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Behind the Wall of the Caucasus

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In January 2004 I bought a ticket to Moscow. I had one destination, a destination that even I was unable to confess fully to myself at the time: a plot of land the size of Maryland, which has been bombed steadily for the past ten years. Occasionally its name flashes in the headlines of Western newspapers, but more often it occupies the edge of the world's consciousness. I had come to Russia to find Chechnya, and not just geographically. To find war—not bullets and bombs—its aftermath, its impact on people I knew only from sound bytes. I was looking not so much for death as for the memories the dead leave behind. I wanted to measure what I saw and experienced there against my life back home.

Russia comprises several countries. There is cosmopolitan Russia: St. Petersburg and Moscow, which belong to Europe. There is provincial Russia: Novgorod, Pskov, Voronezh, Tver, and Volgograd. There are the colonial settlements populated by Russians: most of Siberia and the Northwest Caucasus. Before they were incorporated into the Russian Empire, these lands were populated by Ubykhs, Cherkess, Chechens, Adyghes, and other indigenous populations, whose languages shared a common source, and whose cultural traditions were closely intertwined. For many of these peoples, particularly in the Northwest Caucasus, their traces remain only in the place names, the idiosyncrasies of the crafts and cuisine, and sometimes in odd words whose etymologies are the ghostly shadows of an exterminated race. To the east and south of the colonial settlements are the republics Karachaevo-Cherkessk and Kabardino-Balkaria, which are populated half by Russians and half by natives. Finally there is the Northeast Caucasus: Chechnya, Ingushetia, and Dagestan. These three republics do not in any way resemble Moscow and St. Petersburg. In spite of Russian influences, local traditions still prevail. Practically no Russians live there, and most regard these republics as havens of Islam, as antitheses to culture and civilization. Indigenous languages such as Chechen, Ingush, and Avar are spoken on the streets; faces are dark and hair is black. People who live in the Northeast Caucasus do not say they live in Russia. If you ask them where they live, they will answer the Caucasus. In spite of the nationality stamped in their passports, to them Russia is a foreign land.
I did not cross the border into the Northeast Caucasus until a week after I arrived in Moscow. Every policeman who stopped me for a document check, every friendly and not-so-friendly person I met, advised me that south was the wrong direction to be traveling. I was better off, they told me, going north to provincial Russia, where I could visit old monasteries and churches, or back to Moscow, where I could witness the flourishing of Western civilization. If I went south, they said, I would be kidnapped by an evil Chechen and spend the rest of my life digging graves for his victims. In spite of their prodding, I continued traveling in the wrong direction.

A week into my trip, I met four conscripts on a train headed for Vladikavkaz, the capital of the Republic of North Ossetia, and home to the largest Russian military base in the North Caucasus, the last stop for soldiers on their way to Chechnya. It was January 13, and the third-class section of the train reverberated with the sounds of snoring and drunken toasts in celebration of Staryi Novyi God, the Russian New Year from the prerevolutionary calendar. The boys noticed me immediately. I was clearly out of place, unable to spread out the linen or fold my seat into a bed as everyone else had done. The word foreigner seemed branded on my skin. One of the soldiers, a wide-eyed, lanky boy in his early twenties, introduced himself as Tengiz and asked me where I was from.

“America,” I said.

“Will you join us in a toast to the New Year?” another soldier asked as he lifted a bottle of vodka and poured some into a shot glass.

They ranged in age from seventeen to twenty-one. All had shaven heads and were dressed in oversized military fatigues. They told me that they were starting their two years of required military service with a tour of duty in Chechnya.

“Are you afraid of dying?” I asked them.

“Of course,” Tengiz grinned. “Why else do you think we’d be drinking so much?”

Our talk woke the old man across from us. He sat up in bed, his hair disheveled from a long night of interrupted sleep. He stared at us with something like hope or nostalgia, happy, I suspected, to return to the days when life was not yet scripted, when possibility was imminent and hope more of an instinct than an illusion. He cleared his throat, summoning his wisdom for our benefit.

