

Host and Guest

By Vazha-Pshavela

(Luka P. Razikashvili, 1861-1915)

Translated by Lela Jgerenaia © All Rights Reserved.

Edited by A. S. Kline

This work may be freely reproduced, stored, and transmitted, electronically or otherwise, for any non-commercial purpose.

Host and Guest

I

Veiled in the gloom of night
The sweet face of Kisteti
Appears, among hills around,
A rocky throne among cliffs.
The river moans in its dark ravine
Turbid, with grief at its heart.
The mountains too are bowed down,
Laving face and hands in the water;
On their breasts, many have died,
Unfitting is the blood on their flanks.
Seeking the blood of his brother's killer,
A man travels along the road.
I say a road, but what road is this:
A narrow path over rock!
A path that's so hard to walk,
He can scarcely move a step.
There, the village of the Kists,
Is like an eagle's nest,
As pleasant a place to gaze on
As the breast of a woman.
Black fog slumbers about the village,
Its face deep in thought,
Listening to the hills around,
Absorbing the scene with joy.
It's a guest for the moment,
Tomorrow, it moves elsewhere;
Departing, travelling the heights,
The slopes covered with ice;
It darkens and shrouds
The visible landscape.
Making the hunter cry out,
His track lost among cliffs,
Bringing joy to the wolf, the thief,
Those walkers in the dark.

II

High above, some stranger
Dislodges a rock from the cliff.
The traveller looks up,
Faced by a tall mountain.
He listens....after a moment
Hearing the hiss of sand.
He reaches for his gun:
It might be an enemy.
He looks about feverishly,
His weapon at the ready.
He sees someone burdened
With a double-headed staff.
He was dragging its dark weight,
That's why the sand hissed.
The stranger said not a word,
Not a sound came from his mouth,
The barrel of the gun gleaming
Like the dew after morning rain.
He asked: 'What kind of man are you?
Why are you wandering here at this hour?'
'What would you have? I'm a hunter.'
'You don't look like one to me.'
'Why should you not trust me?
Why are you suspicious?
Because I'm wandering perhaps
Like you across this mountain?
I am a hunter too,
And today I've hunted in vain.'
'So it goes with us hunters.
Would you live without trouble?'
'This also is trouble, brother,
I can barely move a step,
I've walked all these hills,
I traversed every ravine;
Black fog swirled around
Driven by a strong wind;
It howled through the ravines
Like a famished wolf.

I could barely see the road;
I tried to descend the cliff,
At a loss to know the way
I was struggling so fiercely.
I scared the beasts near and far,
I could hear their hooves clearly,
I could hear the rams clashing horns
As they fled along the cliff.
My heart sank at that
I could see nothing ahead;
Forget about the hunting,
I dared not take a step forward.’
The stranger standing close by
Came a little closer.
The traveller called out: ‘Hunt on, then,
Don’t complain, stay calm.’
‘Good hunting to you too, brother,
Kill a host of those agile creatures.’
‘Here’s one. So why complain?’
He showed him a horned ram,
Lying dead, one with curving horns.
‘A cunning one, but silent now.
If you want we’ll share it,
Equal shares, like comrades,
I’ll not take more than my own,
Let’s share it justly,
Come home with me tonight,
My dwelling is nearby.
Where do you come from, brother?
Tell me your name as well!
Don’t worry, God has found
Food for you today.
You shall have your share
In this ram I’ve slain,
Don’t look surprised, it’s no jest,
And I’m not seeking favours.
If it was not meant to be,
Why would you meet me, now?
It would be a shame
If you lost your share,

Who are you? Tell me your name.
Your looks seem Khesvurian.’
‘I am called, Nunua, brother,
A wanderer in the hills.’
But Zviadauri lied,
He concealed his true name.
What could he do? He was notorious,
He owed a debt of blood to many Kists,
He had cut the right hand of many Kists,
Sent them to an untimely grave.
‘Tell me your name, too,
Now I have told you mine.’
‘Mine is Jokhala, brother,
My last name, Alkhastaidze;
It would not do for us
To tell lies.
My house is nearby,
With doors like a fortress.
Come home with me tonight,
I’ll take you there myself.
If I’m not the perfect host
I’ll not treat you ill, at least.
Tomorrow, take your own way,
Go wherever you wish.
I’ll tell you some of my troubles,
You can share some of yours.’
‘Lead me wherever you wish, brother,
I long to be there – How far is it?
You’ve cut the ram’s throat,
And skinned its legs too.
I’ll not refuse to visit,
I’ll help carry the ram too
I don’t ask for a share, you know,
I’d not dishonour myself like that.’
Between them they skinned the ram,
And carried it to the house,
They exchanged many stories,
Grew acquainted as they went.

