

Galaktion's One-Hundred and Seventeenth Birthday Feast

The minibuses gathered in the wake of the Kutaisi Railroad Station, where trains to Tbilisi, Georgia's capital, ran once daily, if at all. Minibuses were far more constant, waging a slow, steady progress along the main East-West highway. My destination was Vani, a town that had been a trading partner of 5th century B.C. Athens, in the age of Plato and Aristotle. From there I would have to find a way to a smaller place, a village so tiny that it appeared on no map. *Chqkvishe*, it was called.

I pushed ahead to the entrance of the station-house, and asked a man who looked like he might know how to find the *sopeli*—the ancestral village--of Galaktion Tabidze. No one even mentioned this tiny village in Tbilisi—though the poet himself came up often enough. The ginger-haired, maternal woman named Guliko, who sold carrots, potatoes and apples from a wagon cart on the intersection of Tbilisi's Kikodze and Leonidze streets, grinned luminously when she saw me holding a book of his poems. She began to sing his praises, and I understood her heart belonged more to the world of this dark-eyed man than to the cucumbers and melons she sold to passersby.

I showed her the short lyric I'd begun to read with my Georgian teacher. I had a paperback translation: on the left-hand column was Tabidze's verse in curving Georgian letters, facing a page of flowery translations in laborious mock-Byronic couplets. A year ago, when I first bought the book and glanced at the English, I'd throw it down, blind-sided by disappointment.

Now, I handed her the book, open to a very short poem about two seas—one wracked by tempest, the other at peace. In this 12-line poem from 1917, the first I'd tried to read with my teacher's help in Georgian, Galaktion casually calls up Byron, Mary Chavort, and Shelley. Then he covers them up in a snow-slide: "*Da poesia daitzrah dzvavi.*" The consonants roll in meaty clusters, forming an avalanche.

As Guliko read me the first couple of Tabidze's lines in Georgian there was a simple, deep music in her voice that lifted it above the ordinary. It filled her throat and made her round face exuberant. "To Ol-Ol" said the poem's dedication. She glanced at it, and asked in Russian: "What's the meaning of this?" I did not have the words or the heart to tell her the whole story. The poem was dedicated to Olga—the wife he lost. She was taken from him in 1936, in the purges. He married twice more, and never replied to the letters sent him from Siberia; perhaps he could not. In 1941, the letters stopped.

With her gloved fingers, Guliko selected a *churchkhela* - a homemade village sweet of walnuts strung along a thread and then dipped into warm, molten grape-pulp, resembling a braided candle when it dries - and gently placed it inside my backpack. She kissed my cheek before I left her corner. That night, as I tasted the pebbled sweetness in my bright kitchen, I pushed away the thought of the rough pavements of Chavchavadze Avenue where the poet jumped to his death in 1959.

All this was far from the innocence of Chkqvishe. Tonight, in this small place I could hardly even begin to pronounce, I planned to attend a birthday *supra* for this 117-year-old symbolist with the uncanny ivory complexion and flashing obsidian eyes of a Caucasian Rudolph Valentino. In later life Galaktion became almost unrecognizable, cultivating the beard of a Biblical prophet. It was the younger man whose image stared out from the cover of my book, and whom I sought out. His language is bardic, rhythmic, sensuous and sonorous: embedded with surreal visions of light blue wine or wild horses. Its metric architecture can be athletic, mirroring the structure of the country church Nikortsminda in one work that is often recited.

A critic once explained to me that he cannot be translated because his poems are not about discursive meaning; they are, he said, like a Greek statue. "Galaktion Tabidze, the poet of "Tovli" and "Moon Over Mtatsminda" had the courage of his solitude; the genius of origination. He made his songs to light an age of darkening hopes. Tabidze's birth, on November 17, 1892, put the unmapped village of *Chqkvishe* in a new light. His father had died of pneumonia two months before; his mother named him for the galaxies she'd lost.