“Fighting is your patriotic duty,” the old man said. It looked to me as though he saw these conscripts through the filter of his own youth. He was probably a veteran of World War II, or as Russians call it, the “patriotic war.” Back then soldiers could say that they were fighting for justice and peace, to defeat fascism.
and liberate the Soviet Union from Nazi occupation. Back then war had a pur-
pose other than destruction.

The young conscripts nodded, one by one deferring to his wisdom. I decided
to let the conversation about Chechnya end there. Clearly this was not the right
time to invite them to share their hesitations about going to war.

The soldiers who had remained silent until now introduced themselves and
told me where they were from. One was from Siberia, another from Tatarstan,
another from the provincial Russian city of Volgograd. None were from Moscow
or St. Petersburg. I struggled to pronounce my last name—Gould—in a way a
Russian could reproduce. “Gold,” they repeated, not hearing the dropped u.
Tengiz recognized the English word gold and translated my name back into
Russian. He called me Rebeka Zolotaya (golden Rebecca) for the rest of the night.

“Listen, Rebecca Zolotaya,” Tengiz said, “give us your address so we can write
to you in America.”

I took out a notebook, opened it to the first page, and wrote down my address,
first in the Roman alphabet as it would need to appear on an envelope, and then
in Cyrillic. I passed the notebook around so they could copy down my address
and add their own on the next page.

“Her letters will reach us, won’t they? Will we be allowed to write to her?”
Tengiz asked the old man, as though he were an expert on military censorship.

“Of course, of course.” He nodded paternally.

Before I got off the train, Tengiz took me aside and said, “Rebecca Zolotaya,
can I kiss you?”

We were standing in the back of the train, in front of the steps where I would
disembark. Everyone’s life is full of opportunities missed, moments where a
different answer would have changed your life. This was different. Tengiz’s re-
quest contained no promise of any future or of anything at all other than the
moment itself. His question was so innocent and spontaneous, so devoid of any
attempt to deceive, that I could only say yes. We kissed until the train arrived in
the station. It seemed to me one of the better ways of saying goodbye when words
cannot suffice.

When I entered the train station at Mineralnii Vody, I was greeted by three heavily
armed men, whom I recognized as OMON by the patches sewn onto the shoul-
ders of their jackets. Recruited from prisons and paid many times more the rate
of normal soldiers, the OMON are the most feared cadre of the Russian military.
Their job is to raid civilian homes and entire villages under the guise of checking
for weapons. Such *zachistkas*, or “cleansing operations,” invariably end in massacre. These OMON were as drunk as I was, but they knew better than I how to get what they wanted. One of the men, his eyes flushed red from too many shots of vodka, asked to see my passport, which I had placed indiscreetly in a money belt that also contained a thick wad of cash. Inexperienced, drunk, and afraid, I pulled out my money belt and exposed a layer of crisp dollar bills. The drunken eyes of the OMON soldier gleamed.

“We have to arrest you,” he said as he skimmed through the pages of my passport, a broad, cocky smile plastered on his face. His attempt to charm was as revolting as it was pathetic.

I asked him what crime I had committed.

“You didn’t write down here how much money you had when you entered Russia,” he said, winking.

“No one ever said anything about money when I went through customs,” I protested.

He smiled again, barely able to control the movement of his lips, and said, “Alright. I’ll see what I can do for you.” He walked to the other end of the station, where a man with an even duller expression and even broader shoulders was apathetically staring off into the distance. They traded jokes for a few minutes, their suppressed laughter emerging as snickers.

When he returned he gazed at me with a mixture of sarcasm and pity. “Sorry,” he said. “My boss says we have to send you to jail and confiscate everything you possess.”

Every word he uttered was slurred with saliva, and I couldn’t tell whether he meant for me to take him seriously or not. I stood motionless, pretending I hadn’t heard what he said. Any response I made would surely have been to my detriment. He pointed for me to sit down on a chair across from his desk in the train station’s waiting room. I obeyed and waited as time idly ticked away. After about twenty minutes the soldier sat down in the seat next to me and attempted again to twist his face into an attractive smile, which was offset by the bloody red patches staining his eyes.

“What were you talking about with our soldiers on the train?” he asked me, his words soothing and creepy at the same time.

