

## The cushion

We wrapped our arms around each other. Family. Microcosm. Chaos in the microcosm. An earthquake. A torrent. Black death. The daily reality of destitution, so pitilessly piling upon people hopelessness upon hopelessness. Hopelessness makes you bitter. And one day hopelessness explodes like a mortar. It did explode. It blew apart. Intoshrapnel, all over the flat. An acrid smell like gunpowder. As tortuous as a lie told by an honest child. As tortuous as the shame of destitution. Yes. Tortuous. Like shame. But Vakho still managed. Vakho's managing to sound sober. 'Come on,' Vakho says, 'both of you come.' He listens. 'Do you want me to beg?' he asks. Then he says, 'Listen, which one are you, Maia or Manana? Maia, do you want me to beg?' Vakho hangs up. Vakho is drunk again. 'Whores,' says Vakho. 'Five-dollar whores. Those bitches charge Turks five dollars but they make me beg. Five-dollar whores make me beg.' Vakho is getting wound up. It's what he does. It's as if he can't bring himself to care unless he's wound up. Not that this was anything to care about anyway. Fat, blathering whores. Both exactly the same. Bottle blondes. Cheap scent. An unwashed smell like rancid butter. Blather. Pointless, incessant blather for its own sake. Psychic, or so they said. Yes. Psychic. The pair of them. They read coffee grounds, too, and their dead aunt appeared to both of them in a dream. Yes, they both tell fortunes. They're religious too. They said so. Very religious. And patriotic. When the independence movement started they were right there, milling around among the dismantled tents in front of the Parliament. Neither lets the other get a word in, unless it's to back up what they're saying. 'Isn't that right, Maia?' 'Isn't that right, Manana?' 'Yes, Maia!' 'Yes, Manana!' And off she goes. Where has she gone? She's hauling her fat arse in its little dress off towards the kitchen. But which one of them is it? I don't know. What does it matter? They act so alike. Hey you, Maia! Hey you, Manana! They don't know what a 'European' is. What's a 'European'? She must know, surely?! Laughter. I laugh. Why am I laughing? I don't know. What does it matter? It means a blow job. Understand? Do you understand what it means now? Yes. Sure. Well, they don't. Drunk. I'm drunk. Loud talking. Neither lets the other get a word in. They want to buy mobile phones. They've already got phones, but now they want new ones, the one that's just come out. Sausage on the table. Bottle of vodka. Other things. Things. Their chatter. That unwashed smell like butter. Wanting to forget. Yes. To forget. No matter how or by what means. Just to forget. My hand on someone's arse. Whose. The one on my right. She's laughing. Why is she laughing? They didn't come here for *that*, they just came to see Vakho. What does 'for *that*' mean? Laughter. As if he doesn't know. Yes. He's a child. He doesn't know anything yet. Laughter. I laugh. Why am I laughing. I don't know. What does it matter? My hand touches someone's hand. Whose hand? The one on my right. A hand grabs mine. Round face, bottle-blond hair. Vakho is sweet-talking them. Why is he sweet-talking them. Because they came over, and that makes them very good girls. Vakho kisses one on the head. The other on the cheek. Whose cheek. The one on my right. In my head she's number one. Why? I can't remember. Yes. Number one on my right. Number two on my left. Vakho opposite. Vakho asks who he was speaking to on the phone. It was her, number one. 'Vodka and sausage up front, the girls on account,' says Vakho. He better not get it wrong. Why would he get it wrong? Because it's Friday. Who's answering? Number one. Yes, the one on my right. It looks like Vakho's been expecting this. 'Let's go outside for a minute,' he says to number one. Why do they need to go outside? 'Give it to me here then,' says Vakho, 'right here at the table. Or on the table, if you want.' 'What are you like!?' says number one. Laughter. I laugh. Why. I don't know. What does it matter? We drink. The bottle is empty. Fat arse hauls herself into the kitchen. Out again, carrying a bottle of vodka. Which one. Number two. She sits down. We drink. I laugh. My hand touches number two. She grabs my hand. Round face. Bottle-blond hair. I stand up. 'Come on then,' I say to her. Which one. Apparently it's number one. How do I know? Because Vakho says: 'Leave her here.' Why should I? Because it's her he spoke to on the

phone, that's why. What does it matter? It makes no difference. 'Come on then,' I say to number two. She reaches for a bottle of Coke. Brings it with her. Comes towards me. Into another room. Why didn't I pay any attention to her at the table? But I did! She thinks I prefer her sister. What does it matter? They're exactly the same. No. They're not the same. They have very different temperaments. Her sister does it quietly. Does what quietly? She can't tell me. European? No, she can't tell me. Maybe number two should do it too. No. Maybe. no. Maybe, maybe. No, no. She does it. She remembered that she hadn't got a rubber. Yes. A rubber. That's what she calls it. She does it because she likes me and because she's a bit drunk. My hand on bottle-blond hair. Her head moves monotonously. Every now and then it slows. She moves. Moves. Slows. Slows. Slows. Animal anticipation. Heat builds inside me. It spreads. Weakness in my knees. Empty. Empty. Weak. Dirty. Dirty. That unwashed smell like butter. At my side. Close. At my side. Tangible. More rancid than before. She drinks Coke from the bottle. I lie on the bed. Close my eyes. Why. I think that if I close my eyes the smell of rancid butter will go away. The smell of cheap scent. Close by. At my side. It doesn't go away. Then from the next room I hear: 'Why did you make me beg, you whore!' Crack! 'Five bucks for a Turk and you make me beg, you whore!' Crack! She turns over. Leaves my side. Runs over. The smell of rancid butter is still there. 'Open the door or I'll break it down!' she cries. Number two, probably. 'Get lost, bitch,' shouts Vakho. But she's screaming. Yes. Screaming. I am weak. Dirty. Weak. 'Quiet, whore!' Crack! Crack! She falls silent. All I hear now is the other one outside the locked door. Probably number two. Then the bed creaks and she falls silent too. 'Five bucks for a Turk, you whore!' Creaking. 'You made me beg, you whore!' Creaking. Creaking. Faster. More. 'Ahh!' she says. Number one. Number one or number two. What does it matter? All that matters is the silence. I know they'll leave now. I'll get some sleep. Dirty. Dirty. Weak. They leave. I go to sleep. I still feel dirty in the morning. Nauseous, too. Vakho wants to get rid of his hangover. The first glass makes me feel sick. 