

## Music in the Wind

ALEXANDER THE CARTER AND THE BOY

IN THE IMERETIAN CAP

Alexander had a big ox cart and big red oxen were yoked to this big cart. Motor cars of the time, apparently, could not take such heavy loads as could Alexander's ox cart. With warped heads and necks the oxen would come in through the gate, they would bring in the cart rattling and creaking. Red bricks leaned beautifully to one side on the body of the cart, sometimes roof tiles: they were red, too.

Alexander the Carter was a working man, he had a good appetite for food, he probably also liked his drink. On one of the cart's chassis planks hung a soap horn, on the other, to the left, a wine gourd which sometimes apparently contained water and sometimes watered-down wine... Hit by sunstroke, the carter would rest his lips on the gourd and would cool down his innards with ordinary wine, he would drain it in a single gulp and with the back of his large hand he would dry his lips to the accompaniment of "khio, khio", and with the swish of an ash stick. You should have seen how he cleaned a large bowl full of beans, a lump of maize-bread dunked in soup didn't suffice for one mouthful.

This Alexander had a son, probably two or three years older than me. He used sometimes to lead the oxen, he was wearing short boots, trousers stuffed into colorful stockings and a flapping coarse shirt that summer. On his head he wore an Imeretian cap or something similar. He had a busy, troubled gaze and a daft gaze of sorts. He said hello to his elders and that was it, no other sound escaped from his mouth.

He would stare at me personally without batting an eyelid, he would tell me nothing bad and nothing good, he would straighten the oxen's twines when they were unloading the cart, and he would still be looking at me; behind that inane curiosity, I now think, was concealed an unconscious jealousy that I was not reacting, or hatred. I didn't want to be in his sight and I couldn't leave the circle. I was afraid not of him, but because of him, if the devil also knew, because of something...

One moonlit night, before I fell asleep, I got up from my bed half-asleep, I tramped out onto the wooden balcony and before I reached the balustrade, I caught sight of a motionless boy in an Imeretian cap in the dark cellar, gaping crazily, through a crack in the floorboards, he stood with a stick, he didn't move. I yelled and scared my parents, "What happened," they asked, they came running. "There," I said, "down there, in the dark, it's Alexander's boy," – I probably gave his name which I no longer recall – "frozen." "What does he want there now?" they asked, they really didn't believe it. "He's numb there," I repeated with a flood of tears, and I no longer knew the sense or meaning of that word, in my truth and honesty, but it was true, he was very much uncertain. He stood with the stick, it wasn't raining and he found refuge in the moon beams. "You imagined it," they said and probably to pacify me they went

down with lighted oil lamps, they took me with them, I went down hanging from the skirts of mother's frock and I knew that no one was waiting for me there.

He'd probably gone...

"That's enough, don't sob!" Mother, too, was nervous.

They put me to bed, I didn't sleep, I could hear how they were whispering about their child's nervous nature.

"May your stock fizzle out!"

They thought I was asleep, yet they still reproached each other in a low voice... What had stock got to do with it, it'll have been the fault of the full moon.

I – and not they – saw distorted shadows that appeared on the walls in its light... Alexander brought in the cart on his own the next day, his boy had fallen ill.

On the anniversary the following spring, the boy drowned in the Rioni, near a ferry boat, there where the bridge known to this day as the New Bridge was being built...

## MUSIC IN THE WIND

It was a windless, warm day. Silence reigned. The autumn sun had nested in the yellowed leaves. The crowing of cocks could be heard from somewhere afar, somewhere obscure.

I was sitting on the warm soil, in the dry fallen leaves, in the yard in front of the house. My son was collecting coloured flint fragments, just as I collected them – a very long time ago – in the same yard, only the house wasn't standing then. The house was being built. The footings were being mortared. The foundations were being tied together.

The child was listening to something, for a moment he was lost in thought and he said to me: "It's as if everything that I see, that I hear, isn't real, as if it has already been once before..."

In truth, has all this really been once before or not?

Then it was also a windless, strangely calm and warm day like this. As if on that very day the world had laid down to sleep. The distant, obscure crowing of cocks could be heard. In the yellowed leaves, under the branches of the trees stripped bare, I stood all alone and felt that I existed in something big and incomprehensible.

How clearly I remember that day! I recall everything from then; I recall it clearly and confusedly, like an incomplete dream.

We had a rather large yard for the town. My impoverished parents made a start on a larger house that suited this yard; it still hasn't been completed, although about forty years have passed since then.