“We were just having a good time together,” I answered, feigning innocence but still abiding by the truth. After all I had not committed any crime or discussed anything that posed a threat to Russia’s security. “They wanted to hear about America,” I offered at last.

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He nodded, for he knew even better than I what I had talked about with the soldiers on the train. Perhaps he didn’t really care how I answered that question; probably his real goal was to scare me, to let me know that I was being watched, that every move I made would be recorded somewhere in the annals of the internal security service.

With his primary goal accomplished, he was ready to set me free. He left me alone with another OMON soldier and went to “consult” with his boss at the opposite end of the waiting room.

“I have good news,” he said when he returned. “My boss says that if you give us a gift, we’ll let you go.”

“What kind of gift?” I asked.

He winked, or rather, his heavy, fat-lined eyelids sank and parted slightly. He pointed to his stomach and then to mine, to the place where my money belt was strapped to my belly. “That kind of gift,” he said, “is what we want. How much can you offer us?”

“All I have is twenty dollars,” I said. “Is that enough?”

He knew I was lying. But the gift I proposed was far more generous than he expected, so he nodded, that eternally foul grin frozen on his face. He took my money and escorted me to the train headed for what I had claimed was my destination, Pyatigorsk, the city where the poet Lermontov spent his final years, where I could find the museum dedicated to his memory, the home where he died, and the site of the duel that ended his life. Whether out of gratitude for the bribe or a sense of civic duty toward his homeland, the OMON soldier accompanied me everywhere until it was finally time for me to board the electrichka, or suburban train.

A few days later in a boarding house in Nalchik, the capital city of Kabardino-Balkaria, I told the story of my encounter with the Russian conscripts.

Of course,” he said. “All our trains are like that now. At every train stop, the train conductor reports to the OMON anything suspicious that happened on the train. When a foreigner like you steps on board, everyone watches.”

In a sense the story I have told has already been written. In 1837 Mikhail Yurevich Lermontov wrote a poem about the untimely death of Alexander Pushkin called “The Death of a Poet,” in which he blamed the Russian government for the duel that ended Pushkin’s life. To punish him for his criticism of the monarchy,
Nicholas I decided to remove him from his post in St. Petersburg and send him to the Caucasus, where he was to serve as an officer in the Russian army.

“Good-bye, unwashed Russia,” Lermontov writes:

“land of lords and slaves
of blue uniforms and the people they deceive.
Maybe, behind the wall of the Caucasus,
I will hide from your pashas,
from your all-seeing eyes,
from your all-hearing ears.

Lermontov’s farewell prayer is a declaration of independence by a prisoner condemned to inhabit his cell forever. Of course his words reached the czar, as they were arguably even directed at him. Lermontov knew that he could never hide, could never escape from those all-seeing eyes and all-hearing ears. For him Russia was a country of slaves, lords, obedient soldiers, and blind masses. Lermontov was trapped inside the apparatus of an oppressive state, and perhaps this is why he decided to risk his life in a duel, which took place in Pyatigorsk in 1841. Lermontov died at the age of twenty-eight.

The conversation with those soldiers on the train was the only time I heard ethnic Russians talk about the war on Russia’s southern border. For the most part Russians preferred to ignore Chechnya out of existence. The farther I got from the Russia that considers itself a part of Europe, the more I felt at home. In the Northeast Caucasus, and in the bridge republic of Kabardino-Balkaria, people were strangely, unexpectedly kind. Visitors from abroad are both rare and welcome. Unlike their northern neighbors the people who live in these regions are unable to forget the bloodshed occurring mere miles away; oblivion is a luxury they cannot afford.

I arrived at my destination on a bus headed for Ingushetia, a small republic that shares a border with Chechnya. (During the Soviet era, Chechnya and Ingushetia comprised one republic. The Chechen and Ingush languages are nearly identical, and Chechens and Ingush are considered by many to be essentially the same people.) The bus set out from Nalchik, to the more provincial Nazran, which, with a population of 30,000, is the largest city in Ingushetia. A Chechen woman seated across from me was bringing her niece back to the Sputnik refugee camp several miles from the Chechen border. She heard me ask the man sitting next to me when the last bus would return to Nalchik that day. The last bus, my laconic
seatmate said, left hours ago. This meant I would have to spend the night in Nazran. I was bracing myself for a night of roaming the streets and seeking peace on the bus station floor when the Chechen woman—named Zarema—interrupted my unpleasant daydream. “Come sleep with us in our tent,” she offered. I could not refuse.

