The Light of the Ancestors (by Idris Bazorkin)

Rebecca Gould

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/r_gould/5/
Poetry
Meena Alexander, Devon Branca, Jesse Cataldo, Brittny Cavallaro, Casey Charles, Liz Countryman, Loren Edeich, Hannah Gamble, Alina Gregorian, Eamon Grennan, Bob Hicok, Tony Hoagland, Major Jackson, Susen James, Julia Johnson, John Kinsella, Ben Lerner, Emmanuel Moses, Travis Mossotti, Soheil Najmi, Sierra Nelson, Meghan O'Rourke, Todd Overby, Eleanor Payster, Jean-Luc Raharinana, Dragica Rajčić, Jeremy Schmall, Glenn Shfbeen, Matthew Siegol, Leigh Stein, Avrom Sutzkever, Tricia Taecs, Ryan Teitelman, Florencia Varela, Aung Way, Lisa Williams, Huang Xiang, Jeffrey Yang, Dean Young
TRANSLATIONS BY Zackary Sholem Berger, Andrew G. Emerson, Gary Gluck, Marilyn Hacker, Matthew Hurt, Maung Nyi Nyut, Sarah Vermande, Michelle Yeh, Jen Zoble

Fiction and Nonfiction
Idris Bazorkin, Nic Brown, Ron Carlson, Wendy Fox, Laura Krughoff, Arthur Levine, Patrice Nganang, Jean-Luc Raharinana, Victoria Redel, Kevin Wilson, Mike Young
TRANSLATIONS BY Rebecca Gould, Matthew Hurt, Amy Baram Reid, Sarah Vermande

Interview
Su Wei with Austin Woerner

Portfolio
Don Hillier

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## Poetry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Loren Erdrich</td>
<td>Collaborative Artist Statement</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and Sierra Nelson</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casey Charles</td>
<td>The Orb's Prayer</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travis Mossotti</td>
<td>The Escape Artist</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glenn Shaheen</td>
<td>The Rothko Chapel</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dean Young</td>
<td>Two Poems</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eleanor Paynter</td>
<td>Phantom Limb</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ryan Teitman</td>
<td>Strange Elegy</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leigh Stein</td>
<td>A Brief History of My Life Part VII</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brittany Cavallaro</td>
<td>Other Fields</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major Jackson</td>
<td>Two Poems</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tricia Taaca</td>
<td>Agita</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannah Gamble</td>
<td>Exits/Interiors</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florencia Varela</td>
<td>Elephant Missed</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeffrey Yang</td>
<td>from Yennecott</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Todd Overby</td>
<td>Pieces of a Man</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emmanuel Moses</td>
<td>Préludes 2 &amp; 3</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>translated by Marilyn Hacker</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julia Johnson</td>
<td>Representation of Figures</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devon Branca</td>
<td>Self Portrait, Age 8</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew Siegel</td>
<td>[It's true]</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meghan O'Rourke</td>
<td>Two Poems</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bob Hicok</td>
<td>Two Poems</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeremy Schmall</td>
<td>Two Poems</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alina Gregorian</td>
<td>The Man Who Wears Monocles</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa Williams</td>
<td>Poem</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben Lerner</td>
<td>Late in the Form</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liz Countryman</td>
<td>Another Neighborhood</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesse Cataldo</td>
<td>Emma in the Fields</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony Hoagland</td>
<td>Two Poems</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susen James</td>
<td>The Miraculous Keening of Anna</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Kinsella</td>
<td>Two Poems</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eamon Grennan</td>
<td>Because My Son Is Setting Off</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Fiction</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura Krughoft</td>
<td>This Is One Way</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ron Carlson</td>
<td>How to Win Her Heart</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin Wilson</td>
<td>Goat</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nic Brown</td>
<td>How I Fell in Love; Then How I Killed my Baby</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arthur Levine</td>
<td>Orion's Belt</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike Young</td>
<td>Look! Look! Feathers!</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria Redel</td>
<td>The Brilliance</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wendy Fox</td>
<td>Fauntleroy</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Portfolio</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan Hillier</td>
<td>Altered Engravings</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>From the Borderlands:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Writers in Exile</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meena Alexander</td>
<td>Landscape with Kurunji</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jean-Luc Raharinamana</td>
<td>Two Works</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>translated by Matthew Hurt and Sarah Vermande</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dragica Rajčić</td>
<td>from The Eighth Life of a Cat's Soul</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>translated by Jen Zoble</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avrom Sutzkever</td>
<td>from Diary Poems</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>translated by Zackary Sholem Berger</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aung Way</td>
<td>Hospital</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>translated by Maung Nyi Nyut</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patrice Nganang</td>
<td>The Invisible Republic</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>translated by Amy Baram Reid</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soheil Najm</td>
<td>When I Walk My Wounds Fall Away</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>translated by Soheil Najm and Gary Gluck</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huang Xiang</td>
<td>Three Poems</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>translated by Andrew G. Emerson and Michelle Yeh</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idris Bazorkin</td>
<td>Light of the Ancestors</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>translated by Rebecca Gould</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interview: Su Wei with Austin Woerner</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contributors' Notes</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Editor’s Note: Borderlands

The writers in this section represent various perspectives on the ideas of exile and border-crossing.