'I'll drop you at your mother's,' says Vakho. 'I'll go by myself,' I say. No. Vakho can't let me go in this state. We go down to the yard. Vakho's ancient Lada. Inside the car, the smell of an animal-hair sack. Mouse droppings. Mouse droppings. I get out of the car. Make myself sick in front of somebody's garage. Green bile. I feel a bit better. Back in the car. 'Your mum's still alive,' says Vakho. 'You've got family, that's why you're such a lightweight.' 'Yes,' I say, 'let's go to my mum's. I need to get myself a family before I totally lose it,' says Vakho. Mum doesn't ask questions. She heats some water for me. I take a bath. A long one. A very long one. Mum lets me have the room to myself and takes her students into the kitchen. The next morning mum goes out. She comes back later. 'The boy sends his love,' Mum says. 'He really misses you.' I go home. I feel distant from Ketino and the boy. They're still acting as if nothing happened. Ketino takes the boy to play with the kid next door. Before he goes he comes over to me. His gaze—unexpectedly mature. His behaviour—no kiss, but he wraps himself around my leg. I give him a single kiss. He wraps himself around my leg, then goes. I try to catch Ketino's eye. Ketino won't look at me. I stop trying so hard; Ketino's looking at the floor while she listens. I start talking. I mention love so often it hurts. If we don't love each other, what's the point? Or if we don't love each other, imagine what we're doing to the boy. Something like that. In the end we make up. Once we've made up Ketino and I love each other again. That's the way it's always been. And that's how it is now. People who are frightened are made more cruel by their appetites and passions. When we realise we might have to suffer winter all alone we are suddenly filled with fear and our passions grow stronger. For a short time that's how it is. Then it becomes normal. Sometime we pay our marital dues. Sometimes we try and remember the names of famous people: names beginning with A... B... C... D... E... F... We go to sleep. We wake up. Sometimes we love each other. Sometimes we don't. The winter is long. Drawn out. It sees us love each other and it sees us irritate each other. A 50-miligram cut glass. They call it a 'hundredmil'. It belonged to my grandfather. From the bottle to the glass. Down in one. Envera's vodka. Grape vodka. Like grappa. Clove of garlic dipped in salt.

Hand on the glass. The street. Winter. The bridge. Trees. Glass against my lips. Two large gulps. Chew the garlic. Intense. Tears in my eyes. Handkerchief up to my eyes. Handkerchief to my nose. Bone. Pain. Breathing freely again. Handkerchief into my pocket. Cigarette. I want one. Cigarette. I've got one. Warmth. From the soles of my feet up. Lighter works first time. Fires. Warmth. The cigarette is good. Warm, intoxicating smoke. I stare at the glass. Taken from my mum's. At my mum's it smelt of valerian. Valerian smells dangerous. Surgical spirit smells even more dangerous. My father. I was five years older than my son is now. Yes. Five. Hovering in the doorway. Some stroke my head. Some rest their hand on my shoulder. I stand there. They rest their hand on me. It's as if each of us was fated to be an only child. My father was an only child. I'm an only child. My son is too. Grandad wasn't an only child. He had a brother. Grandad lived in town. His brother stayed behind in the village. Auntie Pusia and my father were cousins. My aunt got married in Ochamchire. Auntie Pusia and Uncle Nestor. Ochamchire. The Black Sea. Pioneer camp on the shore. Russian teenagers and their made-up campfire songs: Ochamchire, Ochamchire, the best town in the world! One tiny monument of Lenin in the centre. Probably the smallest, most ridiculous statue in the whole of the Soviet Union. More a caricature than a monument. Ochamchire railway station. Standing there makes my heart race. The small square by the station. Two or three buses. Ochamchire to Tkvarcheli. People standing next to one of the buses. Women wearing black dresses. Men smoking cigarettes. Goats in the square. In the field on the other side of the square, a snack bar and several red cows. In the snack bar they're making *khinkali*. Bad *khinkali*, with too many herbs, but the customers keep coming anyway. Three roads off the square. Auntie's flat on the road in the middle. Between the station and the sea. I start walking. I get closer. My heart beats faster. Auntie smells like family. Auntie grabs me and then, when she's finished stroking my head, she starts nit-picking. The way mothers do when they haven't seen their child for a while. I get Uncle Nestor to tell one of his stories. I don't care which one. How he got caught in the act with a prostitute. How he tried to dig himself out of the hole he was in. Or I get him to tell me about the first time they met. Something funny. Something it's nice to remember. Something to make me and Auntie laugh. I keep walking. I get closer. My heart beats even faster. From one home to another. Uncle Nestor. A stout, garrulous man. I don't understand half of what he's saying. While he talks he looks at me with searching eyes. I am in a sticky situation. I need to give him a yes or a no. I've got no idea what he said, but he's looking at me with those searching eyes, still spouting incessantly. Probably about politics. Back then politics meant Stalin. Stalin? No, Envera. He mentioned Envera's name. Envera. He was like an interjection: hey! Just like an exclamation, short and to the point. Envera is like a 'hey!'. Small. Lively eyes. Thin, but sinewy. Like someone surprised before they know why. Someone who's ready to laugh before the joke. Primed and ready to let out a 'hey!'. Wooden gate. Three-storey house. My relatives live on the ground floor. My uncle's vine-covered pergola running from the loggia to the fence. Into the shade of the pergola. Up the steps. Auntie. I imagine how it would be to be brought up by Auntie Pusia. Year in, year out. All the time. 'Sweetheart, my darling, look how big you've grown!' 'Auntie, can I have some of Uncle Nestor's vodka?' 'That stuff's no good, it'll make you go crazy!' 'Let me have some, Auntie!' The table spread for dinner in the loggia. Fried potatoes. Fried eggs. Fresh cheese. Delicious crusty bread. Sour plum sauce. A bowl of sliced cucumber and tomato. Plenty of onion scattered on top. Hot chilli paste mixed in. Mixed in so well that the spices intoxicate you and tempt you to sprinkle on even more. A short-necked vodka bottle straight from the fridge. Me sitting next to my aunt, Uncle Nestor and Envera. A three-room flat. For now, one room belongs to me. Summer. You can't hear the sea from Auntie's flat, but you can smell it. Salty, humid. Iodine. Heat. Fear. Desire. A few steps from the loggia to the fence. My uncle's pergola. A table and chairs, where the neighbours play cards and dominoes. I come back from the beach, sun-scorched and hungry. But as soon as I set foot in the shade of the pergola I know I am home. Rested. Watered. How much wine must my uncle have pressed for all