Red soil heaped up from the footings was thrown alongside the foundations. A stonemason with a bent back was building a stone wall. One workman was mixing a wet lime mix, another was carrying it toward the scaffolding. Mortar was leaking from the pitted bucket and would stick to one of the poles with a thump. Stone fragments and red bricks

were piled up in a corner of the yard. Rough hewn cornerstones were laid side by side with their fronts facing forward and their rough ends to the rear. In those days, they hauled in large trimmed chestnut logs which they floated down from Lechkhumi by raft as far as the chain bridge.

As for us, we stood in Potskhveria's flat. Our long yard began from the steps of Potskhveria's single-storied, half-wood, half-mortared flat and it ended at the junction of the two streets, on the Military Highway. From the window of the communal flat the house under construction could be seen, roofed with rafters and a main beam, a main gate adorned with crossbeams and hung on thick gate-posts of chestnut, the cornfield and that tall young walnut tree that grew so fast, so unusually fast.

That year, for the first and last time in my memory, they had planted corn in the yard. The cornfield was already dense, husked, yellowed; a winding footpath passed through its centre. The day had been declared a rest day, the gate was bolted, the scaffolding abandoned. I was walking along the footpath, in the middle of the dense, yellowed corn cobs, in a strange warmth and silence; a very large, blue sky could be seen above and I was all alone under that sky.

Recollections turn wan and become softer towards the end. The perception of the end brings you unusually closer to the beginning. In one period of life, the beginning and the end rush towards each other with equal speed.

## A DANGEROUS YARD

Twice I was hit on the foot by a fragment of brick falling from the scaffolding, twice in the very same place.

"Clear off from there, why are you creeping about, what do you have to do there, what have you lost there, play over there," the workers warned me.

Once my foot slipped on the railings and only with great difficulty did I keep my balance on the scaffolding. The same day, as if on purpose, I struck a rusty nail. My shin was crazed, I crept into my room, and I quietly stuck a scrap of paper on my leg. If they caught sight of me, they'd have to take me to the hospital and I'd have to have an injection so that I didn't get blood poisoning.

I went mad when I heard mention of an injection, I started yelling. They asked me why I was yelling.

"Of course I'm yelling, I'm in pain," I said. "What's more, that nail was new and shiny, there wasn't a trace of rust on it," I said.

"Don't let me see you down in the yard again!" Mother threatens me seriously. I realize that I've survived the needle, but how can I go down into the yard. I'm sitting on the balcony, I'm looking at the house under construction and at a bricklayer standing on the scaffolding with a bent back. Still, what a disorderly yard it is, you can't cross its length and breadth without a mishap, danger lies in wait at every step. Here more

attention and caution really are needed. Here one has to rack his brains a little, I reason in my mind, and with the railings under my chin I look down. For as long as it is possible to look down from above. I get up. I go down into the yard, this time leisurely and unhurriedly. I went around the walnut tree, I only approached the scaffolding. I came back without even looking towards the gate.

In the middle of the yard are the only slanting sheaves of maize straw that have survived last autumn's crop. Can pointed maize straw be kept in the yard like this? If someone falls onto this, if someone strikes it with their hand or, especially, with their head, I'll have to dig them out.

I grasp it, but I can't pull it out. I rest, I grasp it again. Is it mortared into the ground, or what's the matter? The neighbour's dog hurled his anger at me from the next yard, coming up to the fence with his teeth bared. That's all I needed, I can't calmly go into my own yard anymore, I can't bend down, I can't touch a stone, I can't uproot maize straw any more. That pawing dog has constantly got one eye on me. If I only knew why he's frightening me! I may uproot this maize straw, I may leave in peace; I may – although I had no intention whatsoever – throw a stone at his head; what can he do to me? If he puffs himself up with his barking and growl-ing, he still won't be able to jump over the fence, so what can he do to me?

I picked up a stick and started to make a noise on the slats. Muria went out of his mind. He went mad and he crashed into the fence.

"Don't give me a sudden heart attack!"

...On the other hand, if he really jumped across this fence at me, or else if he found a way to crawl across, what could I do, wouldn't he swallow me alive? I shouldn't let him feel my fear. If he sees you fleeing, he'll tyrannize you and walk all over you. That's their nature; on the contrary, you should attack them and argue with them over there. You should defeat the enemy in his own lair.

...Thus, he became too vicious and his barking increased; the maize straw with its soil and roots will do that wretched dog some good. With both hands I wrestle with the slanting sheaves of maize corn.

Muria really became frantic when he saw this.

"May you be ripped in two; now I'll show you!" I force myself to look down at my cut, bloody palm. No more pain or fear or crying. This defeat appears worse and more dangerous than fear, crying and pain. The dog doesn't bark anymore. He has put his head against the fence; he keeps one eye on the slats and between the slats. He's interested in what happened to me.