Some are political exiles, unable to write freely in their own countries. Aung San Suu Kyi left the country after his role in the 2007 Saffron Revolution endangered his freedom. Huang Xiang served twelve years in prison and labor camps; his work is still banned in mainland China. Jean-Luc Raharimanana left for Paris when his work was banned in his native Madagascar. Patrice Nganang, who left Cameroon in 1992, writes movingly in his essay "The Invisible Republic" about the dangers many African writers face in their own countries.

What kind of government would want to silence writers such as these? Clearly, one that fears them. Anyone who doubts the relevance of literature in today’s world need only look to censorship officials around the world for proof of its power.

The act of writing is, inherently, an act of location; as exiled Chinese novelist Su Wei states in this section’s interview, “literature is my home now.” Avrom Sutzkever’s Yiddish poetry provided a constant through line during the dislocations of the Holocaust, while Idris Bazorkin’s fiction attempted to preserve the culture lost when his people, the Ingush of the Muslim Caucasus, were deported en masse to Central Asia during World War II. However, the process of locating oneself through language comes with considerable complications: Dragica Rajcic writes about how neither her native Croatian nor her adopted German can adequately express her experience. The word “exile” can describe not just a geographical position but also a state of mind. Soheil Najm writes movingly about the experience of feeling like an exile within his own country, Iraq. Meena Alexander’s poem “Landscape with Kurunji,” written in the aftermath of the 2008 Bombay bombings, speaks of the tension between human violence and the beauty of the landscape.

Translation itself is a form of border-crossing; in that spirit, Washington Square is privileged to provide a home for these pieces, never before published in English. We invite you to enter the rich borderland of which these pieces speak.

Amy Bonnaffons, International Editor
When they met, Nasi displayed all the respect due to Batazi as the mother of her son's bride and future in-law. She gave her Persian silk to sew a dress with, sugar cubes, and a bundle of tea leaves.

...The conversation crossed the subject of when the wedding should be held. Batazi said that she wanted to get it over with as soon as possible, because she was afraid that Kaloi, who was in love with Zoru and had hoped to marry her, might do something drastic.

"Listen to me," Batazi said in a low voice. "I keep guard over my daughter like a hen over her chicks. And I've noticed that something's not quite right with her lately."

"What's worrying you?" Nasi asked, bending her head down so as to hear Batazi better.

"Kaloi has changed completely. I asked reliable sources whether he has hatched some kind of plan. They said that he wasn't planning anything, and that makes sense since what could he do so long as we keep guard over Zoru? But you never know with youth. I'm afraid that even if he doesn't kidnap Zoru, he'll kill your son! Until my girl is safely settled in her husband's home, her happiness might turn into despair. That's what I am afraid of."

"Thanks for warning us. We'll keep a lookout. I remember that young man. If you recall how much his parents hated us, then you'll understand how easy it is to produce a disaster. He has nothing to lose. For him it would be a miracle if my dear Chaborz died. We must be careful and make sure everything turns out alright. I wouldn't leave these young folk alone for all the money in the world. Anything can happen to them. Why didn't you tell me about this earlier? We don't have time to waste with rituals, like the groom's visit to the bride, and the celebration with his friends. That would be a torment to Kaloi. If he really loves your daughter, it might make him do something terrible."

"If he really loves her!" Batazi repeated. "I'm telling you, he loves that girl to madness. He loves her so much that not having her has affected his health. But he respects the wishes of his elders, and he remembers that his father was my father's friend. That's the single bond which protects us from his revenge."

"Of course, of course," Nasi repeated absentmindedly. "He's a shy boy. But I didn't know he was dangerous. I didn't expect this kind of threat from him."

Nasi was thinking as she spoke of the day long ago when she had first seen Kaloi and Zoru together. It was at the horse race, during Egi's annual celebration, when Kaloi had emerged triumphant and proven himself the strongest young man in the entire region. The moment when she noticed how Kaloi and Zoru looked at each other, she decided that her son had to have Kaloi's sweetheart for his wife, she had to make Zoru her daughter-in-law, and that she would sacrifice anything and everything to make that happen. Nasi told herself that Kaloi deserved the love of a real woman, not the cowardly little wisp of femininity that Zoru was. That was why, when she finally did get a chance to speak to Kaloi, she told him that he had better watch out, and that he would be sorry someday that he had won the competition instead of her son.

Many years had passed since then. Her first dream was on the verge of being fulfilled. Chaborz would be getting married soon to Zoru, Kaloi's childhood sweetheart. But what of her second dream, the one which she had barely acknowledged even to herself, the dream of giving Kaloi the love he deserved, love from a strong, passionate woman? This dream hadn't lost its hold on her ever since she saw Kaloi for the first time. Who could predict the kind of love that might be possible between them?