He came of age within the livelier modernist circles of Kutaisi, Georgia's second city. Kutaisi played Chicago to Tbilisi's New York: provincial, humble, uninfatuated by its own fairytale of greatness. Its genius was self-created and sudden at the start of the revolutionary age. Change was in the air and its clamor infiltrated the language itself. Just as jazz was the music of a rural African American population displaced to the newly industrialized cities of the north, so the poetry of the Blue Drinking Horns had in it the syncopation and synthesis of a crew of young provincial men who'd restyled themselves in a search for cosmopolitanism. They knew the works of Baudelaire and the brilliant novelties of the European avant-garde. And from Russia, they caught the fire of Futurism. They frequented cafes, wrote manifestos and created literary magazines that flowered and burned out in just a few issues.

Inside the minibus, it was warm and close. I couldn't even see the mountains in the distance, but I knew they were there. The scenery through the window to Vani was hardly scenery at all; just a jostle and a rocking rhythm, a diesel-belching progress along rutted roads as the sky darkened from milky pastel to a deep eggplant color. The minibuses in Georgia are narrow and familial spaces, packed with an assortment of villagers heading to and from market. There are young mothers with babies swaddled in pink blankets, older women with bodies as round as turnips and an incongruous sparkle of satire in their eyes, aged men with milky cataracts. All of them seem to chain-smoke, chatter and chuckle at once. Heading into the countryside is like settling into an enchanted evening sleep.

It was dark when we reached Vani, and the last few passengers climbed out of the bus slowly, I among them. A taxi was idling nearby. In my simple Georgian, I said: "You know Chkqvishe?"

The man at the wheel nodded. "Galaktion Tabidze's sopeli," he said. No problem; he could take me there shortly. It wasn't far. At the Tabidze museum gates, two guards waved him inside the gates. In the darkness of the village night, I stepped out of the car.

“*Ikat, es sheni patara sakhli,*” said the driver—*here, this is his small house.* He said it with a tone of compassion in his voice, for he thought I would miss some presence I was searching for, no matter how carefully I traced the hollows in the floorboards of the porch. I walked along the stone pathway until I reached the low wooden steps of the unlit house. Nothing stirred in the trees. I thought of the very first poem of his I’d learned from my teacher, called *Kari Hkris*. I’d tried to translate it, freely:

*The wind winds, the wind whines, the wind winds
spooling leaves through loose branches to thread
arched needletops of trees, a tensile copse.
You are gone, you are gone, you are gone?
What a wild rain comes, what snow, white snow.
Impossible to find you on this blind lane.
Every place you hide; every time your image swans past
I hear trumpets, bodiless. My thoughts are mist
condensed by wind, winding wind, dying wind.*

Now Galaktion Tabidze was eluding me, just as the figure in the poem eluded the man who searched for her—at least I thought it was a man, charging through snow and wind. In Georgian, the line that haunted me was the simplest one, “*Sada khar, sada khar, sada khar?*” Literally it meant: *Where are you, where are you, where are you?* A child’s cry.

I said, “*Akat? Dabadeba?*” *Here? Birth?* What to make of this literal cabin in the woods. The porch slats stood awry, many of the white railings missing. Bad weather and icy seasons had warped the remaining slats. A lock protected the inner rooms, where the child lived with his widowed mother through his first few winters and summers. His father had died of tuberculosis two months before the baby’s birth. Nothing visible set the house apart from any other three-room cottage. A bronze plaque on the wall said in Georgian script. “1891, 17 November, Galaktion Tabidze’s birthplace.” He lived until 1959, a ripe age for a Georgian symbolist living in the time of Stalin.

Galaktion came of age during the tumult of revolutionary break from Tsarist Georgia – when Georgia was independent, for just four years, before being reabsorbed by Russian Bolsheviks. In 1905, the October Revolution in Moscow reverberated in the Caucasus. Gurian peasants and Tbilisi intellectuals reacted with fervor, and the wide boulevards of the capital were convulsed by rallies and demonstrations. In Kutaisi, the young artists and writers suddenly felt the lightning of revolution strike. They had the power to change the language, to cast out the dead conventions, to invent a new meter as incantatory as the moment required.