the family who visit. He pressed the grapes. Sang their praises. Only drank the wine when others were watching. It had an acidity that clung to your tongue and a sugary taste that made you feel sick. As for the colour: a blue-tinged pallid yellow. He made good vodka, though. Not much, but it was good. Fiery. The kind you notice all of a sudden. Like a flame leaping into life. Vodka in the cut glass. Glass to the lips. Two big gulps. Heat in my throat. Spread to my chest. Feels good. Envera makes vodka, just like Uncle Nestor. Envera's vodka reminds me of the table spread in the loggia. Envera. Given refuge in Guria after fleeing Abkhazia. He talked to me about 'procuring himself' a flat in Tbilisi. Procuring. Procuring. The mood of the era. The spirit of the times, summed up in one word. Procuring themselves a flat in Tbilisi —by whatever means—was all the refugees talked about. People forced out of their own homes, it seems, are driven to take it out on others in turn, extort things from them, 'procure' things for themselves. I told Envera he wasn't the type to 'procure' anything. Envera told me he was only as good at procuring things as he needed to be. Vakho sided with Envera. 'Well?' Vakho said. 'He can live with me,' I answered. 'He's living in Guria too, then,' Vakho said. The war I was wounded in. Vakho and Envera. Vakho gets a pain in his shoulder whenever it's about to rain, because he was wounded in the shoulder. Envera gets a pain in his leg whenever it's about to rain, because he was wounded in the leg. 'There was no consensus,' says Vakho, 'that's why we were wounded'. 'Oh, change the record,' says Envera. Then we remember Ochamchire. When me and Vakho stayed with Envera. Two inexperienced boys standing on Ochamchire's main boulevard with our tongues hanging out. Girls wearing brightly coloured dresses. Girls in pinafores with flip-flops dangling from their fingers. Bare flesh. Unexpected flashes from an open pinafore or unbuttoned blouse. Yes. Flashes. Stolen glimpses. Lush. Bronzed. Full of desire. A sullen air. Seeking to provoke us with their indifference, maybe. Or entice us with their remorselessly carefree attitude. Vakho is braver than me. He starts talking to a girl. Suddenly Vakho seems older in my eyes. Magnolias. Magnolias. Our youthfulness. Magnolias awaken to the sound of twittering birds. Magnolias prepare for sleep when the sun's red sphere lets down that shimmering path into the newly darkened sea. The sun sets into the sea; the magnolias' eyes dim. The sun sets into the sea; the magnolias' eyes dim. The sun sets into the sea; the magnolias are almost asleep. The sun grows very small, becomes a dot, then simply fades away. The magnolias are already lost in cool, slow dreams which spread over the boulevard like silent, unchanging, untroubled breathing. Vakho and me on the boulevard. The seductive scuffing of flip-flops. The contented weariness of salty, hungry flesh. Those familiar clichéd photographs taken on the main boulevard of every seaside town. Heads rammed into sombreros. Pencil moustaches. The little monkey with the round eyes and intense gaze. You can spot the locals a mile off among the people strolling down the boulevard. Small-town fashions. Long knitted stockings with wrap-around laces, specially polished shoes. Trousers tight on the thigh and flared at the bottom. Wide-collared shirt with the top three buttons open. Sideburns. Moustaches. Moustaches. Sideburns. Envera is one of them. Envera knows everyone in this town. Everyone in this town knows Envera. Hi, Envera! Oh, hey. How are you, Envera? Hey, pretty good! What's 'hey' got to do with it?! But that's just Envera. Short. Busy. Lively eyes. Intense and to the point like an exclamation: hey! A 'hey!' means you're ready for anything. Up for a laugh. Ready for the joke. Ready to fight. To help, if help is needed. That's why I told Envera he wasn't the procuring type. Envera knows it, too. He knows it, but he still talks about it, because procuring a flat in the city is all refugees talk about. He was just talking like the rest of them. And the others talk like Envera. They just repeat what they talk about amongst themselves to everyone else too. That's all it is. Then Vakho mentioned Madona. He mentioned her name and fell silent. Madona. Damiane and his daughter Madona. Damiane with his trimmed moustache. His dishonest, half-closed eyes. Narrow shoulders. Belly sagging down into a point. Whatever the subject under discussion, he would always bring up his eldest son, who was living in Saratov at the time. Damiane's three-wheeled motorbike. Damiane roars down the tarmac through

Ochamchire with his proudly sagging belly. From time to time his motorbike jumps forward. Damiane jumps forward too. His hair, combed over from one side to the other, stands on end and starts to flap around like a Young Pioneers flag. Damiane takes his left hand off the wheel. He puts his hair back where it's supposed to be. Damiane zigzags and jumps undaunted up the road with his proudly sagging belly. How is it possible for Damiane to have such a beautiful daughter? Madona. Madona looked like a girl you would see in a magnolia's dream. White. Blanched white skin. Deep black hair. As full as a magnolia leaf that should never be picked. Cheeks the colour of a magnolia flower. Calm voice. Eyes cast softly downwards. Kind. Tender. A long neck. Illuminated by an inner simplicity. Ochamchire cinema. The screen. Wooden chairs. Madona sits between Vakho and me. Every now and then Vakho says something to Madona. Madona stares at the screen and answers him in a very quiet voice. I sense Madona's elegant neck. Madona smiles at Vakho's joke. She smiles without taking her eyes off the screen. I don't look at Madona, because it feels as if my gaze will tell her everything, even without words, but I can sense that Madona is smiling at Vakho's joke. I didn't see Madona in Ochamchire the next summer. She had gone to study medicine in Saratov. Damiane sent her there to be with his eldest son. Ochamchire without Madona. 'Has she got married?' I ask Envera. 'No,' Envera replies. I don't ask him again. He tells me the dreadful news himself. 'Poor Madona,' I say out loud. 