Ever since Nasi had given up on her dream of marrying the mullah Khas­san, all of life's pleasures seemed to elude her. It was as though she was being avenged by the joy she had taken from the mullah. Or maybe it was just that she had learned to attain her goals in roundabout ways. She had to get by somehow, after all.

"Batazi," she said, "you're a smart woman. We need to work together to protect our children—"

"Now you listen to me," Batazi interrupted her. "Don't disagree. I'm ready for any kind of sacrifice. You know how I live."

"What I'm suggesting is that Chaborz pay a visit to Zoru three days from now. At the end of that visit, he'll take Zoru home with him. There will be enough people with him so that no one will have any reason to fear disaster. But I don't think I should leave Egi without first trying to make a friend out of our enemy. Don't you agree?"
Batazi was already in a state of shock at the news that Chaborz would be arriving to take Zoru home with him within three days. She was not used to dealing with such decisive and efficient people as Nasi.

“I don’t understand what you’re talking about,” Batazi said finally, her jaw gaping stupidly wide.

Nasi smiled. “Of course, this isn’t an affair for women to meddle in. But sometimes it’s easier for a woman to obtain through crooked methods what is elusive for men. Men often end up fighting among themselves. With us, it’s easier. I won’t stop at anything for my son’s sake. Chaborz won’t do anything rash of course,” Nasi said. “In time, everything will take care of itself. But we’re mothers, and it’s our job to worry.”

“Absolutely!” Batazi broke in. “Don’t you worry about Zoru. The entire village will be ready for Chaborz’s visit in three days!”

“Who’s with Kaloi right now?” Nasi asked after a brief silence.

“No one. His brother took their sheep to pasture. Kaloi’s alone. Sometimes his cousin visits him, but that’s it.”

“Excellent.” Nasi stood up to leave. “It’s getting dark. No one will see us. I’ll go suggest to him—hmm—what should I suggest?”

“Listen, Nasi, don’t get offended. I heard that one of your relatives is interested in marrying him. Maybe you could pay a visit and say that you have a relative who wants to be his wife?”

“I thought I was smart, but you’re many times smarter than me,” Nasi said. “I knew from the minute I met you whose daughter my son should marry, and I sensed right! I’ll take the matchmaker to see him, and then I’ll start asking him questions about his life. Aren’t you clever!”

Nasi rolled a portion of meat into her scarf, along with a stack of pancakes, returned the flask of liquor to her purse, wrapped her hair in a light blue silk scarf, and left, her violet dress rustling at her feet.

Then she went to find the matchmaker and told her of her plans. After informing the mullah’s sister that they would soon return, they set off together for Kaloi’s tower, on the other end of the village. Nasi walked behind, her head bent down, tormented by worries.

Just think of the torments which a rich and beautiful woman experiences when she has to marry her son off to the first beauty who crosses her path, while her own husband, who purchased her body when it was still young, is now topping eighty!

Kaloi, meanwhile, lay on bear skin atop a bench, in a state between sleeping and waking. The breeze chased the clouds in the sky. It was growing dark fast in the courtyard. There was no point in lighting the lamp since the fire in the hearth illuminated the entire room. The fire would die down and burst into flames, and then bounce from one side of the hearth to the other.

Kaloi lay motionless. It looked like he was sleeping, but his eyes, fixed on the eternal flame of his ancestors, betrayed his alertness. He had spent many years wondering who had been the first among his ancestors to light the flame that burned in his tower. Who had brought the fire inside, so many generations ago? Kaloi couldn’t answer his own question, but that didn’t keep from him the longing to know. And now, looking at the fire, he thought for the first time, Who will be the one to extinguish this light? Maybe me?

His cousin had just left. He had brought news. People had arrived from the plains with speeches about how all the villagers of Egi should attack the Tsarist officials. As he reflected upon the news, Kaloi wondered if whether in a few days’ time he would be stoking the fireplace with firewood instead of coal, barred forever from communion with his forefathers, which he entered every time he stared at the transparent gold flames blazing on the hearth. If I can’t see my past in the flames anymore, he thought silently, that also means I won’t be able to see my future.

A knock resounded on the door. It seemed to belong to the world outside and therefore to have nothing to do with him. Kaloi decided to ignore it. His mind had traveled far away, into a dark unnamable region. He saw roads, abandoned in the middle of the night, mixed with ashes the fire left behind, then shrapnel from shots fired, and then battles, fought by hand.

Maybe it was the wind knocking on the barn, rustling the hay? Can someone be knocking at my door? he wondered. Then, suddenly, he heard a shy and tender female voice inquire, “Is anyone home?”

Was it a jinn speaking to him, one of the demons who had possessed his aunt before she died, come to haunt him now? Kaloi jumped up, grabbed the handle of his sword with one hand, using the other to guard his eyes from the fire.

“Allah!” the woman screamed. “If I didn’t know that this was a human habitation, I’d have died from fear! Where’s your head, young man? Come down off the ceiling, so I can see you better.”