They were young men, products of brief terms of study abroad in St. Petersburg, Germany or France, returning to sleepy Kutaisi. They called themselves the *Blue Drinking Horns*. Blue was a symbol of Romantic poetry and the vaunting sky of Georgia, but the horn was a tribal object—made from a ram’s curving antlers. You filled it up with wine and drank it down in one gulp during round of toasts. This was the universal test of manhood in Georgia. In every village *supra*, or feast, the horns were filled with local wines. Though Georgia and neighboring Armenia are among the earliest Christian countries—the rituals of the *supra* go back to much earlier Dionysian cults. The Blue Horns were Dionysians in their own way.

During the Soviet era, one of the many factors that made Georgia unique was that this Southern republic was allowed to keep its own language alive: in schools and party assemblies, in daily life. Other republics did not get this privilege; their languages began to atrophy and die. Georgian stayed vibrant. It has no kinship to Russian, Greek, Persian, Mongolian, Turkish or Arabic, though smatterings of vocabulary come from each successive wave of invaders. The language itself has no clear relation to any on earth. It’s a purely Southern Caucasian phenomenon, a Kartvelian tongue. Georgian has a rich vocabulary, and a unique alphabet. Galaktion made it richer, by creating new combinations of sound and sense based on the ancient semantic roots of his tongue.

Before I understood a word, I fell in love with the sound of it. The spoken music of Georgian is made of voiced and unvoiced strings of volcanic, glottal consonants and great round vowels, like boulders shaken loose in the human throat.

The Blue Horns wrote lines that were percussive and free, rhythmic and infectious. Galaktion's older cousin, Titsian Tabidze, was at the near-center of the new clique. His friend Paolo Iashvili wrote a manifesto for the first issue of the journal *Blue Horns*, published in March of 1916: "*After Georgia the holiest land is Paris. Magnify, O people, this dream city, where our drunken brothers, Verlaine and Baudelaire, Mallarme, the guardian of the secrets of the word, and Arthur Rimbaud, the accursed youth, drunk with pride, display their crazy acrobatics.*"

It sounded like the Beatniks had come early to Kutaisi. Galaktion kept a certain self-preserving distance from this circle. His cousin Titsian called him the Chevalier of Solitude. In 1917, following the Russian Revolution, Galaktion and his peers found themselves in an independent Georgia, but liberation was short-lived. It ended in 1921 when the Bolsheviks took control. When the Blue Horns migrated to Tbilisi by 1919, Galaktion along with them, they were no longer outsiders. The radical core of the government ministry gave them patronage. A change had come over them: they were now the mascots of a new political order, officially recognized as a sort of tribe of minstrels. They climbed trees and recited verses; the well-heeled radical intelligentsia of Tbilisi gathered and applauded. The poets did not hang back from the attention, but they lapped it up, like tamed cats offered a saucer of cream. And this fondness for recognition spelled the beginning of their undoing. They joined the writer's union, and were close to the first Communist government—which fell with a thud in 1926. By 1937, the first communist leadership had been liquidated.

Celebrity status did not help the Blue Horns. On the contrary, it lulled them into traps of mutual denunciation, making them ripe for the intellectual purges that Stalin's right-hand man, Lavrenty Beria, undertook. In a systematic way, in 1937, Beria tracked down Tbilisi's artists and writers. Titsian Tabidze was publicly denounced and expelled from

the Guild of Writers; in private, lurid reports were whispered of his torture and death. His friend Paolo Iashvili, a poet of great talent, was called up to the next Central Committee meeting. He took a revolver, and in front of all the committee members, shot his head off.

And yet, Galaktion Tabidze lived on, under a cloud. The wife of his youth, his companion since 1912, Olga Okujava, came from an early Bolshevik family of intellectuals, whose independence ran contrary to mindset of the 1930s. Under Beria's decree, Olga was arrested, twice, taken by armed men in Tabidze's presence. The second time, in 1936, she was sent into exile in Siberia. She wrote him frequently—letters and pleas, and he did not answer. The reason is ambiguous: fear or mute hopelessness, or an instinct of self-preservation. The silence ate into him, a cancer.

