

Two Flags

If you cross the little bridge, the road climbs uphill. Once, they brought gravel for the elections by truck and dumped it as a makeshift ramp so cars could climb the slope in bad weather... Zaura — be him buried facedown — sent from the road maintenance, reluctant to part with gravel, kept shaking his messy head, looking like a qvevri brush, angrily muttering curses at the road workers... anything those guys could do, they did without complaint — whatever they were ordered to do: in rain, in heat, in frost and wind... Even now they had taken big shovels and were furiously unloading the UAZ truck, which was advancing at a snail's pace and leaving little mounds of gravel behind.

— “Why did they put me to work for, to bring out these ten worn-out old coots... I'll tell you: no one is going to come to the polling station... and then one should go to their houses, with a bow — ‘pozhaluysta’ [uses Russian word ‘please’] — and either give you their vote or not,” Zaura grumbled, and signaled the driver Feirouz “Le Gicleur” with a look to hurry up a bit; otherwise it will get dark...

— “Overcoming poverty and creating an environmentally safe environment — that's our main task,” the mayoral candidate said; I heard him myself recently. “So that's it — shouldn't these ten old cracked coots want to solve it for the elections?!” Feirouz, the driver, sniggered and winked at Zaura.

— “Take your foot out of this politics and hit the gas, or else I know what happens... The tortoise put out a foot and said ‘I'm joining the herd’ (a Georgian proverb).” — came the teasing replies.

— “Yeah... yeah. And the tortoise also said ‘I'll kick the penalty!’” Feirouz laughed again, baring his big, corn-yellowed, thick, widely spaced teeth.

Far off, dust rose the size of a fly, and soon a white, sand-covered jeep appeared, the big Latin letters on it proclaiming the name and logo of some NGO. Sun-tanned young people sat in the jeep; one was a little older and clearly the leader. The youngsters chatted cheerfully in English and occasionally burst into hearty laughter at the radio news piped into the car... When they caught up with Zaura and the UAZ truck, they wound down the window and one of them — loaded with cameras and sitting near the window — asked mispronouncing a village name: “Is Antennantkari this way?” Zaura was surprised; he thought they were all foreigners, but that young man had asked in fluent Georgian. Zaura hesitated a moment, then smiled:

“Ah, you must be looking for Anetaantkari...”

The young man laughed too and nodded. “That's right,” Zaura showed him the way, and the jeep continued on with a steady sway — what could worry it? It was a two-axle vehicle from a top firm, bold on the roads and tried a thousand times over...

“Those folks from Tbilisi are devil-may-care! Why do they come or go?!” Zaura spat the butt of his cigarette with the thick sole of his boot and gulped down his flask greedily.

“Well, hurry up... it will rain cats and dogs now and they will be up the creek without a paddle...” Zaura said.

Zaura's phone buzzed in the back pocket of his jeans — they called it an 'ass' pocket here — and the workers hurried. When the sky grew dark and large drops of rain fell onto the sun-baked earth, having finished their job and already on their way back home, they jumped onto the UAZ's truck bed and shouted smiling to Zaura:

"Boss, the treat is on you..."

"No treat, no shreat," Zaura snapped. "Listen, Badura is calling — hurry, you need to show up at Anetaantkari; some foreigners and high guests are coming and the show has to be started... Those from Tbilisi who passed with the jeep earlier — it's a hundred percent them... Anyway, I'm off now and later I'll slaughter the mayor's sheep for you and its lamb, as a treat, too..."

"Yeah, you always promise us that, and we are skipping the third 'chakaphuli' [a popular Georgian dish] time..." Gigo muttered unhappily and scraped his dusty shoe over the sun-bleached grass.

"Not the third — the tenth... Now I'll take care of their business, then we'll win the elections and let the good 'chakaphuli' and the 'bozbashi' (Georgian dish) be on me — come on, give me your hand. Thumbs-up!" Zaura offered his dirty right hand to Gigo.