Her voice was warm and comforting. Kaloi released his hand from his sword and felt the blood rush to his face. Shame on him! Terrified by a woman! “Who are you?” he asked, bewildered. “Come to the window. Sit down. I must have been hallucinating.” Then he heard the sound which had made
him imagine the rustling of hay: her dress rubbing against her skin. His unexpected guest approached the fireplace, the fabric flowing back and forth between her legs. The room filled with the scent of oil from the sea. It was the pomade on Nasi’s hair, which rich women use to make their hair shine. The flame in the hearth trembled, illuminating her face as she approached Kaloi. If Kaloi had been standing face to face with a jinn or even with Kinchi, the moon-goddess, he would not have been so stunned. It was Goitemir’s wife facing him, the cruel and beautiful Nasi. She smiled pleasantly, and looked him up and down. All this time, Kaloi stood silently. For some reason, his mouth had become parched and his tongue was unable to move. “I’m waiting for you to greet me,” Nasi said, a smile on her face. “Do you ever plan to invite me inside?” Kaloi barely managed to spit out the words: “May your entrance be blessed.” She pretended not to notice his confusion, and answered warmly: “May you too be blessed and healthy! I only hope more so than this home! May joy settle beneath your roof forever!” After these tender words, Kaloi forget about the curse he had attached to the name of the woman speaking to him. He forgot whose wife and mother she was. He was facing a guest, and the innate reverence he had for all guests suppressed every other feeling. The confusion finally passed. He found that he could speak and move once again. When Nasi couldn’t find a place to sit, he offered her the three-legged stool reserved for respected elders and honored guests. She fidgeted in her seat. “I can’t let myself sit in a place where a man is standing,” she said. “Particularly a man like you! I should be bending my head in shame to be staring you in the face. You’re the one who should be sitting on the stool!” “No! Please! This isn’t necessary. You sit. You’re the guest,” Kaloi begged. Nasi finally sat, after a protest, and placed the bundle of food she had brought with her on a tray on the table. Kaloi ran to light the lamp, but Nasi stopped him. “There’s no need for that,” she said. “I’d rather sit with you like this. My eyes ache from the light of lamps.” Kaloi agreed. He picked up a big cast-iron pot and placed it above the hearth. “Forgive me,” he said. “I don’t have anything special to eat in my house. Nothing fit for a woman. I did shoot a partridge today and will boil it for you, but in the meantime—” Without finishing his sentence, Kaloi made for the exit. Nasi stopped him before he reached the threshold. She ran up to the door and blocked his passage, then asked him not to prepare any meat for her. “What are you talking about?” Kaloi said. “I wouldn’t be an Ingush if I refused to show respect to a guest like you!” “For Allah’s sake!” Nasi nearly screamed. “I don’t have forever. Let’s just say that you boiled the bird for me in spirit and I’m satisfied. I’m not even hungry. I don’t have time to eat. I need to speak with you, so don’t go anywhere.” Kaloi backed away from the door. Nasi sat back down. He put a low stool in front of the hearth and placed on it a bowl of salt, water, stale millet pancakes, and an empty bowl. Then he began clumsily to mix the ingredients together in the cast iron pot. She watched his movements carefully, a strange, perhaps mocking, expression flickering on her face. It wasn’t exactly surprise and it wasn’t exactly quite joy, but somewhere in between. He felt her eyes gazing upon him and became confused all over again. “When men come to visit me, I have no problems cooking for them. But for some reason in the presence of women I forget how to do this kind of thing. Please don’t judge me.” Nasi stood up. “Since you insist on making dinner, please allow me to be mistress of your house tonight. I can’t allow you to do woman’s work while I sit and watch. You should be sitting and watching me. Cooking is my job.” Kaloi sat down obediently and fixed his attention on Nasi as she skillfully moved about his home, as much at ease as if it were her own. The darkness, the warmth, the quiet, and the proximity of a young man alone with her excited Nasi. Her body became supple, as the decades were erased by Kaloi’s presence. She seemed to dance across the floor. It was the first time in her life that she had been the mistress in the home of a young man. As she walked around the room, tidied up the hearth, and prepared the food, Nasi felt as young as Kaloi. She had spent her entire life with old man Goitemir, a fact which made her bitter whenever she gossiped with her friends, all of whom were lucky enough to have husbands their age. Whenever they spoke of their husbands, Nasi grew red, furious at the pity they lavished on her, though she managed to keep her resentment to herself. She had never in her life had the chance to have fun or to play around with
her husband. Whenever Goitemir approached her and tried to distract her from her chores, whenever he tried to embrace her and pulled her close to him, all desire faded instantly. She soon learned to lie and dissemble her feelings, to feign the affection she didn’t feel. She had never in her life had a lover her own age. Even with Khassan the mullah, she had met him when he was already decades beyond her.

She was well aware that being alone in the home of a bachelor would seem like a crime to the neighbors. But years of living with men like Goitemir, Khassan, and her husband’s many relatives, with his eldest son as well as her own Chaborz, gave her the confidence she needed not to worry about the gossip they might spread about her. She would always be able to invent some excuse to justify her misdemeanor.