'Poor, poor, poor Madona,' I say to myself. Madona was in the madhouse. Yes. She lost her mind. She's in Kutaisi asylum now. It's no great surprise that she lost her mind. And she did: poor Madona lost her mind. Damiane was confined to his bed. She couldn't leave him. She couldn't get away in time. She just couldn't. Damiane was gunned down in his bed. The leader of the mixed battalion was called Batka, But Batka didn't kill Damiane. It was him. The one with the gold tooth. He put the gun against Damiane's forehead. Shot him. Killed him. Laughed. Showed his gold tooth. While that was going on Batka was wrapping cloth *portyanki* around his feet and looking at Madona. Madona was looking at the others. Seven of them. Other faiths and nationalities. Brought together by hostility. Staring at her unhurriedly. Spitting disdainfully. Anyway, poor Madona went mad. They could have killed her. But no. They didn't kill her. 'You can keep your lunatics,' they said, and let her come across. She's in the madhouse now, in Kutaisi. Shakoia the fool works as an orderly in Kutaisi asylum. He got that nickname back in his neighbourhood, Balakhvani, because his lower lip sags down, but Shakoia really is a fool. Shakoia's a fool, but on top of that he's also crazy. Shakoia the fool liked living in the madhouse. He just stayed and stayed. He carts torn, excrement-smearred bed sheets around in a small wheelbarrow. He comes. He goes. He ambles about. He talks to himself out loud. Raises his short hairy arms threateningly at people. If he's in a bad mood he hits the patients. If he's in a good mood he shows them his genitals and laughs. Laughs and laughs. Laughs and laughs. I can hear his laughter. I can hear it, because I'm staring at him. I can hear it, because I am probably raving, delusional. Maybe this really is just delusion. And if it's delusion, then Shakoia the fool never came here from Balakhvani and never lived in Kutaisi asylum. Maybe Batka was not wrapping his legs with *portyanki* when the guy with the gold tooth fired the bullet at the terrified, dumbstruck Damiane. Yes. Maybe it's delusion. All delusion. Just my delusional ravings. But when I imagine poor Madona in the madhouse I can hear the dreadful laughter of Shakoia the fool standing with his genitals hanging out. He's laughing and laughing. Laughing and laughing. And I stare at him, because I can hear him laughing so clearly. Then I feel Vakho's hand on my shoulder. I've been staring at Vakho. Vakho knows when I stare like that I am lost in my delusions. Vakho pours me some vodka. Draws my attention to the full glass. Envera's vodka tastes like meths. Envera always manages to save some vodka for me. Envera's vodka always reminds me of Ochamchire and once I've remembered it doesn't let me forget again. Remembering is better than forgetting. However painful it is, remembering is still better. Auntie Pusia died a year before the war. Uncle Nestor's face. Overcome. His beard. Envera's lacklustre eyes. I am with them. By their side. In an empty flat.

Then the war. Envera off at war. Uncle Nestor in Guria. His death in a refugee shelter. My aunt's grave in Ochamchire. Uncle Nestor's grave in Guria. In between, the army of the country that took the collapse of an empire as a personal insult. Before the empire's former republic had found its place on the world map, that other country resorted to force. Cut it off. Established battalions with members brought together by hatred. Provided weapons. Opened a corridor to enable them to plunder. To avoid any mishaps it posted signs along the roads and paths. A red arrow showed the battalions which way to go and underneath was written: This way to Georgia! This way to Georgia! With an exclamation mark. Yes. An exclamation mark to give it more force. Peacekeepers, they were called. And they were called peacekeepers because that's what was thought to be necessary. Why was it thought necessary? Because it was necessary. That's what the president of my country tells me on TV. I understand that the president of my country is the president of the country that lost the war and that he's trying to curry favour with the country that won the war. Yes, because what you give up by force you try to win back through ingratiation. Yes. That's how it goes. I understand. But Envera and Vakho don't understand. Envera asks me to take him to my mum's because he misses a mother's warmth. Vakho tells me to turn the television off. I stand up. Before I turn the TV off I shake hands with the president and greet him with 'Hello, Mr President!' 'Hello,' our president replies. Powerful people have a strange way about them. They take your hand, look you in the eye, but it feels like there's an invisible screen between you. As if they're still talking to you through a TV screen. But what difference does it make whether I'm really shaking the president's hand or not. What matters is this: I'm living in highly politicised times. There's political upheaval on a global scale. And I, the hapless son of a small country, am interested in whether my country will survive the chaos or not. He's giving me some hope, but speaking in such vague, general terms. Just as the president of the country that lost the war should speak. No more, no less. I press the off switch. The television fades to a dot like the shrinking sun. We go to my mother's house. When my mum puts on her glasses she looks like my grandmother. Everyone's grandmother. An archetypal grandmother. But however much she may look like a grandmother, to me she's first and foremost my mum. Mum. The cushion. How would I begin the tale of the cushion? I would begin quite simply: my mother made a cushion for my son. An ordinary cushion. A red inner cushion stuffed with chicken feathers inside a white cushion cover. There are two buttons, slightly yellowed with age, sewn onto the cover. Why two? How many should there be? Three? No. Two. Even though one would be enough to fasten it securely, because it's small, just the right size to tuck under your head. That's probably how I'd start. Writing. Writers. Writers have to write. Focus your energy. I can't do it. It runs away, like water from a flask blown full of holes by a mortar. I haven't got enough fingers to plug all the holes. The solitude of one who is far away, a solitude in which my delusions and I were truly happy. Say something. Spit it out. Put a full stop. Guard it with the tenacity of a hunter and still achieve what you will. It'll make you stronger. Strengthen your conviction. So what if you're suffering. You need to suffer, because man is born to suffer. Some have an easy ride. Everyone has their own path to follow. This much I know: whatever I go through is all I can know. Searching. Searching. You can't find it. Or maybe whatever you find doesn't make you happy. You're searching for your own path. Your rhythm. Your mood. Your soul. Your path, because it's yours alone to travel. Focus your energy. It's what gives you life. If you don't, you'll never find anything. It's out of the question. You can't rush it. But it's here. You've found it. You feel you're as close to your soul as you can get. It's off. You can't sleep. Here it comes. Surging forth. As words. As faces. As a mood. As a rhythm. As a symphony. Your brain works non-stop. Even in your sleep you think to yourself: 'I mustn't forget. I mustn't forget. I mustn't forget!' You fall on pen and paper like a dehydrated man falls on a bottle of water. You write it down. You make a note. 