"Eh, this time I'll trust your word once again, but didn't you say earlier that bozbashi is eaten at a funeral? Don't make it an excuse later..." Gigo added.

The boys laughed. Zaura shook his head disapprovingly. "You're a fool and you'll die like a fool!" he snapped, started the engine and called out from the open window, "Don't scatter until I tell you, understand?!" and hit the gas...

"Yeah... yeah. Give me the penalty!" Feirouz laughed again, baring his big, corn-yellowed, thick, bristly teeth.

...

In Anetaantkari, Zaura was greeted with much fuss and clucking... Big and small, people had gathered near the village governor's office and there was a lot of arguing, disputing, and discussing... The elders sat like owls on a long wooden bench, worn shiny by age and frequent sitting, leaning on their canes, mostly short of breath and sighing. The women looked intently at each other and the outsiders with curious eyes. Children were revving up "velosapets" (bikes) — some the three-wheeled kind, some the two-wheeled kind, and some the things they call "scooters." The governor, Omara, taciturn, pitch-black, a father who lost his son in the war in Samachablo, stood at the entrance to the two-story building, his hands shading his eyes as he looked down the dusty road... Clearly everyone was waiting for the guests.

"Looks like those fancy folks lost their way," Zaura thought — for him journalists, NGO workers and their donors were just flashy, showy people.

"What do they care?! Once it hits six they'll flip their timesheets and go their ways... It's not Saturday or Sunday for us, neither dead nor alive... I couldn't go to Noshre's son's wedding — the mayor says the World Bank is coming and the others are following: infrastructure people, this 'NGO', this 'EU'... they say we sit at a strategic road junction... There was no time for Noshre's boy's wedding!... they promise other prospects for our people and you have to think strategically like a statesman... bla bla — who knows! What has Noshre's son's wedding got to do with the fate

of the country? Does it depend on whether I'll feast at Noshre's son's wedding, eat 'khashlama' (a Georgian dish) or not... For three months I've been planning to empty a qvevri and haven't managed it because of them; I want to take care of chacha and at least prepare the qvevri for the next year... Autumn's at the door and it's here! March passed, April, May, June and half of July... I really deserve that my wine gets spoiled and leaves me empty-handed?!..."

Lost in these thoughts, Marika appeared — the governor's assistant. She had run away from home three times on her own and been brought back twice, coquettish, accepted as the village's little darling and the fate of the whistle-stop boys.

"The governor sent me — guests will come any moment and we have to bring chairs from the village hall and the boys should help," she said.

"Which boys?! Do I look like I've tied them to me? I nearly killed them hauling gravel on the road and who thanked me?!" Zaura snapped.

"I'm just telling you what I was instructed — the rest is your business, you know!" Marika pouted, her Botoxed lips thick with red lipstick, and with the slow sway of her rounded hips she moved away from Zaura.

Zaura couldn't help watching the wide sway of Marika's hips for a moment, but angrier than aroused he spat, "Phooey!" and furiously jabbed at his phone's keypad. What else to do? He'd have to call Gigo and the boys — those hungry, eager lads who'd been waiting for their wages and whom he unjustly exploited during the road works — and who knows how many big and small tasks awaited them before the elections started...

"Boy, you have to get here quickly — chairs are to be moved from the hall and you must go with Marika... now your excuses like 'I have a backache and a fever' are not accepted, I don't want to know... it was said and it must be done!"

Zaura cut the call with a flick of his hand and blended into the crowd.

"Zaura, son, do you know why they called us?" Aunt Daro smiled and asked — "They wanted us to put on our best clothes, no printed cotton dresses or flip-flops allowed..."

"Investors and high-ranking people will come; today they must pour asphalt in a ceremonial way; later other benefits will come — solar panels for the kindergarten, the hall, the school, the clinic — the neater and more picture-perfect we look, the more beautifully they'll pave us and other fancy little things will come abundantly..."