Nasi heated the cold pancakes around the edges, prepared a stuffing out of sour cream, and placed a bowl full of macaroni on the table, alongside dishes filled with cottage cheese and meat. The cast iron pot began to steam. She dropped the partridge onto a large platter, spat a chunk of the animal’s fat into the fire in honor of her ancestors, pronounced a prayer, and told Kaloi to come to the table.

“What are you talking about?” Kaloi looked at Nasi as though she were out of her mind. “I can’t eat without you. What kind of way is that to treat a guest? Are you insane?”

They sat down together. Kaloi noticed Nasi contort her arms so as not to dirty her silken sleeves, and apologized that he didn’t yet have the money to purchase a modern Russian table, and that he lived such a primitive existence.

“I am Ingush,” Nasi said simply. “Our fathers and grandfathers didn’t eat at tables.”

They sat with her face in the shadow. The light fell directly onto Kaloi’s face. Nasi stared directly into his eyes, even though Kaloi could only make out the dim contours of her presence, so dark was it inside the tower. She realized that she had never been so close to Kaloi before. She had never had the opportunity to appreciate his chiseled features up close, to admire his straight nose which curved gently at the bridge, or to look at his deep eyes. Though he could barely see her, she waited for her gaze to be returned, and meanwhile stared into his deep grey pupils, filled with an obscure fire. Or maybe it was just the reflection of her dress? He had a dark beard, overgrown with stubble. Looking at him excited her.

Nasi squinted, as though regretting something, and spoke softly, infusing into her voice all the softness she was capable of. She had decided that that night was to be the only, and therefore the most memorable, night of her existence, during which she felt herself, if only for a few brief hours, to be young. She knew that she would never experience anything like it again.

“May you live long and well, Kaloi!” she said. “I know how innocent you are, and that’s why I speak to you as I do to my family. Do not search for wisdom in my words. Do not look for cleverness. I speak of serious matters which concern our simple life in the mountains. Of course, I’m older than you, but forget about that for now. I speak with you as to someone my own age. A woman’s mind can’t be compared to a man’s, even if that man happens to be young. But I’m hoping that my experience in life will help me speak clearly. Can I continue?”

“I’m listening to you,” Kaloi said calmly.

“Women don’t often talk about things like this,” Nasi began. “But even a man’s good ideas sometimes end in disaster. I want us to say goodbye on better terms than when I entered your home.”

Kaloi couldn’t figure out what she was trying to say. Intimate conversations with women were quite unusual for him. He was confused. She smiled and continued.

“As I was on my way to your home, I decided that if you offered me your hospitality that would mean that you wanted peace. Even if you refused to let me inside, I told myself, I would beg for you to let me in. But you turned out to be a true host, and a real man as well. I have partaken of your hospitality. I have broken bread with you. So now take the food I have brought for you. I knew that you don’t have a woman to take care of the cooking.”

Nasi noticed a dark line streak across Kaloi’s face as she spoke. She pretended not to notice anything and continued speaking: “I consoled myself with the hope that at least once I would be the mistress of your home. Don’t refuse me that pleasure. Our father and grandfathers always finished off their meals with a toast to the gods. I wanted us to drink just a little sip, to make conversation easier. Forgive me. I play hostess to all kinds of guests: Ingush, Georgians, Russians. Many of them like to drink. Sometimes they insist that I drink with them. So I have learned how to drink—” Nasi interrupted herself with laughter— “I have learned to hold my liquor and how to get a bit tipsy at the same time.”

Kaloi was unable to conceal his shock. He confessed with childlike simplicity that he was sorry, but all he had in his home was water. Nasi burst into laughter.
"You think I didn't know that?" she said when she calmed down. "If I ever, even by accident, hear that you keep liquor in your home, then I swear by Allah I'll never cross the threshold of your door! I've long known about the purity of your home, may your ancestors be blessed, and I respect it. But I thought that if we ever chanced to speak to each other alone, you would do me the honor, as your guest—"

And with these words she took the flask out of her purse and filled two glasses with brandy, for her and Kaloi. Kaloi didn't know what to do. An expression of helplessness and then of terror swept over his face.

"But I can't—" he mumbled in despair. "Please drink it all yourself."

"Nonsense," Nasi said. "When have you ever heard of a woman drinking alone, especially in the presence of a man? It's just like you to say a thing like that. And how much are we going to drink? Since you already invited me to eat at your table and allowed me to be the mistress of your house for the night, then you must keep your promise to the end! I'm leaving soon. If you never drink again, that's wonderful. No one is asking you to. But at least once in your life you have to try, just to find out what it's like, if only to know the value of what you don't have. So before we continue our dinner and damn our souls to hell with this drink, this very same drink which our ancestors sipped instead of tea, I'll tell you something else."

The smile disappeared from Nasi's face. She turned slightly away, but not so much that she couldn't see Kaloi's face, and continued speaking.