'Now I'll sleep,' you think. No. Here it comes. Surging forth. And when it arrives, great happiness. It's the same when you put a full stop. Soon, though, it feels

alien. You think you made a mistake. That wasn't it. Something's missing. You didn't describe it quite right. None of it's any good. If only you hadn't written it. The alienation is something you have to endure. Yes. Endure, so that one day you can dare to try again, to wrestle with it again. Just once feel as free as a man who has climbed to the mountain top, just once be reminded by a shuddering deep in your soul of the very existence of that soul. All the same, it soon feels alien. And what's hard is that doubt makes a fool of you. When all is said and done, that's what happens—you focus your energy in order to become convinced of your own foolishness. In the throes of your foolishness. Desiring your foolishness. A paradox. Yes. A paradox. From the paradoxical to the absurd. But life follows its own path. If you never leave the path you cannot hope to recognise it. Another paradox. From the paradoxical to the absurd. You need to leave the path. Summon your strength and leave the path for a while in order to see it better. It won't let you go; it pulls you back. It will hang a sack made of animal hair over your shoulders. A sack. My sack. Made of animal hair. I get ready to take it in my hands. I stand up. Look at it. Then for one fleeting moment I hold the air in my lungs. As a sign I am about to act. To begin. Muscles in motion. Stepping towards the sack. I bend over. With my right hand I grab the neck of the sack. The feel of the woven-hair fabric irritates me. This irritation gives me strength. One strong heave onto my shoulder. The air flows out of my lungs. The sack settles onto my back. Its weight presses me step forward. Go on! I move forward. No. I'm not moving forward. I am able to move, but now I don't feel like it. Not yet. First my tiredness and I are going to rest. I am sitting by a window. My tiredness sits opposite. My tiredness and I drink 100 mls of vodka. One more drink and then maybe I'll go somewhere. Where? Travelling. I can sit in one place and still travel; there's movement even in indolence. Maybe the greatest movement is found in indolence. Maybe. Who knows. I've travelled like that. I sat in one place but visited the furthest-flung planets. I did. Yes. I remember. But first a drink. Yes. Because my tiredness wants a drink too. And that's fine. It's nice. Out of the bottle, into the glass. Down in one. Glass against my lips. Winter outside the window. Cloudy day. Bridge. Trees. Two big gulps. Tears in my eyes. Handkerchief from my pocket. To my eyes. To my nose. Bone. Pain. Breathing freely again. Handkerchief back in my pocket. Staring at the glass. Fifty mls. They call it a hundred. My grandfather drank cherry vodka from this glass. He'd drink one glass. No more. In the morning on his days off. Grandad sits by the table. On the table there are papers and a large abacus. Grandad writes. Every now and then he moves the beads on the abacus. He's wearing a mesh t-shirt. A woman's stocking on his head. My clean-shaven grandfather sprays the room with eau de cologne. On the radio, the raised voice of a dictator. Then the dictator's voice fades away and out of the radio comes a rousing melody. Grandad pays no attention to me. When Grandad's engrossed like this I really feel that eau de cologne is a grown-up's smell. I crawl under the table. The table is my house. From under there I can see the corner of a massive couch. A chair. The iron balcony. The door to the balcony is open. The sun dances on the leaves of the plane tree. I cuddle up to my grandfather's legs. Grandad pays no attention. My grandmother comes into the room. She asks, 'Where's the boy?' 'I don't know!' answers my grandfather. I laugh out loud. I don't think anyone hears me laugh because my grandmother asks again: 'Where on earth could he be?' 'I hope no-one's kidnapped him!' says my grandfather anxiously. I laugh even louder. 'Oh, there he is! Got you!' We all laugh. All three of us. Then Vakho arrives. Vakho has noticed that my grandmother always wolfs down any sweets I discard. Vakho tells me this while we're eating sweet dates. Vakho and I have an idea. Vakho and I laugh and mould dates. It's easy to mould dates. You shape brown plasticine around the stone and you're done. Vakho and I sneak into the other room and scatter the bait onto the floor for my gran, making sure we're not seen. Then we go back under the table and wait for Gran to come back. Gran is genuinely fooled, because her eyesight is fading and she thinks the balls of plasticine are actually dates. She bends down. She gives them a blow and then sinks her teeth in. Vakho and I laugh. Gran gives us a right telling off. We laugh. For ages. Ages. Gran isn't telling us