When the bus reached Nazran, we boarded a marshrutka, a vehicle that transports the refugees to their various shelters: ramshackle tents, deserted homes, abandoned train cars, and open fields. A Chechen flag hung from the driver’s window, and on the back of the car he had pasted a bumper sticker that read: “No law is written for wolves.” These words reminded me of the Chechen national anthem, which proclaims, “We were born at night, when the she-wolf whelped. / In the morning, as lions howl, we were given our names. / In eagles’ nests, our Mothers nursed us.” For this marshrutka driver to have such a slogan branded on the back of his car was risky even in Ingushetia and would have been impossible in military-occupied Chechnya. He flashed his defiance proudly, and none of the refugees seemed to mind.

After an hour of bumpy roads, we arrived at Sputnik. I followed Zarema into a tent crowded with bunk beds and boxes. In the corner three children filled the top bunk of one of the beds, while Khalid, an elderly man sat on the bottom. His wife, Seda, was busy preparing a feast for the guests from Nalchik. Zarema embraced her parents, nieces, and nephew. Then she introduced me as a journalist who had come to the camps to write about the living conditions. I had never told her who I was or why I was traveling through Ingushetia, and I was surprised to hear myself introduced as a journalist. Perhaps her choice of occupation for me was her way of telling me why she had invited me into her home.

I spoke first to Seda, the grandmother of the children and matron of the tent. She looked to be ninety but was probably closer to sixty. I never saw her stand up straight the whole time we were in the tent. Her back was hunched almost at a ninety-degree angle, which made me wonder how she was able to walk at all. In spite of her disability, she was in charge of keeping the tent clean and preparing food. When we arrived she was preparing a Chechen specialty, hinkal, a circular flat bread stuffed with pumpkin and dipped in butter. Given the dismal cooking conditions, it came as no surprise that the food was cold and flavorless. They loaded my plate liberally with food and tea, reserving as little as possible for themselves.

Meanwhile the children began to stare. At first they were frightened and stayed away, watching with wide eyes. Gradually they encircled me and began speaking
to me in Chechen. I smiled and feigned comprehension, but I could not keep up
the illusion for long. They soon realized that I didn’t understand what they were
saying, and the two girls, who were also the oldest, switched to Russian. Both
Amina, thirteen, and Fatima, ten, were fluent in their second language and eager
to share with me all their books and treasures. Lecha, the youngest at the age of
five, watched silently as his sisters spoke a language he didn’t understand. Fatima
put a tattered Russian translation of Alice in Wonderland in my lap. It was, she
told me, a book she lived inside; she could cross through the mirror into another
world when she felt that she could no longer live in this one.

After they exhausted their store of treasures, the children asked the adults to
take out a shoe box of family photos. Amina sat down next to me and started
sorting through pictures of her life in Sputnik, going backward in time. We came
upon a photo of a handsome young man in his thirties with curly hair and a
mischievous smile.

“That was my uncle,” Amina explained.

“He died here.” Seda pointed to the bed I was sitting on. “Thirty-five years old.
My son was ashamed to show his face in the camp. All his friends died in the war.
He said he had no reason to live. He died unmarried and didn’t leave any children
behind.” When Chechens recite their history, they say that they have faced gen-
ocide every fifty years since the beginning of the nineteenth century. In a culture
that teeters on the brink of extinction, leaving the world as childless as you enter it
is a tragedy as deep as death itself.

They showed me class pictures taken while Zarema was growing up in Kazakh-
stan. Stalin deported every Chechen to Central Asia on February 23, 1944. They
were allowed to return home only in 1956, three years after Stalin’s death. A third
of the population perished either in the cattle cars that transported them to the
other end of the Soviet Union or of starvation once they arrived.