"Enmity has raged between the villagers of Egi and the Goitemirov clan for many generations. There were times when they made peace, but hatred was only simmering. I'm not interested in who's to blame, who's right, or who's wrong. My brain is not equipped to handle questions like that. I think that both sides in these kinds of conflicts are always blind. But that's not what I want to talk about. I want to talk about how this hate has prevented me, who have never done you any harm, from crossing your threshold, even to express my condolences for the grief which has visited you all too many times. May Allah bless all those who have died in his name! May he forgive them the sins they committed while walking on this earth! May he send them all to paradise!" Nasi wept quiet, bitter tears. "May their souls remain behind, together with us on earth! I pray that your ancestors will forgive me and my family for everything we've done against them."

1 Though forbidden by Islam, alcohol was a sacred drink according to pre-Islamic Ingush culture. [Translator's note]

Kaloi didn't know what to say. Nasi's words recalled to him how much hit parents had suffered on account of her husband's family, and he saw more clearly than ever the abyss which gaped between them. At the same time, her prayer had been so pure and lovely that he couldn't summon the requisite hate within himself, nothing to match what he knew he should be feeling, or what his forefathers had said he would feel.

It was strange. The more intensely he looked at her, the more carefully he listened to her, the more he felt their difference in years, the more innocent she seemed. "I didn't realize at the time that she was only joking," he thought to himself, recalling that day at the village celebration when she bared her teeth and threatened him with revenge. "She's a complete simpleton. She doesn't have an evil bone in her body."

"Thank you for your kind wishes," Kaloi finally said. "You know that there's no real enmity between us. And blood revenge doesn't apply to women anyway. I of course don't hate you at all. You don't even belong to their clan, even though you gave them a son." Kaloi suddenly blushed bright red when he realized that he had just alluded to her body.

The blush did not escape Nasi. She decided to use it to her advantage.

"Let's drink," she commanded.

Kaloi could only obey.

"I want to touch your cup with mine to mark the beginning of our friendship," she said, "just like men do with each other." She cautiously tipped her cup against his, and waited for him, as the man, to drink first.

Kaloi hesitated. Finally he whispered to himself, "What will be will be," and thought of the many times in his childhood when he jumped from the mountains to the edge of the ravine, just for the thrill of the danger. He lifted the cup to his lips.

Nasi watched him closely. She sipped the liquid and imperceptibly spat it on the ground. She knew that Kaloi couldn't see her. He was too occupied with the shock of his own intoxication. She sipped lazily from her own cup, pretending to drink, though it was already empty.

They ate the bird and the pancakes with the sour cream stuffing in silence. Finally, after several minutes of waiting, Nasi perceived, from the frustration with which Kaloi chewed his food, as though the meat chunks were too tough and he didn't have enough energy to digest them, that the brandy was working its magic. Feigning intoxication, she said slowly: "Young man! Not even in Kabarda, Ossetia, or Georgia will you find a girl or even a mar-
ried woman who would not be honored and blessed to be your wife. Such a woman does not exist anywhere in the world."

Nasi stared deep into Kaloi's eyes. He lowered his head, his cheeks on fire from the alcohol.

"It's not every day a girl meets a man like you!" she continued. "That's the first thing I want to say to you. The second is: I know you're not attracted to every pretty girl who crosses your path. And when attraction happens, which is probably as rare for you as it is for anyone else, then the women like me who come to visit you to be the mistress of your house for the night, must annoy you to no end. Am I right or am I right?" Kaloi nodded assent. "And I just found out that the very girl you had your heart set on marrying has already been taken by us. I mean Zoru, my son's future wife."

Kaloi sensed that Nasi was talking about something important, but he was unable to make himself pay attention. He fought the pressure to give way to drunkenness. But Nasi detected what was happening to him. His brain was already floating somewhere far away from his body.

"True, we aren't to blame for this turn of events. You didn't tell anyone about your plans to marry the girl. And the girl was silent about it as well. But you realize why I'm bringing this up now, when it seems like there's no point in talking about it. I'm bringing it up because I know that a wedding like this, a wedding which deprives you of the girl you want to marry, will not only heal but will even increase the enmity between us. And that's exactly what I don't want. So that's why I came to see you, to speak to you words which are difficult to say and even harder to believe in. I take all the responsibility for these words upon myself."

She stood up and stretched out her hand to Kaloi. He grasped it carefully without knowing why.

"If it will cure the hatred between us, I'll kick her out," Nasi vowed. "I won't let her cross my threshold. If a sliver of hate even as small as a mosquito's wing would be annihilated by my banishing her, I'll do it. I'll even kidnap her for you to make things better between us. Just speak the word, and I'll do it. Your desire is my command. Believe me, no one ever has to find out. I'll keep my word for as long as the sun burns in the sky. And there's no way of interrogating the dead."

"No one will ever find out why. But no one can stop gossip. If the marriage is broken off now, people will wonder why Chaborz decided not to marry her. They'll start whispering that she wasn't a virgin. And then Zoru will be more miserable with me than without me."

"You're an amazing woman!" Kaloi said as he squeezed Nasi's hand. "But since you're so good at keeping your word, then I have to be even better than you, since I'm a man. I swear that I'll never allow for things to get worse between us on account of my neighbor. Don't worry, for your sake, I... because... because... But, I should probably stop talking. It seems that your brandy's got me drunk. You're an unbelievably courageous and beautiful person. It's too bad that she doesn't have your courage. It's too bad she isn't you, or that you are not her. Then everything would've turned out differently. Then the Goitemirov clan could have searched for us for a hundred years, they could have scoured the planet, but they never would have found our hide-out."