off anymore, but we want her to so we laugh even more. We don't really want to, but we pretend to all the same. Childhood. The cushion. My boy's small hand on his cushion. Silent sadness. Silent. Silent. Distant memories. Silent sadness. I like this kind of sadness. It doesn't have the bitter taste of despondency. Despondency gnaws away at you from within. Its vagueness agitates you. It beats you down. This sadness is silent. It brings memories. Mingled with warmth. Clean. The feeling of cleanliness gives me hope. A red-handled brush. The red-handled brush was my horse. I had a toy horse but I liked the brush more. In my head it was a knight's horse. I invented enemies for it. Bad sorts. Evil sorts. The wounds received at their hands made him whinny in anger. At such moments I would pluck a hair from the brush. For authenticity. As if it really hurt. Not 'as if' though; it really did hurt. Oh, how it hurts! But still they cannot make him submit. On the contrary: he becomes even more bitter. Even more upset. He kicks the bad guys. Ultimately he is victorious. Of course he is victorious. It's in his nature. An inexplicable but tangible energy. A threadbare armchair. Threadbare in the middle. On the sides it's still green. Alone. Old. Sad. A sad old armchair. Curtains my mother bought recently. A bright, cheerful colour. The sun, coming through the bright curtains into the room. Me, clinging to my mother. If she's bought something new it means everything's ok. My mother is young. My mother smiles. The sun, coming through the bright curtains into the room. A stout kettle. White. Bloated. Good. A teacup. Butter spread on bread. A piece of cheese on top. Anticipation of the nourishing saltiness that follows on from the smell of the bread. Anticipation of the sweetness of the tea. The water in the kettle has boiled. White. Bloated. Good. It wheezes. In the depths of the wardrobe the smell of mothballs. The smell of mothballs intensifies my feelings of loneliness. I am scared. But still I long for it. I hide myself away. Shut myself in. Darkness. Alone in a dense, impenetrable forest. Inert. Inert. Listening. After a while the sound of a furtive footstep. Towards me. A rustle. The slightest sound. Towards me. My heart stops. Turns to stone. Comes to a halt. Then it beats. Strongly. Suddenly. Rapidly. In my neck, too. Leaps. The corner of my father's huge jacket, spread over me like the wing of some fearsome bird. Alone in a dense impenetrable forest. My cushion, from back then. Just like this one. Fastened with the same yellowing buttons, I think. In those days I'd tuck the cushion under my head just like he does. It was small. I was small too. I belonged to my parents. It belonged to the big cushion. Why the big cushion? I don't know. That's just what came to mind. A funny parallel: the big cushion and its child, the little cushion. One the echo of the other. A feeling of constancy arising from their similarity and co-existence. An unacknowledged hope that over time my cushion and I would grow up together, become heroes together, be our children's omnipotent protectors together. Hope in the dark room. Hope in the dark room. I don't feel alone anymore. I lift my ear off the cushion and put it down again several times. I slip one hand underneath, put the other on top so that my hands can feel its newness. A shiver. From the memories. No. A shiver that heralds a cold. I'm getting a cold. I'm going to come down with a cold. Flu. Handkerchief from my pocket. Up to my nose. Flu germs expelled from my body. Breathing freely again. Vodka eases the pain in my sinuses. Dull pain. Bottle. Glass. Down in one. Against the lips. Two big gulps. Difficult to swallow. A bite of food. Peelings on the table. Garlic. I don't want it. Staring at the street. I have to go. Dawn breaks out of obligation on a cloudy day. Leila. Maka. Darejan. Money for bread. A jeep. Slow. Very slow. Probably looking for an unfamiliar house. Moving slowly. A jeep drove past me that day too. It was moving slowly too. When did it drive past? The day I saw a man lying destitute on the pavement. Military boots bound with strips of leather. I saw him. I walked away. Dead or alive? I don't know. Why did I walk away? Damp. Damp. I turned back, but only after I'd walked away. The jeep stops. I look at it. Look at it. Then it moves off slowly again. Slowly. Slowly. I follow it with my gaze. My gaze. Eyes wide. Follow it. It reminds me of something. What does it remind me of? Yes. I remember. How could I not remember, I must remember—a ship at sea. Reddish clouds. Darkness invading the redness, redness invading the darkness. A soft sweep of green across the sky. Reddish-black



clouds made more intense by the soft green. The sea a dark blue. In several places a hint of green. A patch the colour of mud. Successive waves born and calmed in the depths of the sea. White foam on top of the waves. White foam—a gull appears and disappears. White foam—a gull appears. Then disappears. I stand on a hillside. Alone. Eyes fixed on a ship. The ship rises. Rolls up onto a wave. Down again. It sails further away. It's raining. Rain. A drop of rain trickles down from my eyebrow. I do not blink. Drops on my temples. On my neck. By my ear. In my ear. A drop, alive like a worm. Moving. Wet. A flash. It cleaves in two. The colour of fire. Waiting. A crash. Rumble. Auguring evil. Impassibility. Finality. Staring at the ship. The ship rises. Rolls up onto a wave. Down again. It sails further away. River in the valley. Seen from the corner of my eye. It was small. It grows bigger. Flows towards the sea. Getting muddier. Forming a crest. A muddy stain spreading into the sea. From time to time earth collapses, roars into the sea. Other sounds heard against a backdrop of collapsing earth. Against a backdrop of rain. Of waves. Of despair, the despair of birds skirting the clouds. On the hillside newly-formed streams and rivulets rush through grooves towards the swollen river. A tree, perched on a slope. Water robs the roots of earth. Twisted. Raised on stilts. Strange and monstrous like a tooth with its roots. And then, a deafening roar towards the sea. Thundering. Roaring. The river rushes away. Uproots it. Carries it away. The river carries bodies away too. The bodies of men and beasts. Here and there, in its crested, determined fury, a head. An arm. A hoof sticking up. A bloated, bare stomach. Staring at the ship. The distant ship. It's sailing away. Down from the sky, into the sea, a bird with tired wings. Bereft of strength. Falling. A wild struggle and then down like a stone towards the sea. The final squawk of the battle. Clipped wings. Down. Down. Two together. Final squawk after final squawk. The ship rolls up onto a wave. Down again. It sails further away. More frequent squawking in the midst of hopeless, blank-eyed despair. The distant ship. Sailing further away. The feeling of reassurance. Of being home. Of knowing you're home. It's getting further away. Mercy. Release. God. It's getting further away. My gaze. Following. Getting further away. Gaze. My gaze. I remember that blank-eyed stare. Staring at the street. Winter. Bridge. Trees. Wet asphalt. A jeep drove past. The feeling of knowing you're home. It slipped through my fingers so unexpectedly. Was lost. Vanished. It's long gone. Andro. I could sense Andro's arrogance at knowing he was home. That was a different kind of knowing you were home. It's what I sensed in Andro. Andro. When did Vakho and I meet him? It was we went to Hopalong Nana's to sell our flesh and before I dragged myself over to Maksime's friend's café to sell my soul. Andro. Our classmate. By Rustaveli metro station. Rustaveli. Rembrandt. Rachmaninov. Roland. Reagan. Rossini. Rostropovich. Rourke. Ringo. The Beatles. Our generation's favourite band. Generation. This is my generation! This is my generation, baby. My my my generation! Vakho called. 