophy’ for such a display of manly prowess, and he, having drained it in one go, tossed the empty horn back to the toast-master, to play which role they had selected the same master-of-ceremonies, Jay Toma.

“They are eating bread, they are drinking wine, but it doesn’t look as though they’re going to sing,” exclaimed a raven, and, in his own fine voice, he intoned a drinking-song. From the different sides the raven’s tune was taken up, and the singing grew in strength to such a pitch that the forest was set creaking in response; mountain and valley were a-tremble. The flowers were dying with laughter.

Close by here a little mouse had his hole. The racket had aroused his appetite, and he peeped out. For a long while he gazed at the birds' festivities and feasting; he could see fat, rich foodstuffs of different colours and kinds, all of which just made his mouth water, gulp after gulp. For a long time his patience held, but at last it was too much for him. "What will be will be," he declared, and, with that, he scuttled closer, took a leap and hopped down onto the nut-laden spread right in front of the bride and groom.

"Good health to the newcomer! Good health to Squeaky!" rang out the general cry of the birds. "Hey, there's a good little fellow for giving us your attention, laddy!" were the words of welcome given to the mouse by the intoxicated birds.

"Good health, good health, dear friends, long life, joy and endless festivities be your lot, and may the good Lord Creator never spoil your noble doings!" So saying, the mouse had taken a firm grip on a nut with a decent kernel and was slowly gnawing away at it.

"Give the little mouse some wine, wine!" shouted the toast-master. "He has a lot of drinking to do to catch us up!"

"I don't drink wine, my dear friends, though I'd happily give my right arm any time for a nut; you pass the time as you please — just let me nibble away at this nut, and I'll be fine."

"Did he say he doesn't drink? What sort of reponse is that?! Ha, drink, or we'll pour the wine over your head!" said the toast-master to the mouse in a hostile tone of voice, handing the horn to the wood-pecker. The wood-pecker took the horn from Toma and sat down close by the little mouse. "Come on, little brother, drink it down. This is a wedding-feast, you know, not some game or other! You can hardly call it fitting just to gnaw on a nut! Look, if you want to nibble a nut, first come on, I say, and take the horn from me!" So saying, the wood-pecker handed him the horn.

"I simply can't drink it. If you call yourself a brother of mine, let me be. I just can't do it; what am I to do? — I might as well drown myself, but where's the water?" Thus did the mouse answer him, turning his face away.

"Pour the wine, pour it over the head of that son of an ass, that...!" yelled the toast-master. "Don't you really think you should toast the bride and groom, you fool, you?!"

"I've never drunk wine in my life, gentlemen; do you think you have the right to force the habit on me at this stage in my life? How can this be possible? Why do you pester me

so insistently? You are honourable, goodly folk. Look, by way of toasting the bride and groom I'm helping myself to an acorn."

"Make him drink, make that brigand drink, that...! He has to be forced to drink; we can't have this. Why on earth did he drag himself in here, if he doesn't drink wine? Make him drink, make him drink!" resounded the chorus of the birds.

The wood-pecker seized the little mouse's neck with one hand, whilst with the other he brought the horn, full of wine, into contact with the mouse's lips and began forcibly to make him drink. "If the decision were yours, I know, you won't drink, sir, but here it's the toast-master's will that prevails. You can see that amongst all the assembled gathering there isn't a single individual here who is not drinking wine — you alone here have appeared as the obstinate one. Come on, man up to the task, brave yourself to it; is it not just as shameful to turn your face away from wine as it would be from your mother's milk, you mongrel, you?!"

The mouse — with what tremendous torment — managed to swallow a few drops, whimpering the while — wine, it seemed, gave him no pleasure.

"Steel yourself to it, little mouse, steel yourself to it! Well, then! That's it, like that. Ah, brave little chap!" were the whooping encouragements screamed by the birds at the little mouse.

The little mouse tensed himself, strained the sinews of his throat, struggled with the wine and downed it, emptying the horn. But a drop of the wine was spilled on his velvet coat.