Kaloi sensed he was beginning to say dangerous things. He let go of Nasi's hand and sat down.

"Sit down," he commanded Nasi, an edge of contempt on his voice. But Nasi wasn't offended. This was Kaloi as she liked him, a real man, powerful, but young. She sat down.

"Thank you, Kaloi," she said. "You've been so nice to me, much nicer than I ever dreamed you would be. When I knocked on your door, I was full of fear, and now I can leave in peace. You captivated my heart. If you want, please pay a visit to my parents someday. Maybe you'll find there the girl you dreamed of marrying. I'm your advocate in everything. You can rely on me. Just say the word. But now it's time for me to go."

Nasi observed Kaloi's eyes hovering over the flask, still waiting to be emptied. She said she would leave it for him to finish drinking alone. Kaloi didn't like that idea.

"You refused to drink without me. Now I refuse to drink without you!"

"That makes sense," Nasi said. "Well, okay, then. I'll take one more sip just for you." Nasi filled her cup halfway. She filled Kaloi's to the brim.

He tried to protest, but she pleaded with him tenderly: "You're mocking me! Or maybe you think that I'm not really a woman?"

Kaloi shook his head. "It's just that you have a powerful brain. Muscular, like a man's. But as for you yourself, of course you're a woman! You're one of a kind!"

He downed the liquor in a single gulp. As before, Nasi managed to spit the
liquid from the corner of her mouth to the floor without Kaloi noticing.

"Thank you, Kaloi. May everything be blessed within your house!"

She then filled their cups with the bullion which had been boiling on the hearth. When they both finished drinking their portions, she rose to leave. Kaloi rose as well, following her movements carefully, and did his best to stay close behind. He walked with difficulty, barely able to keep his balance, his eyes bloodshot with insobriety. Nasi reached the door, took off her scarf to retie it, and wrapped it again around her temples. Then she reached out to steady herself, stepped forward uncertainly, and fell, suddenly, backwards.

Thankfully, she didn't land on the hearth. Instead she fell into Kaloi's arms. He had been standing close behind and on instinct ran up to catch her before she fell to the ground. He carried her to the bench and started tending her wounds as though she were a child. He lifted her again to lay her atop the bear skin, when suddenly she trembled and wrapped her arms around his body.

"I'm falling. I'm falling," she whispered.

"No, you're not!" Kaloi reassured her. "I'm just moving you to the other bench, so you can lie on the bear skin. It will be softer and keep you warm. Don't worry. There's nowhere to fall to and nothing to be afraid of."

As soon as Nasi lay down, she felt better. "May Allah forgive me," she said. "I'm just going to rest for a few minutes, until this feeling passes. Just lock the door please, so that no one can enter."

Kaloi stood up to lock the door and soon returned to the bench. "Feeling any better?" he asked.

"It's so stuffy in here."

He opened the window. Nasi lay down, rubbed her eyes, and then rested her hands beneath her head. Her hair fell to the floor. Kaloi stood above her, watching and waiting, uncertain what to do. He understood that she was sick, but even then he couldn't keep himself from staring with awe at her beautiful face and body. Gazing at her hands made him imagine the softness of her skin beneath her clothes. The smell of her hair drove him wild.

They were alone in the tower. Kaloi was drunk. But he nevertheless managed to control himself and stayed calm. Nasi stared at him from under her heavy eyelids. She could tell that he was tormented by something.

"Water," she whispered.

He handed her a cup. But it was difficult for her to raise her head. He understood and tried to help her. Nasi took the first sip and then the second. Her breathing became steady. She asked him to sit down next to her.

"I'm afraid of being left alone," she said.

Kaloi sat down on the edge of the bench. Even from there he could feel the warmth of her pelvis. Her hands rested, as though accidentally, upon his. He was afraid to move. Blood surged at his temples.

It was the first time in his life he has experienced such torments. Nasi began to breathe harder. "It's so stuffy," she said, unbuttoning the silver clasp on her cape. Kaloi watched as her neck and breasts came into view beneath the outline of her blouse. Her breathing soon returned to normal.

Then she opened her eyes. He couldn't make out the outlines of her face in the darkness, but the gentle smile lingering on her face implied that she was doing better. This made him happy and set his at ease. She took hold of one of his hands and placed it on her breast, so that only a thick layer of cloth divided his hand from her flesh.

"Listen to how powerfully it beats!" she exclaimed. "It's beating for you. You saved my life!"

Kaloi had never been so close to a woman in his entire life. His hand had never before grazed a female body or brushed up against a woman's breast. He felt that he was losing control of himself. He tried for a final time to suppress his passion and remove his hand from her body, but she pulled him even closer to her.

"You're killing me," he said to Nasi in a whisper and embraced her in his arms, feeling supernaturally strong, fired with an unknown source of power.