'Come over,' he said. 'I need you!' I hung up. Vakho. Sunken eyes. Puffy temples. Broken. Can't look me in the eye. 'I've got to get off this stuff,' he says. 'It'll kill me, but I'm going to get off it.' Two days of howling. Sitting there bent over at the waist. Smoking. Staring at the floor and howling. Sweat. Sweating. Punching the walls. Using one pain to dull another. Sits down. Stares at the floor. Howling. Rocking. Howling. Lies down. Sweat. Sweating. Stands up. To the toilet. Nausea. Sweat. Sweating. Punching the walls. Using one pain to dull another. Sweat. Sweating. Rocking. Rocking. Staring at the floor. On day 3 he feels better. We drink. He sleeps. Feels better. Doesn't want to go out at first. We go out together. 'Where shall we go?' I ask Vakho. 'Somewhere we used to go when we were kids,' says Vakho. 'Let's walk down Rustaveli, go to Laghidze's for some soda.' Andro by the metro station. Balding. Goatee. The strap of his man-bag wound round his wrist. They're not really called man-bags. That's just what Vakho calls them. I don't know what they need them for anyway. Either for carrying documents or their mobile phone. I don't know. I don't care. They wrap the strap round their wrist. When they walk the bags bang into them. That makes them walk funny, almost as if they're walking in time with their bags. Vakho can't stand them. That's why he calls them man-bags. Like handbags. Andro and his

goatee. Andro and his man-bag, dangling from his wrist. He left when we were still the Soviet Union. Married a Czech girl. We didn't see him after that. We didn't really care. He didn't really have any friends. Not because he didn't want them. On the contrary. He set out to get them, very deliberately. Like a politician. Yes. That's what he was like. Like a politician. Talking to him made you feel reassured. Or something like that. Just like a politician. He tried to make friends with Vakho. And me. But only so he could get to Vakho. Yes, he was like a politician. False. Unpleasant. Transparent. Resourceful and duplicitous. Able to get you to go wherever he wanted, even if you didn't want to go. You were like a child. He made things easy for you. But there's still an unpleasant feeling. It's all false, you see. Fabricated. Calculated. What's on offer is a pre-planned programme of events: 'Let's go and eat *khinkali*, I've got money. Or we could go to the cinema, I've got money. Or we could go...' Where? There was never anywhere else to go. The races, for example. He never invited anyone to the races. Nor the theatre. Surprise. Greetings. More surprise, although it's not really surprise anymore. An arm round the shoulder. The usual platitudes. 'Let's go to a restaurant,' says Andro. 'Have you got money?' laughs Vakho. Andro doesn't laugh. Andro has changed. He seems more self-confident. Balanced. Grown up. Vakho's laughter sounds different. It's laughter that makes people look small. It makes Vakho look small. I see it. Vakho sees it too. And Andro. But Andro doesn't laugh. Andro has changed. Me and Vakho haven't been to a restaurant for ages. The arrogant tone Andro uses with the waiter seems wrong to us. He's somehow polite and rude at the same time. 'Have you got this? Have you got that? Why not? Fine, bring us what you have got.' And he looks off to one side, clearly dissatisfied. I notice Vakho is trying to behave like the old Vakho. He can't do it. That's probably why he's being so short with Andro: 'What's with the goatee and that bloody man-bag?' Vakho emphasises the word 'man-bag'. Andro smiles with his eyes. Andro senses what's behind his abruptness. I know too. So does Vakho. Vakho's disdain was there in his laughter. Andro shows us some pictures. His flat in Prague. Him and his wife. His kids. Two daughters. They don't speak Georgian, but they know they *are* Georgian. Especially the eldest. What does that mean, especially the eldest? I don't ask. I listen. Vakho listens too. Then Andro moves onto business: he sells cameras. It's a good job. Stable. The Czech Republic has come on a long way. Language hasn't been a problem; Czech isn't hard to learn. The West has invested a lot in the Czech Republic because it's the heart of Europe. An economy can't grow without investment. He has no interest in who the Czech president is. 'Isn't it Vaclav Havel?' I say. He smiles. Yes, it's Vaclav Havel, but that's not important. What matters is that in the Czech Republic everyone just gets on with their business, without any fuss. Even the president. He's just a normal citizen like Andro. That's what matters. At first he found it hard but he soon adapted. He has a really good job now. Decent pay. Car. His wife has a car too. He's promised he'll buy his eldest girl one too and as soon as he's back he'll will. It's too early for the youngest, otherwise there'd be no problem. We drink. He talks. He talks a lot. He can talk about whatever's in front of him. He doesn't drink much, but he still seems a bit drunk. He's not much of a drinker. Doesn't eat much either. He gains weight easily, that's why. Men need to stay in shape. That's really important in Europe. If you're not in good shape you're finished. Relationships are totally different. Practical. Businesslike. It's nothing like Georgia. In Europe they don't just think about food all the time. No. It's different. His Georgian wifes stood him in good stead, mind. Yes. That's what he says. His Georgian wifes stood him in good stead. Georgians are useless in Georgia, but they do very well abroad. He gets respect. He's earned it. He's behaved like a Georgian a few times and they liked it. He doesn't need to be treated like an equal, but a bit of colour can't hurt. A bit of colour. A bit of colour. What the hell does that mean? I don't ask. He talks. Then he tries to catch the waiter's eye. Where is the food we ordered? What kind of service is this? In the end he gets annoyed. He gets up. Goes to see what's happening. He leaves his man-bag on the table. Even when he's not carrying his man-bag he walks as if he is. 'He's driving me crazy,' says Vakho and stares at Andro. After a few