"Don't pour wine on my coat, you numbskull! Surely you don't see any resemblance between it and that cloth-cap of yours which might explain such stupid behaviour!" inveighed the little mouse against the wood-pecker. Then he let out a deep breath. Only the very last mouthful was left, when he cried out: "Good health to the bride and groom! Good health, best-man, to this groom of yours!"

"Good health, good health to them — he's drained it, he's drained it!" went up the enraptured cry.

The little mouse soon succumbed to the wine, and he began to croon. His singing was so squeaky that it grated on the ears of them all. Then he started to dance. The gathering began to split its sides with laughter. A magpie accompanied him and together they

danced a Georgian jig. The ravens had to hold on to their stomachs; to such an extent were the onlookers of this spectacle rollicking with laughter.

“Oh, I’m whacked,” said the mouse at last; and indeed sweat was pouring over his face and chest. He flopped down right there beside the table; his pot-belly projected upwards, and, in that supine posture, he began to pant.

Right at the end of the table was sitting a nightingale; this songster-bird was not participating in the festivities. She was not laughing but was observing the proceedings with a heavy and contemplative heart.

“Beautiful nightingale, why do you not treat us to your beautiful voice?” the birds entreated her mildly.

The nightingale declined, saying: “Do you suppose that I’m always in a mood for singing? — I’m afraid I’m out of sorts.”

At length, the birds’ supplications and entreaties had an effect on her, and she began to sing. The birds fell so silent that the buzzing of flies could be heard; the flowers caught their breath and, with affectionate eyes, all had their attention fixed on their poetess. This was the song the nightingale sang:

“Glory to thee, holder of the heavens,
Glory to thee, o force of nature —
Glory to the groom, kingly crowned,
And God grant thee, his wife, long life as well!
I shall plait a crown of love,
Chastely shall I embroider it around;
I shall not be sparing but shall weave all within it
Whatsoever I may discover within the world that is noble
And wrought by a heart sincere —
This is what, young couple, I shall place upon your head.
Love is the essence of my heart,
And if I see love in another, it lights a flame in me;
This day it is your troth that is supreme,
And for that reason it grips both our hearts and eyes.”

At this moment a stag had appeared in the neighbourhood and was listening intently to the singing of the birds and the melody of the nightingale, which roused a feeling of sorrow in his heart. Some memory stirred, a tear came into his eyes; he sighed and returned to the cover of the dense forest.

The birds took up the general refrain. One song it was that they all sang, but each in his distinctive voice. In this song the praise of nature, the beneficence of the forest and of Mother Earth were being portrayed. The birds were offering thanks for this beneficence, when an eagle passed overheard, casting an eye all around. "An eagle, an eagle!" went up the cry: "The king is coming!" Suddenly all lost their tongues, as no longer did they dare to utter a sound; a quiver and shudder ran through them all.

And in truth the eagle was a dread sight at this moment — what did he want? He wouldn't have needed more than a single swoop to turn the crowd of birds entirely to dust!

"Why do you flinch so, my brothers? Say something! Do you really suppose that the king will take it upon himself to annihilate us? — is that what you imagine he desires?" enquired the chief jay of the throng. "If you grant me the right to speak, I'll invite the king to join us this very minute."

Some refused, saying: "Who can stand the glare of his eyes? We for our part will derive no further pleasure here, as should be obvious." Others found the idea to their liking, saying that they should indeed invite him.

The chief jay took off straight upwards and frolicked in front of the king of birds. The eagle, as though he had merely a fly flying before him, kept straight on.

"Greetings to Your Excellency, Your Majesty!" Thus did the jay, cap in hand, salute the eagle.

"Greetings also to the jay," said he in stately response.

"Your Glorious Majesty, we ask you to do us the honour of attending the wedding-feast. We ask this of you with all our heart and soul; on bended knee we, your subjects, in our entirety beseech this of you. If Your Majesty deigns to accept our invitation, we shall remain ever hugely thankful to you, we your servants."

"So let it be — why not!?" replied the eagle. "Lead the way!"