I asked them about Kazakhstan and how they felt about the deportation.

“For us, Kazakhstan was paradise,” Zarema told me.

“Paradise?” I repeated skeptically.

“Compared to now, it was heaven on earth,” Seda agreed.

Many of the photos were ripped in half, some preserving only eyes and hands.
I asked what happened to them, why they were in such bad shape.

“After the first siege of Grozny I went back to our home,” Seda explained.
“Everything we owned was scattered on the streets. We had many more photos
than these. But this is what I found. The soldiers destroyed what they could.”

I would have considered the destruction of their photographs a random trag-
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edy had I not heard the same story the next night at a shelter for refugees near the bus station in Nazran. A Russian woman and former resident of Grozny brought out a box of photos to share with me. The Chechen women asked in astonishment how she had managed to preserve those fragments of her past, as all of their photos had been ripped to shreds.

When we reached the bottom of the stack, Amina started to go through the photographs again. “You’re her captive audience,” Seda said, smiling. “She’ll show you the same pictures all night if you let her.”

Zarema prepared my bed with clean sheets, while the children crawled into a twin bed and huddled together. “They like to stay close. It keeps them warm,” she said. I fell asleep as dew dripped through a hole in the green rubber ceiling. The Akhmadov had pasted tape over the hole, but the adhesive was disintegrating. Mildew spread along the edges. Living in a tent city for a night is not hard, I thought to myself. But when you grow up here, as all the children had for the past five years, it must be difficult to stay human.

The next morning, over hinkal and tea, Seda and Khalid discussed their plans to return to Grozny to pick up her pension check. I asked if I could go along. The Akhmadovs agreed. They kept the children out of school that day for protection; with children in the car, they said, we were less likely to be searched by Russian troops. I was the reason they were afraid of being searched; I was the one illegally entering an “anti-terrorist” zone without the credentials required of foreigners.

We crowded in: Seda, Fatima, and I in the back, with Lecha on my lap, and Amina, the eldest, in the front seat, with Khalid driving. Wearing a hooded jacket that covered my face and hair, compressed with all these bodies into a small car, I found it hard to breathe. The direct route into Chechnya would have brought us to Grozny in less than half an hour, but with me in the car, we couldn’t cross through the checkpoints on the main road. We drove through the mountains instead.

The first Chechen village we reached was Assinovskaya. There were no signs to announce the boundary between Chechnya and Ingushetia, only a lightly armed soldier occupied with his cigarette. The two republics separated only in 1991, after Chechnya’s first post-Soviet president, Jokar Dudayev, declared Chechnya’s independence from the Russian Federation. The hills we passed were bare and muddy, with rare patches of green. Snow-capped Elbrus, the highest mountain in the Caucasus, rose in the distance. The only signs of civilization were the heaps of rubble we passed every few miles. Rather than suggesting destruction, these heaps
seemed to blend in quietly, as though a war had ravaged the country centuries ago, and no one had gotten around to rebuilding. I did not know that war could feel so much like peace.

As we traveled deeper into Chechnya, the checkpoints multiplied. Russian soldiers with Kalashnikovs strapped to their bodies stood poised to shoot, tattoos adorning their muscular, bared arms. The only buildings left standing along the road were military barracks shielded by sandbags piled to their roofs. At every checkpoint a soldier approached the car, made a cryptic signal with his hand, and Khalid slipped him a bill. I asked how much money the soldiers expected. He said that bribes varied, anywhere from ten to fifty rubles, or thirty cents to two dollars. I never found out how Khalid was able to read the soldiers’ sign language, to translate their gestures into the perfect bribe.

In the next few villages, every second house was a pile of bricks. Those still standing were painted in hues of blue and green, perhaps as an affront to war, an assertion of life in the midst of destruction. The main signs of commerce were gallon-size glass jars of petrol refined from oil taken from one of the republic’s many derelict wells. Chechnya’s economy is built entirely of cottage industries; with no state infrastructure all people can do is buy and sell. One of the ways former housewives stay alive and feed their children is by selling the oil they have refined at home.