"Oh my, you'll be swept away mocking at others!" Aunt Daro laughed and prodded Zaura, and just as the woman replied, Zaura was called over:

"Zaura— come here," the governor called. "How do you manage to hide all the time?!"

"Me?" Zaura was surprised and joked. "I'm like a flag out on the road, I'm visible from every point..."

"Well, if you're like a flag then the flag raising is your task — don't you dare refuse or argue," Omara looked Zaura straight in the eye.

“Now flags!” Marika had said earlier about the chairs and not flags, and Zaur protested: “What flags, what are you talking about?!”

“Soon people will come and we don’t have even one flag ready...” Omara said.

“A flag? Come on, Jemalich — what flag are you talking about? Which protocol service am I?” Zaura retorted.

“Now you’re the protocol and the prosecutor... In short, two flags must be raised — our five-crossed Georgian flag and the EU twelve-starred flag. You know the international situation in the neighborhood, right?! How important the EU projects are for us!”

“Yes, I know, so what?”

“Well, in fifteen minutes you must dig two holes and set the poles so that both flags are waving in front of my balcony before the guests arrive, do you understand?!” Omara said.

Zaura shrugged and looked at the tractor.

“Don’t stare at the tractor for nothing... What do you need it for? Boy, bring a good pry-bar and call the boys and they’ll help set the iron springs... The flags are with Marika — I sent them to be ironed; go and get them and we’ll arrange them the best way... Let’s not be ashamed in front of guests and hosts... If nothing else, it’s our image — image!”

“Image, schimage... tell me which one to raise first — ours or theirs?” Zaura asked.

“How’s that?”

“It depends on where the guests will look from — if speeches will be from the balcony and as I see you’ve set up microphones there, guests will go up to the balcony and greet the hosts from there... right?”

“That’s true, but when they come and get out of the cars the first things they’ll notice will be the flags... right?”

“Right!”

“So if that’s the case, if the EU flag is placed here first and ours second, then from their view ours will be seen first and then theirs?”

“Ahh... I hadn’t thought of that,” Omara pondered. “Who can we ask to tell us what’s correct?”

“Ask me about digging the holes — I wouldn’t know that,” Zaura laughed, leaving Omara in thought, who was staring at some point and swinging his hands by inertia. That’s how he got when nervous — he suffered from urticaria in childhood; he got covered with a skin rash, itching and torment from a fever...Urticaria, damn it!

“... ‘The center’s orders are the orders! Everyone knows how to act in that situation’...” Indeed, in about half an hour the holes were dug and the flag poles were ready... All they needed were brave, devoted workers. The boys soon rolled up in the UAZ truck and, proudly waving the Georgian five-

cross and the EU twelve-star flags in front of Omara's "residence," lo and behold — Omara's feverish jitters calmed down; when the dust-storm of the guests' cars raised clouds across the village's rutted, stone-strewn road, the gathered crowd instantly fell silent. Omara stood like a sentinel and turned his gaze to one side. A lively picture unfolded that would make any photographer jealous, and it didn't take long: a team of journalists jumped out of one of the cars and camera-clicking began. Marika moved among the guests with her usual poise, charming locals and strangers alike, especially the men, gifting them with the host's slightly tired but practiced courteous and pampered smile. She was a true woman trying her feminine best, coquettish, doing her best to display her finery — after all, what sort of gathering in Anetaantkari would be without this? Her accentuated waist particularly caught one photo correspondent's eye, and the young woman even got her personal shot. Georgian and English phrases and lines mixed among themselves. Officials were easy to spot among the guests by their unusually formal, out-of-season dress and unnaturally taut, clean-shaven necks.

"We made it in time, Jemalich!" Zaura grinned at Omara and extended his hand to say "shake," but Omara looked at his hand, a little feverish, muttered something and darted toward the mayor's deputy.

"Now shout for us, Omara!" the deputy called warmly and kindly, and Omara's tension disappeared like smoke.