As a poet, he went through increasing periods of depression. He could not write. When he shook free of the dimness, he composed work like a man possessed, sitting at his study table, surrounded by scraps and morsels of paper. Much of the work was unpublished. Some ten thousand pages in his hand remain at the Tbilisi State Literature museum, largely uncatalogued. The work he published in his lifetime brought him adulation in Georgia. He was given the Order of Lenin by the Soviet Authorities. His readings were enduring occasions; people remembered them for the rest of their lives. He came to coal mines and to lecture halls, to read and share his poetry. His was the voice of Georgian made anew, a language elevated to music.

Yet the gathering blue shadows of the mind did not leave him. One can find evidence in his work, with its pleas for endurance. The increasing distance from his fellow man proved unbridgeable, though he married twice more.

Here, on the porch of the house where he took his first steps, I turned off the small, bright beam of my flashlight. *Sada khar, sada khar, sada khar*. It was not the cry of a child any more in my ears, but of a man who has lost a piece of himself. I looked up—past the two

splintery doors—at the galaxy of stars. They were bright as mercury. They outshone the shrouded stars of the city, and had a particular insistence that night.

The driver walked ahead of me to the museum nearby, a state-run commemorative building. A party appeared to be well underway. The bright lights filtered out from behind curtains; a spot of life in the darkness of the mountains. The museum's front room was altogether empty except for a bronze Galaktion statue, all attenuated legs and arms.

There were armed guards at the gate. *Can we enter this place?* I wondered. It certainly looked forbidding.

“A moment,” said my driver. “Director is coming.” All at once a man of sixty with a tawny broad mustache, a country squire's fleshy features, and a full black coat of Caucasian arms materialized before us, a dagger by his side, and rows upon rows of bullets resting in diagonal white casings across his breast. In spite of the warlike garb, he was smiling. His great black cloak—the Georgian *chorkha*—gave him a kind of Caucasian grandeur, as if he'd stepped out of some traveler's volume of the 18th century, and might disappear again at any moment.

He welcomed us, and his courtesies were large and limber on the tongue. “I am called Levani,” he said in Georgian. His costume and his size made me think somehow of *Arabian Nights*. Irma, his co-host, a smiling woman with chestnut hair came out with him. She spoke English: “Hello,” she said, “So we would like to invite you. We understand that you are here from America?”

“Yes. From New York.”

“A long way! Come in, come in,” she said.

This party, I judged by the array of dishes and glasses, had been going on since late afternoon. There were over fifty people in attendance, at three long tables set up in a horseshoe-fashion. A live band was playing music. Horns drew curls of melody in the air.

Shalva, the Tamada, rose at the head of the front table and made a toast. A dance tune began. Fluting her arms, Irma, the chestnut-haired hostess, circled out, her toes spiraling across the polished floor. A man, most likely her husband, matched her gesture. Though they did not touch, they moved in syncopated circles across the dance floor. The feathery motions of her arms, outstretched, were an invitation. Levani cut in, dancing underneath the minaret arch of her partner's raised arms, and spinning around with a grace unusual for such a large man. When the music finished, the whole party cheered. More toasting followed. In turn, they toasted the president, the patriarch, the poets, and the homeland of Georgia. The band played a patriotic tune, and everyone stood, hands over heart, to sing along. Later on, a partner for me materialized from the far table. I danced, too, twirling, surprised to be out on the floor.

Over the shoulder of the celebrants, a late picture of Galaktion Tabidze himself stood guard. He was bearded and weathered, his features thickened, as if by cold or exposure to the elements. From that two-dimensional frame, he watched the party unfold. He was an enigma to me. In his final years, he looked more like a Lear than ever. I wondered if he'd mind my crashing his party. I could not ask, because he was dead, and so was the system of state socialism that had formed and deformed his world. He gave up no secrets willingly. I promised myself that when I returned to Tbilisi, I would learn his verses, study his words, until I understood some small part of his music and its survival through an age of forced silence. That night in *Chqkvishe*, though, we did not ask how or why the songs came and with what human or divine faculty they persisted. It was enough to gather around the long tables and celebrate the poet's birth.

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