It was already late, well past evening and closer to dawn, by the time Nasi got ready to leave. She continued to caress him gently, hesitant to stand. He responded in monosyllables, unable to control his movements. Everything was a blur, and he was only jolted back into consciousness when she turned to face him from the threshold of his door.

"You have the gall to be offended by the Goitemirov clan. But you Egis are the worst sinners of all! And no one punishes you!" she smiled wickedly. Then she drew him towards her and whispered into his ear. "You became a man today, Kaloi, not when you were playing at the horse races or when you won the prize for strength, but tonight, when we lay together." She pressed her lips against the lobes of his ears. He felt like he could hear her heart beating inside her rib cage.

Green world, fecund
With the golden sun.
You light my world, Kaloi,
The boy who became my man!

Nasi sang so quietly that he could barely make out her words. As the words fell from her lips, he saw that she was crying. But she soon regained control of herself and wiped her eyes with the corner of her scarf. Then she resumed staring at him.

“I don’t know why I have this feeling,” she said, “but my soul tells me that I’m seeing you for the last time.”

She opened the door and crossed the threshold. Kaloi watched her without moving as she walked away. Nasi noticed a female figure observing her from the other side of the gate. Nasi suddenly remembered: Batazi! I forgot all about her! She must be furious with waiting so long for me!

“Wait a minute!” she commanded Kaloi and ran towards the woman’s figure. “Batazi, is that you?”

“Yes, it’s me,” the voice said. “My God, I was ready to wake up the village to find out what had happened to you!”

“But don’t you know what your neighbor is like?” Nasi said. “He’s an ox! It’s easier to give birth to a child than to tame a man like him or to convince him to do what you want. But that’s all now in the past, praise be to Allah! Now he’s been lassoed and placed in the stable. You can sleep without locking your doors at night! He gave me his word.”

Batazi embraced her future in-law. “And where are you going?” she asked Nasi. “It’s already late. Stay with us for the night.”

“What are you talking about?” Nasi exclaimed. “The mullah won’t let himself sleep until morning unless I return home!”

Nasi and Batazi said goodbye and walked off in opposite directions.

Kaloi walked ahead, and Nasi followed behind. The night sky was still dark. Clouds concealed the stars, though the wind had died down. When they had almost reached the mullah’s home, Kaloi slowed down to let Nasi walk ahead of him. Then, suddenly, they stopped walking and froze. Their eyes were locked, gazing at each other. Neither of them wanted to move.

The full moon emerged from behind the clouds, briefly illuminating the world beneath. Kaloi observed Nasi’s pale face. Her eternally smiling eyes were full of sadness. She glanced at him briefly, then turned away, just as quickly, as though afraid of him seeing her in that state of vulnerability.

“I haven’t had any memories worth living for since my youth,” she said quietly. “And what awaits me? I don’t know, probably more misery. But at least I’ll always have this night to carry with me in my dreams. At least I can take this memory with me to the grave.” Nasi was silent for a while, then continued. “Please, Kaloi, don’t think anything bad about me. When you’re older you’ll understand why I did what I did. I’m not such a bad person, really. I’m just unhappy. But I’ll never be telling you this again. Even though only for a brief instant, I experienced some kind of happiness with you. And I know that you probably felt something as well, with me. How sad it is that people can’t begin their lives from scratch whenever they want to!”

She reached out both hands to him, but then suddenly withdrew them, as though aware that the moment for emotion had passed. She threw him a quick glance, fusing all her passion into her eyes, hoping that her feelings would communicate something to him. Then she lowered her head and ran away.

Kaloi stood motionless for a long time. He continued to feel the tenderness of her hands and the warmth of her voice, the smell of her hair, and the rustling of her dress. Why had she come to see him? Why had she vanished like that, forever, as fleeting as the shadow of the moon? Kaloi was overcome with the feeling that he had lost something precious and irretrievable. Was it simply her presence? Was it her love? But what made him think that she loved him, or that he loved her, for that matter? Or was it his youth that he had lost that night, his purity, his sense of truth? He took a few steps forward in the direction where she had run and thought of running after her. But then he stopped. It was too late.

His head was spinning, full of the desire for her to return.

He went home, sat down on the bear skin where his love had been consummated not long ago, locked the tips of his fingers together, and stared at the eternal fire until the sun rose high in the sky and the rooster crowed.

When the sun’s rays pierced the room and the flames spread onto his cheeks, he returned to his normal self. Trembling with the fear that the light of his ancestors had been extinguished, he ran to the hearth and stoked it with more coal, until the flames licked the edges vigorously. The hearth burst into flames, so steadfastly did the light at the center burn. He thought of how he had given himself to a woman for the first time last night, and how the woman had given back, and how that was the same woman who was stealing from him the girl of his dreams, and depriving him of happiness for the rest of his life. And with that final burst of light from the hearth which had burned steadily for more generations than his fingers could count, Kaloi felt the strength he had lost during the night return.
Contributors’ Notes

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BOB HICOK found it necessary to say to someone recently, “I’m looking for a good stone mason, not a good stoned mason.”

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