Omara moved forward like a Little Kakhi (Heraclius II, King of Kakheti, nicknamed 'a Little Kakhi') going to war, ready to behead an Ottoman leader — he was moving upright, spirited, leading the host-guest party like a beehive... The governor shook hands with the locals with a practiced smile, greeting them as if he recognized everyone by name. Then he bent down toward the children and patted the cheek of a three-year-old, skinny, diathesis-prone Tedo who was sitting on Aunt Daro's lap. The cameras quickly captured the wholesome commemorative image. Aunt Daro used the moment, took out a folded piece of paper and handed it to the majority candidate. The men around him stepped Aunt Daro aside, scrutinizing her and the child with their eyes, though Tedo howled out of fear; the woman was still pleased that she had not made a mistake and that it had gone well.

An ad-hoc presidium was arranged in front of Omara's residence. Field microphones were installed. A dark blue cloth covered the table and chairs were arranged; all that was missing was bottled water, and Marika quickly arranged cold water with disposable cups along the table. It was hot, and four hands reached for the bottles at the same time...

The meeting began... First, the anthems of Georgia and the European Union were played, and the crowd rose to their feet. Then it was time for speeches, and the radio operator Bikenta adjusted the volume and tone for a long time, because the speakers picked up background noise and every word echoed across the vast space... Anetaantkari rumbled in response, the mountains amplifying the sound...

— "As you know, one of the main drivers of climate change is the excessive use of various fuels, especially fossil fuels... use... use..." — the dark-red-haired foreign orator lectured the audience. He spoke slowly and confidently, ignoring the echo picked up by the sound system that reverberated across the mountains. After each phrase, he would glance at the slightly startled female interpreter, who jotted notes on small sheets and translated with a small stammer and growing nervousness:

— “The increase of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere causes the so-called ‘greenhouse effect’ and raises the average global temperature... raises... raises...”

The interpreter paused for a moment at “greenhouse effect,” checked with the speaker, and, reassured she understood correctly, continued in sync.

— “It is a confirmed fact that climate change affects humans in many ways, from physical health to economic conditions and social stability... to... to...”

“See, I told you something’s happening in nature and my joints are aching differently, they mock at me... what do they say, can something help us?! Will this parade of celebrities going to save my joints now?!” Daro muttered, annoyed.

“It will help, both joints and the lack of finances, grandma!” smiled the majority candidate, calming her down.

“Uh-huh! I’ll tell you next year, when you come here, asking to give me your voice!”

Some people chuckled. Omara muttered something curtly and shot a fierce eagle-like glance at the villagers, signaling them not to make a single misstep. Meanwhile, the dark-red-haired foreign speaker was replaced by a new presenter, a sharp, graceful young man with a European bearing and polished image. Zaura immediately recognized the young man as the one he had met on the road from the jeep, and happily, like a very familiar person, applauded him with a broad smile.

— “Droughts and unstable weather reduce agricultural productivity...” the young man spoke, and the echo repeated diligently: “Reduces productivity!” ... “And demands replacement of traditional crops... replacement of crops! ... Reduced access to clean, potable water... reduced access... deepening economic inequality... vulnerable groups... groups... most affected... natural disasters... frequent floods... landslides and droughts... threaten human life and property... glacier melting... and sea-level rise... causing coastal changes and leading to forced relocation of populations!”

Every mention of a problem made Omara’s face flush; his hands reddened, he began hysterically twitching and perspiring. But the real ordeal began when the next speaker listed the negative health effects:

— “Extreme heat increases the risk of heart and respiratory problems, especially in children and the elderly...”

“That’s what I was saying! ... They’re talking about us...” Aunt Daro rejoiced. “I couldn’t make my man believe anything... and here the kids constantly get allergies, elders get high blood pressure and strokes — see whose fault is that?!” She snatched a dust-covered toy giraffe Jose, from diathesis-prone little Tedo’s mouth.

— “The spread of infectious diseases, like malaria, is expanding, as their carrier insects reach new regions... Air pollution and rising allergies cause asthma and other respiratory diseases...” — the speaker continued, a middle-aged man with a refined, slightly accented, authoritative voice.