The jay dropped down headlong, and the eagle, folding his own powerful wings, also swooped headlong down. This vignette made everyone think the heavens were being rent asunder. The whole gathering of the birds broke up, as with much twittering and chirping they rushed forward to meet their king. The king in his turn gave his own special greeting to the assembly.

They invited the king and seated him at the head. All stood, cap in hand, on their feet. The nightingale alone was not to be seen there.

“You may be seated,” announced the eagle, and the birds in their turn arranged themselves according to rank.

It was a Monday when this event took place. All the folk who had gone into the forest, whether to work or to hunt, remained utterly astonished; all were remarking: “What’s all this? What can have so affected the birds that from nowhere is there any longer a single sound to be heard?” How were folk to know that the birds were at the jays’ wedding-feast, celebrating in glorious comfort?!

They offered the eagle wine in drinking-horns. He drank it assiduously and became right merry. As he gave forth some heroic song with his fearsome voice, a tremor ran through them all.

“Lord,” they all prayed to God, “Lord, in no way anger our king, otherwise he’ll slaughter us all in an instant.”

But the eagle shewed no signs of wrath — rather he urged the birds to make merry, to sing and dance. However, some spirit was evidently out of sorts with the birds, for their mood had utterly altered. They did not know what had happened to them. In order to give heart back to the birds, the eagle ordered them to blow on the bugle and strike up the drum. The command was fulfilled that very instant, and the eagle began to waddle on his powerful talons; he almost clawed that flowery spot to shreds. But still no-one dared to sport, until at last the little mouse again became emboldened; he danced such a *lezginka* and performed such genuflections that the dust reached right up to the sky! At one point he became so impassioned and carried away that he jumped over the head of the eagle, of all people! Such foolish behaviour on the part of the lad caused the king some slight annoyance, but, for the sake of politeness and, taking into account the occasion, he said nothing; he only flashed such a menacing glance at him that the little mouse nearly gave

up the ghost with fright. Anyway, following this menacing glance, the little mouse became quite unmanned — he felt ill, left and lay down beneath a tree, pulling a dry aspen-leaf over himself.

Amongst the birds, the wood-pecker was behaving the most daringly of them all. He was quite sozzled, and his crooning was so shrill that it set the whole mountain and valley in motion. The wood-pecker's boldness now grew to such a pitch that he began to chivvy even the king!

“And who, pray, gave *you* the crown?” he said to the eagle. “When did *we* choose you as king?”

“Hey, you damned fool, shush, shut up; what are you saying — you brazen face?!” whispered the birds to him.

“I *won't* shut up, so there! Why should I shut up, why?!” the besotted wood-pecker kept repeating. “What kind of folk are you?! You're all subject to feelings of loathing towards him, each in your own heart, comrades, but you daren't actually express your feelings to his face. Boldness consists in calling a spade a spade.”

The eagle laughed heartily at the wood-pecker's insolence, but the birds regarded with disdain this insult to their king; they took hold of the wood-pecker, thrust some long, coarse grass through his beak and tied him to a tree right there. The wood-pecker grew dispirited — he no longer dared to speak, nor did he understand the reason for such savage punishment.

The birds were quite carried away, and, while they were in this state, a fox sneaked up, closing in on them. For a long time the crafty creature spied upon them from the edge of the forest, biding his time and thinking: “First let them get well and truly drunk, then it'll be time for me.” They noticed the fox at the very moment when he was just about to grab the bride and groom. Shrieking and yelling broke out, as the assemblage of birds broke up, but the eagle, with beak opened wide, crashed into the fox and in an instant frightened it off. The birds scattered — some perched in the trees, others circled high above. On the ground the eagle and the wood-pecker alone remained; even the poorly mouse sought out his hole at the sound of this alarm. The eagle freed the wood-pecker and said to him: “I forgive you all that nonsense, since you were intoxicated. But don't you dare to try it ever

again, otherwise — woe betide you!” At this he flew off, way up high — it seemed as though he were pinned to the heavens — and there began whirling round and round.

Ketevan and Zakara took cover in the dense forest — they passed the day in each other’s caresses, kissing and embracing, and in the evening they fell fast asleep, perched on the branch of a beech-tree, side by side.