

## The White Bridge

*I'm standing on the bridge, spitting into the river – It doesn't  
rhyme, but it's a fact.*

*V. V. Mayakovski*

I was a mama's boy. I read books, always had a clean collar, was so good to beat up that it was rare for people to pass the opportunity to do so unless they were going on a business trip with a suitcase in each hand, or a mourner busy carrying a coffin. The war had just finished, life was hard, and people had little to give them pleasure and keep them entertained.

I was Library No. 6's most avid reader. I had to be careful when I went to the li-brary. If anyone saw me they would beat me up, and so I was careful: first, I would casually cross to the other side of the road, then I would equally casually spit off the bridge, and when I was sure nobody was watching, I would quickly walk into the library.

I was sitting in the library that day too. Suddenly I became aware of the noise of the Rioni River. I guessed that somebody had opened the door. I looked up at the librarians: two unmarried women with nothing left to tell each other. The woman in front was standing over a kerosene heater with her legs apart and star-ing at the doors, white as a sheet. A flowery red heat rash spread up the inside of her legs. Keto Pavidloian seemed unable to close her mouth and slowly waved her backside from side to side behind her in search of a chair. Fear had spread through the library like mold across a damp wall.

At first I thought they'd seen Ipolite. Back then in our town there lived a rat they called Ipolite, because apparently the actor Ipolite Khvichia had thrown boil-ing water over him at some point. Ipolite was everywhere you went, at the Kutaisi traders' association, the pawnshop, the market, the bank – bald, pink, and with a long green tail. He was a really unpleasant sight.

Ipolite and I were the only ones who ever went to Library No. 6. Back then we were both obsessed with the classics: Ipolite with the book bindings and me with the rest, and I still remember how I miss those days. The noise of the Rioni faded again; the doors had closed. I looked behind me cautiously.

In the doorway stood Adrakhnia.

Adrakhnia was a solitary man. He only ever appeared in profile, and his face bore a variety of old scars. One of these scars was more prominent than the oth-ers: it began above his hairline, cut across his forehead in a diagonal line, and then across his eyebrow, before skirting along the side of his nose, showing somewhat fainter where it crossed his dry lips, deepening on his chin and fading complete-ly underneath it. He was especially dangerous at

nightfall, in the fog, and while watching the film *El Dorado*. At the very sight of him even the road would shy away beneath his feet and try to escape.

And this was the man whose eyes were now looking at me.

Adrakhnia sat down at my table and took a black bound notebook from his pocket. He put it in front of me, looked at me, said, "You're going to write me a letter," and pointed at the notebook with an index finger that wasn't there. "I can't write," he said, and again he showed me the index finger that wasn't there. "No one must ever know," he said, waving at me the finger that wasn't there.

"I swear on my mother's life," I mouthed, but no sound came out.

"On your mother's life," Adrakhnia voiced on my behalf. He started dictating. "Write this. 'Dear Margalita, they douse me down, but still I burn for you'." Margalita was the widow of Rafael, the commodities expert. Two years previously Rafael had gone in front of the auditors... It was the second year Margalita had dressed only in black. The second year she spent her days sitting by the windows she cleaned with vinegar, looking out at her dead husband's car, which she refused to sell and which stood there on bricks, buried under yellow flowers, a monument to their love. She would sit there, mourning his loss, pick up a cherry on the point of a needle, clean the needle with a handkerchief, and then press it to her nose as a sign of her sadness.

I don't remember how long I was writing for. A lot of what I wrote was borrowed from the classics, but a lot was my own work. I can still remember saying something about them meeting at the wrong time and in the wrong place, like in the middle of having your blood pressure taken, or during the border crossing between East Germany and Poland, and things like "Oh, yellow chrysanthemum, painted on a fan," or "My love, why did we meet in a tapestry?"

There are parts of that letter that I struggle to understand even to this day. "It is you that makes each of my eyes so jealous of the other! When they compete to see where your gaze falls, theirs is a wakeful sleep, and in place of pillows they lay eyelashes underneath their heads! Sometimes the first eye falls asleep before the second, and sometimes the second before the first; each strives to make the other wait to glimpse the fount of beauty, the flame of mercy!"

Adrakhnia spent a long time reading what I'd written in the notebook. His lips mouthed the words silently. He looked out of the window to read the town clock, again mouthing silently, then raised his lower eyelids to close his eyes and said, "You're going to get a beating." My heart stopped. My finger twitched rapidly in its place.

Adrakhnia stood up. "But if anyone beats you up I'll rip their arms off, and then I'll rip their legs off and walk you to school on them," he said, and left.

Almost twenty years have passed since that day. I was back in Kutaisi recently; I wandered through the streets and said to myself, "I'm back in my hometown. Shouldn't I be feeling sadness, heartache, affection? Shouldn't I feel its beauty?" I went one way, but felt nothing, I went another way, but felt nothing. I sniffed a leather cap (like one I had bought) and still felt nothing. Desperate for nostalgia, I went to the White Bridge. "I'll spit off it, and maybe that will spur some affection and tenderness in my heart," I thought, but even this didn't work. Every time I tried to spit it came out too slowly, and twisted back under itself. "Spitting off the White Bridge is completely different when you're a child," I said, with a spurious sense of distress.

In Kutaisi the air moves in a particular way, when it is already more than a breeze but not yet a wind. It smells of glycerin, it is warm, lazy, and very well-mannered, and if I had my way I would call it Liziko Gabunia and enroll it in the Faculty of French at the Kutaisi Pedagogical Institute. The breeze came along and I doffed my cap, but it passed by me as if it didn't recognize me, and at the corner of the road it adjusted its earring, probably caught sight of me, and vanished.

I sat down on a lemonade crate. Somebody set a low-heeled boot down on the pavement in front of me. I looked up at him, and stood in his way. It was Adrakhnia. He had aged well, had not put on any weight, and his profile was now as transparent as thin paper. He didn't recognise me. I reminded him about Margalita's letter. He looked off to one side and offered me a cigarette. The next day, it turned out, was the fifth anniversary of her death. He invited me to come to the grave.

The next day I went up to the cemetery. Under a trident-shaped lime tree I met Margalita and Adrakhnia's two children. The girl was like her father, thin and silent. The boy had Margalita's tear-filled eyes and voice, peach-coloured lips, and stood shyly in the shade.

A white stone lay on Margalita's grave. Above it there was a coloured photo-graph. The stone turned turquoise in the gentle drizzle.

And standing by that stone I learned with a sense of gratitude that buried deep within the earth were those first words of mine, laid on beautiful Margalita's chest. It seems it was her final wish.