At each disease mentioned, Omara felt as if the itching of urticaria he got in his childhood also caused these diseases. Sometimes he flared up, sometimes he felt a cold shock in his veins;

sometimes a wave of itching nearly split his arms and elbows. He endured this torment until it was over, when the governor finally addressed the overheated crowd with a word of hope:

— “Friends, I believe that through tireless teamwork we will develop environmentally safe energy resources and technologies to slow global climate change and its resulting natural disasters: droughts, floods, landslides. If we do not reduce harm, if we do not overcome energy poverty, if we do not ensure the population has access to environmentally safe energy resources and technologies, we will face an extremely difficult reality! This is why our friends and partners from the European Union are here today, and together we will overcome all challenges! Strength is in unity!”

The governor’s last words were met with loud applause.

The crowd now moved toward the stretch of road prepared for asphalt paving. The colorful renders clearly showed how the surface would take shape, and the elderly residents, shaded by the renders, watched the images with interest and shared their satisfaction. Guides placed the governor, a minister, and two foreign guests with symbolic shovels in hand, so the first batch of hot asphalt could be poured from the vehicle onto the road under their direction... The machinery roared, engines hummed, the crowd buzzed and applauded, and suddenly a deafening, terrifying sound surged from the opposite side — a mountain seemed to roll down toward the road where people were gathered, like in the movies...

Women and children screamed, men shouted back in inhuman calls... Aunt Daro grabbed three-year-old Tedo with his diathesis-prone cheeks in her arms, asking the nearby people for help. Frightened Marika clung to the governor’s silk tie, and the mayor’s deputy begged, “Madam, please step aside, let Mr. David get out!” Guests and hosts, road workers and journalists, asphalt and gravel clashed; the mountain advanced and threatened to swallow both people and machinery...

“People, don’t be afraid! Our leadership, the European Union is here with us!” Omara wanted to shout, opening his mouth, but no sound came from his throat... Not only his hands — his whole body went uselessly red, like an Easter egg...

“Speak up, Jemalich!” Zaur begged, but in vain... Guests pushed past each other; some ran toward the heights, others backwards..

“Guys, stop! Where are you going?! There’s a ravine there, you’ll be buried, you fools!” — Omara wanted to shout, but again in vain... Bikenta’s newly acquired expensive console stuck under his arm as he tried to reach a car; the crowd wouldn’t let him pass, but he stubbornly pushed through, crouching, standing up, again pushing forward into the crowd. Once a quiet Anetaantkari, it now screamed and roared, escaping being swallowed by the earth...

But where can one escape Nature?

Nature is sovereign—vast, divine,
Yet serves the laws that still confine;
She grants her blessings, pure and sweet,
Then lays the fairest fields in sleet.
She bears alike the wrong, the right,
The shade of sin, the soul of light;
She crowns the morn with rosy gleam,
Then shrouds the vale in frozen dream.

And though her hand may wound or bless,
Her heart still beats with loveliness;
For all her tempests wild and free,
She nurses life in charity!

V. Pshavela (a Georgian poet)

A stone-shard, Shako, stepped forward to recite a poem to the guests — microphones buzzed, the sound multiplied and echoed back through Bikenta's speakers... Omara opened his mouth once, but his breath caught, and the massive wave of the earth surged over him...

"Yii, you damn thing, be covered by earth!" — he remembered his childhood, the tender care of his neighbor Aunt Venera, when at ten or twelve he used to shake unripe plums from a tree without her permission...

Omara struggled once more and ...

Omara opened his eyes in the office, his head leaned on the desk against the black-and-white portrait of the Prime Minister, and he fell asleep. Zaura and Marika were nearby — Marika fanning a ventilator, Zaura shaking him and shouting:

"Jemalich, how can you sleep? The guests are coming, we dug the holes, how do we set the flags — should we place our five-crossed Georgian first, or the EU twelve-starred flag ?!"

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