moments Andro comes back. He doesn't look happy. He starts talking again. It's a disgrace. This country needs a kick up the backside. As soon as he landed he knew he'd stepped in shit. Even the customs officials are a joke. He has a good mind to complain. Beggars, the lot of them. He gave them a piece of his mind. And what about his passport? Yes, he's a Czech citizen. But that's not it. Take pharmacies, for example. Look at our pharmacies. You wouldn't buy medicine from those dumps if you were at death's door! And their! No-one can breathe with all these fumes, surely?! There are ten times more cars in Prague than in Tbilisi, but the air is nowhere near as polluted. They sell proper petrol there, you see. That's why. No. No. He'd got out just in time. The city looks such a mess! And the people! Why don't they clear up all the litter dump outside their buildings. I mean, it's not that hard, is it? In Prague they wash the streets with detergent, but here... 'Why the hell did you drag yourself back then?' says Vakho. Just for a moment there's a hesitancy, a timidity in his eyes, and then it vanishes. Andro is not the same Andro as before. That's why he took offence. What did Vakho mean, drag himself back? There was no 'drag himself' about it, he came back to see his parents. 'You didn't come back to see your parents,' says Vakho. 'You came so that people like you would listen and curl up their lips when you slag this country off.' Andro looks even more offended. As far as he is concerned, he loves his country no less than anyone else. Maybe even more; he wants what is good for his country and that's precisely why he says what he does. Do Vakho and I know how many Georgians he's helped out in Prague? We don't, so— 'Oh shut up, you prick,' says Vakho. 'You've got no right to talk about this country. And you're in no position to help anyone out.' Andro goes to say something. Vakho starts on Andro's goatee. He pulls Andro closer. Tugs at it a bit. 'Shut up, you and your bloody man-bag,' he says. Andro says nothing. Andro looks like the old Andro now. Why? Because he's laughing. 'Look at us! We're such strange people and we'll never change.' 'No, mate, I'll grow a goatee like yours and start carrying a man-bag,' says Vakho. Vakho's calmed down; he's seen the old Andro. He starts joking with him: 'You'd be so much fun to blackmail, but how could I blackmail a classmate?' He smiles with his eyes. Andro smiles. He looks like the Andro of our childhood. Vakho mentions blackmailing him so many times I he might actually be considering it. Andro isn't really old Andro anymore though. First he leaves the country, now all of a sudden he feels as if he's back home. Falsehood. Falsehood. I'm tired of all the falsehood. From Vakho. From Andro. From Vakho because it's been there since the very beginning. From Andro because it will be there until the very end. To be honest, what he said may have been true, but he it was still false. It's a strange situation: Andro was telling the truth but he still wasn't right. No. He wasn't. Nobody would come out with such bombast unless they'd lived through what Vakho and I live through everyday. He used the truth as a pretext to show us up. He was mocking us. Unrestrained bombast, again and again. He had no right. Right. Right is a big word. You need to earn the right to speak the truth. Vakho had the right. After the war in Tbilisi Vakho fell out with his unit. Then Vakho got insomnia and, as often happens, his frayed nerves meant he started taking everything the wrong way, seeing an ulterior motive behind every action. He was called to a meeting with his unit. He took me along. Off we went. To Kirov Market. Apparently they give out shoes. As gifts. Wrapped in plastic bags. 'I'll hang these Russian shoes on the wall,' said Vakho. 'Maybe it'll remind me not to shoot any Georgians.' 'Who are you talking about?' his unit commander asked him. 'Those losers?' Vakho punched his commander. His commander fell to the floor. That's when they gave us a beating. They didn't use their weapons. Not to shoot us. Not to hit us in the head with their rifle butts. They gave us a kicking. Gave us a kicking and left. 'Maybe tonight I'll get some sleep,' said Vakho. But he still didn't. He had insomnia for a long time. He looked run down. One day he said, 'We should go to church more'. Me and Vakho in town. The Hotel Tbilisi—walls still standing, but looking run down. Buildings in ruins. Steam rising from the ruins. Grim piles of rubble. The houses had fallen into ruin long before but there was still steam rising from the rubble. Rising higher than the houses themselves had once stood.

Changing shape, lazily, like a huge cloud perched on top of a hill. The cloud looks like a giant. A malevolent giant. It changes shape but still looks like a malevolent giant. People walk quietly through the ruins, like worshippers moving from idol to idol. Vakho and I approach the church. Beggars. In teams. One face. One blot. There are a lot of people in the church. There's a mass being said. Vakho and I move forward. We're holding candles. Then we notice him. It's impossible not to notice him because he's trying to be noticed. A novice. A novice wearing a novice's habit. Thin, spotty face. Tall. Skinny. Hair the colour of straw. Squinting. Squinting. He looks like a crane that's ready to fight. He looks down from above. Gets ready to strike with his beak. He speaks to a woman: 'Miss, you should hold the candle in your hand for a while.' The woman is stunned. She looks up. She can't look him in the eye. She hurries away. Speaking loud enough to make sure others can hear, he says, 'What mercy can she hope to receive? She lit a candle and left! They come into church with their heads uncovered, showing their flesh...' He looks around. Shakes his head. Walks off. The crowd lets him straight through. He walks away. Soon he comes back. Mingles about some distance away. Mingles, yes, because even in a crowd like this people are letting him move around. They fall back. Make way. He is stern. Squinting. He looks like a crane ready to strike with its beak. He reprimands someone. Explains something with the impatience of a child. Leaves. Comes back. He obviously delights in people noticing him. A man asks him where he should light a candle for the deceased. 'Next to the crucifix! You should light it next to the crucifix. How can a man your age not know that!?' The man hurries off. The novice glares after him. 'These people will drive me quite mad,' he says. 'They can't even do the simplest things.' He's got a little boy complex, which allows him to criticise others with impunity. He walks off. He comes back. He's everywhere. Here. There. Nothing escapes his attention. Vakho and I light our candles and leave. We feel no need to discuss the fact that we're not quite ready for confession yet, not quite ready for a more pious life. It would be a lie. We'll leave it for another time. Yes. It's for the best.