Outside of Grozny the soldiers stayed close to the checkpoints, perhaps afraid of confronting the villagers inside the town. Beyond the checkpoint boundaries the men with guns were boyeviks, or Chechen fighters. It was as though two governments were in charge simultaneously; one step to either side and you cross over into enemy territory. Every time we drove close to a boyevik, Seda’s face beamed with pride. She would turn to me and say, “That’s one of our boys. Look how beautiful he is.” When we pulled over to ask directions from one particularly broad-shouldered boyevik, armed like a guerilla but with a childlike smile gleaming on his face, Seda smiled back at him as though he were her son, freshly graduated from high school.

The boyeviks carried themselves differently from the Russian soldiers. Lightly armed they did not brandish their weapons or show off their tattoos as the Russians did. They blended in with the civilians. I mentioned to Seda that because they wore the same clothes as the Russian soldiers and many Chechens have pale skin, it must be difficult to distinguish between a Chechen fighter and a Russian solider. She stared at me, more surprised than offended by my blasphemy. “I would never confuse a boyevik with a kontraktnik,” she said, referring to those
Russian soldiers who are hired to kill—not draftees—and who are among the most dreaded ranks in the Russian military.

It took us three hours to get to Grozny. What I had seen so far had not prepared me for the near-total destruction I saw there. Every facade, every building was either entirely collapsed or gutted from the inside. The few standing walls were pockmarked with bullet holes. In the center of the city, stray dogs nosed through high piles of rubble. Yet Grozny was filled with thousands of people. The streets were bustling with cars, tanks, and old women selling food. And irony had not abandoned the city; a freshly painted sign in a bombed-out building announced an “internet-café,” though there was no electricity most of the day, and the only people with phone lines were government officials.

Khalid parked the car and left to find refreshments for the children. Next to our parking space, a garden had begun to bloom in the midst of a cement heap. The children and I watched an old man a few feet away from us hug a tree, weeping. His hair hung down to his shoulders, and it looked as though he had been mourning for years. Before leaving the city, we stopped at the Akhmadov’s house in the Oktyabrsky District of Grozny. They had lived on a residential street next to houses of crumbling bricks and piles of charred metal where a school had formerly stood.

The Akhmadov’s once-comfortable two-bedroom brick house had been stripped bare. Nails protruded from the floorboards. Russian soldiers (or vandals, though it is impossible to distinguish between the two) had slashed the walls to hasten the destruction. One bedroom was covered with stuffing from a mattress that had been ripped apart. A naked plastic doll lay dismembered on the bed. Amina held it up to me and explained, “Maya kukla.” The doll had been hers.

The children were delighted to return to their home. In the tent where they had spent most of their lives, there was hardly space to move; here they could run around in the backyard and play with their dog, which the neighbors had been feeding for the past five years. The foundation of the house was crumbling, and glass shards were strewn over the muddy grass. I could not watch the children chase each other in a game of tag without shivering. “Be careful!” I warned them. But they were too happy to care about their safety.

Before we left, Lecha sat down in the entryway on a bowl that served as a chamber pot. Seda told him it was time to get back in the car, but he refused to budge.

He muttered a phrase in Chechen, and I looked to Seda, hoping for a translation. “He says he’s not going anywhere,” she said. “This is his home.”
Though he had been born in a cellar and raised in a tent in Ingushetia, Lecha knew the meaning of home. A tent could never take the place of his house, no matter how ruined. Seda and Khalid sat down next to him. They didn’t have the heart to tear him away.

Before leaving Russia I sent letters and books to the Akhmadov children: an illustrated version of Gogol’s story “The Nose” for Amina and a picture book of dolphins and whales for Fatima. Back home I wrote to Tengiz, asking him to tell me about his life as a soldier in Chechnya. My notes to the Akhmadovs were shorter, simple requests that they let me know they were alive and well.

I checked my mailbox several times a day, and even dreamt of receiving a message begging me to return to the Caucasus, but four months passed without a word from any of them. Meanwhile, on April 2, 2004, I learned that the Sputnik refugee camp had been entirely cleared out, leaving only one refugee camp in Ingush territory. And then on June 15, nearly half a year after I had returned to America, and after I had given up hope of ever hearing from anyone I had met during my trip, I was astonished to find in my mailbox not one, but two letters postmarked from Chechnya.