"Hey, look at what's happened to me, it's all your fault!"

In the hall of the polyclinic I recall what's wrong with me. What should one do now? I don't know. Crying is an excellent means of soothing pain and fear; I know, I can no longer cry from fear.

...I return to the yard with stitched and bandaged hand and shin, and tear-stained eyes. Evening is approaching, the sun is going down. A dark-red dusk settles on the houses and

yards. It's surprising how that shiny and slippery maize straw ripped my palm.

I sigh deeply and I see Muria, no less amazed than me. He's smelling just that maize straw on which I had injured my hand.

Yes, but how did he get in?

As soon as he caught sight of me he pricked up his ears, ran his eyes over my bandaged hand, put his tail between his legs and ran off, he squeezed through to from where he was barking at me and threatening to bite me with his flowing mane.

He has a biggish hole or somewhere where he can squeeze through in a rather prominent place. It appears that he comes and goes whenever he wants, whenever the fancy takes him.

No, there will be no life in this yard. Danger lies in wait in every nook and cranny. You can't avoid mishaps, even if you very much want to. On the other hand, what will make you, a living person, sit indoors; what will keep you in your room. First of all, I must brick up this fence. Other things can still be sorted out and can still be helped.

Muria moved about in my yard when he couldn't see me; he would run off when he caught sight of me, he would hide behind the fence and the stone wall; with his snout protruding between the slats he would look at me with a sympathetic eye. He no longer barked at me, he no longer growled at me, as if he had convinced me of his good faith, although it is always better to be careful, as he remembered and so did I; we kept our distance; we didn't cross the boundary (and I don't mean only the fence). Everything was like this, but I've no reason to hide that; for quite some time now I have lost interest in the bravery of Muria's fellow canines.

#### THEY'RE PLAYING MUSIC SOMEWHERE

It's a sunny, windy day. There's sun and wind.

The wind swirls the dry leaves, sometimes it drops and sweeps up the dry fallen leaves in one corner, sometimes in another... I'm running about in the yard, in the dry leaves, in the yellowness, in the sunny wind. I see how my shadow flashes and splits on the tree trunk and on the fence and the paling, what can beat directionless, aimless running about in the sun, in the wind, in the dried leaves? It's good to run all alone in the sunny wind, indeed it is.

"Come in," they call out to me, I can't hear them. "Come in or your ear will start to ache again!" "Let it ache if it's going to ache!"

So what if I get an ear ache, I'm running around in the leaves, in the shadows, in the wind and in the sun. The branches sway up and down with nothing remaining on them except for a few stubborn leaves.

Of course, at nightfall, before going to bed, my ear began to ache. They place red-hot salt wrapped in a cloth on my ear. They wrap my head and face, they bundle me up warmly, it doesn't help. My ear aches and aches.

I embrace and sink into a warmed pillow full of feathers. "Stay like that and you'll fall asleep," they deceive me. I don't feel sleepy. My ear aches, what will put me to sleep.

"When you were saying "Let it ache, if it's going to ache," then that's what's making you cry now!" Mother scolds me.

"I told you that it could ache from outside if it was going to ache, when did I say that it could ache from inside!" I cry, heartbroken. Apparently it's not enough for me to be in pain. No one understands me, no one feels sorry for me.

The next day.

There's the sun and the wind again. The yard has turned into many colors in the shadows of the leafless trees. Lost, fluttering leaves flash past in the air. The robbed branches sway.

I'm sitting in my room with my ear bandaged, at the desk. The desk stands by the window. From the window the balcony of the house can be seen, our yard, the tall walnut tree, the walls of the first floor of our house under construction, the low scaffolding, the leaves swept up against the foot of the wall, the mounds of red soil shovelled up from the foundations.

...Somewhere they are playing a trumpet. Some lone musician is apparently standing in one of the yards. It could be that the soldiers are training on the parade ground, it is possible that someone is amusing himself, everything is possible, but what's the point of music in the wind? I think I can hear something. It's all the fault of my aching ear, no, I can't hear it, they are playing music somewhere. The wind whirls the sound of the trumpet this way and that, twirling it in the air together with the dried leaves...

The sound of the trumpet faded.

I wait, but the wind no longer brings the sound of the music as far as to me. Only its own irksome whistle. The walnut tree is no longer growing, no one is building the house for us any longer, no one plays the trumpet anymore.

Although it is sunny and windy, one can see a heart-wrenching picture from the window. All in all, how tedious life is when your ear aches dully, and from inside, too.