The Akhmadovs had returned to Grozny. They had no water, no electricity, no phone, but at least the children were going to school. That to me was a crucial detail, indicating that these children would have a future somewhere, somehow. Less given to words Tengiz sent me two photographs, one of a black mountain covered in snow, the other of himself standing between two other soldiers whose faces I vaguely recognized from the train ride. He seemed older than I remembered him. None of them were smiling. The barracks around them looked deserted.

I worry most of all about Amina and her education. She had an astonishing amount of goodwill toward the Russians and toward those people in charge of destroying her life. She saw men with guns every day, guns that sometimes pointed in her direction. In this context it amazed me that she was able to speak without bitterness, that she was old enough to know what was going on around her and young enough not to hate.

And yet the war drags on. Both the Russian Federation and the Chechen opposition are willing to sacrifice anything to destroy the other side. The only difference between the two is that one side has tanks and bombs and the more or less tacit consent of the world community, while the other side is increasingly
labeled a terrorist faction. The general contours of Chechnya's future are clear: a succession of puppet presidents, decades of guerilla warfare, and another uprising, whether in ten or fifty years.

In his poem "Of Mere Being," Wallace Stevens describes a bird with "fire-fangled feathers" that perches in a palm tree "on the edge of space." This bird is remarkable, Stevens implies, because its singing is motivated by something other than reason. The meaning of the bird's life cannot be exhausted by logic, pragmatics, or everyday instincts such as happiness and pleasure. "It is not the reason," Stevens writes, "that makes us happy or unhappy." For me the bird in Stevens's poem is a more appropriate symbol for the Chechen people than the wolf. The bird's life has a purpose that cannot be expressed in words, which sets it apart from the human world. The bird is not a predator but has resisted assimilation and cultivated an identity apart. At its best the Chechen self-representation suggests this ideal, that one ought to live for something greater than personal happiness, something more noble than domestic comfort and harmony.

Not every suffering is sacred; not every death is redeemed. Most tragedies are unrecompensed and leave behind only the futile urge to mourn what might have been. I do not wish to romanticize Chechen heroism or to honor the impulse that started a war that has killed to date almost a third of the Chechen population. I try to temper my relationship to Chechnya with a sober resistance to exoticking it. This is not an easy task; Chechens themselves encourage and partake of their peripheral relationship to the dominant culture. Even as I resist my own romanticism, I know that a part of me will always succumb to being's non-reason, to the wish, the illusion, the ideal.

I am in a bar in Tbilisi on a quiet Sunday morning. The sun gleams but not oppressively. Its rays fracture against the sparkling crystal of my glass of ice cream and coffee. I want to return to Chechnya. I tell him it is time for me to go back. He tells me no. I say I am not worried about my safety.

"I'm not talking only about your safety," he says. "I'm talking about the people you see, especially those who help you get into Chechnya. When you get back home and write about them, you will put their lives in danger. You will be announcing to the world that they helped a foreigner break the laws of the Russian Federation. What makes you think any good will come of that?"

"But someone has to tell the truth," I say. "They wouldn't have helped me if they didn't want me to write about them."

"You're no better than an informer," he says. "You might as well be working for
the KGB. The Russians depend on people like you to betray the Chechens and make it harder for other foreigners to travel there. You're playing right into their hands."

Thus I write my memories. I write of Tengiz and the Akhmados, inventing their names but keeping their faces in front of me. Part of me wants to erase them like words on a blackboard, to make them vanish as soon as this page is printed. They are safer in oblivion. But maybe they don't want to be forgotten, I tell myself. Maybe they want their suffering known. Then the other part of me yearns for their images to be thrust upon the world stage, even if it puts them in danger. Anything to remind the world of Chechnya, to bring a war thousands of miles away into America's daily consciousness. Is it better to forget or to remember, to take the risk or to stay safe? This question does not permit an answer; the price for either is too high.