III

The turrets came in sight,
Dogs were barking;
From the doorways
Curious children were gazing;
The stone-built houses
Seemed like giant boulders.
'Look, here are my family,
My fortress, my home;
Welcome, as brother to brother,
As godson to godfather.'
Jokhala called to his wife:
'Come see who's at the door!'
Pride was apparent
In the host's conversation.
As they stood in the hallway, waiting...
The fire smouldered in the hearth,
An old man played on a lyre,
A man sitting near to him,
Sang of heroes
Of ancestral wars:
How they sacked Pshav-Khevsureti,
In vengeance for the blood of their brother;
They celebrate everywhere
The hand of a righteous man.
Then a beautiful woman appeared,
Dressed in black,
Slender as a willow tree,
Like a star descended to earth.
'See, I have brought you a guest.'
'Mercy be to God.'
How you will treat our guest, wife,
That is for you to say.
The woman welcomed him in:
'Guest, may peace be upon you!'
'You too, may you have peace
And your husband and children!'
She took the guest's weapons,
They invited him in;

The woman following behind,
Jokhala leading;
Zviadauri following
His new brother.

IV

The man who sat by the hearth,
Grey-haired, elderly,
He rose now to his feet,
Like a powerful tiger on a cliff-top.
An old man, there as a guest,
Must respect the guest of another,
To rise to one's feet is expected,
He must follow the mountain ways.
But on seeing the stranger,
He took on the mask of the wolf;
They were evident,
The thoughts in his mind,
The aged Kist felt no pleasure,
On seeing this stranger.
His heart throbbed with anger,
And his face betrayed it,
His hand drifted to his sword,
And he checked his knife, covertly,
But a guest cannot start a quarrel
In another man's house.
He rose and exited quietly,
Biting his finger in bitterness,
He beat at his chest three times,
As he stepped outside.
He left and went from house to house,
Sharpening his tongue with poison:
'Our deadly enemy, you Kists,
Walks with you, disguised, in the night.
It seems, Jokhala fails to know him
His eyes have not pierced the disguise.
He is the decimator of our people,
Attacking us with violence,
Forever insatiable in his desire
For our blood and bone.
Today he is in our hands, let's see
If we can make him taste the bitterness
Of those Khevsur killed this summer;
We have unburied dead.

Tell me, if I fail of the truth,
If my words are in error!
Make our enemy know too,
That we are not basely born.
I am surprised at Jokhala,
Why open the door to an enemy,
Who is this guest? The idiot,
Why does he not see?
We must bring bitterness
To Zviadauri's nostrils,
If not then let the women
Wield our shields and swords.'
Even the Kists' children were stirred,
Everyone strapped on a sword,
The entire village was stirred –
Man, woman, and child.
They must sacrifice the life
Of Zviadauri to their dead;
They must kill him on his enemy's grave
As is the custom.
To send a spy,
Instructing him in secret,
To go to Jokhala,
Like a neighbour and a brother;
Not to divulge in any way
The villagers' intent.
To eat and to converse,
To discover where the guest will sleep;
To assault him at night, and bind him,
Needs little debate.
The spy arrives
With ingratiating tongue
He blesses Jokhala's name,
He speaks freely, gives no offence.
He jests and tells stories,
He strikes sparks with his tongue.
Who could know his heart was full
Of the venom of a deadly snake.
They dined. The host
Admired his guest with all his heart.

'He's a brave man, you can tell,'
He swore by his cult,
'Meeting today, tomorrow as brothers
Let us be one in spirit.'
He invited him to rest,
And showed him to his own bed.
His guest refused it, 'No,'
I want neither mattress nor blanket.
I'll sleep in the entrance way,
I'm not used to sleeping inside...
He had achieved the goal
Aimed at in his heart,
This is what the spy desires,
It's why he made his way there.
And he left joyfully,
To spread the news around.
If the fox knows where the cockerel roosts,
What more can he wish!

‘Wife, what’s all this confusion?
Bring me my sword and sabre!
This is no trivial skirmish,
The whole enemy force is attacking!
They are out to destroy us,
Our guest has betrayed us;
Beneath brotherhood and friendship
He’s concealed an army!
Hush! Wait! I am wrong...
They are our Kists.
Why are they here, now;
What are they crying, what do they want?
Listen, carefully,
I can hear a man screaming.
What a dire sound,
What a dreadful deed!
They are slaughtering my guest
With their glittering swords.
Look at those ruthless ones,
How they trample through my home!
They have my manhood in their hands,
And they crush it as they crush the grapes.
Let me go and see,
What has stirred them so?...’
So saying, Jokhala rose
And gripping his sword in his hand,
He opened the doors of his house,
And stepped out defiantly.
‘Why are you here? He cried,
‘Whose guest do you bind with rope?
Why do you break our sovereign law,
Why do you drench my head with mud?
I swear by my religion, I’ll shed blood,
You will regret your vile conduct,
You’ll regret this, though you are my brothers,
Trampling like this on my manhood!...’
‘What do you mean, you fool,
Have you lost your wits?’

Over a deadly guest, an enemy
Who would cut off the breasts of his own mother!’
So the Kists cried,
Shouting, all at once, loud as thunder
‘You and your guest, will both
Be hurled from the cliffs together.
Whatever the tribe must do, it will
According to the tribe’s rules.
This decimator of all Kisteti
Why do you treat him as your guest?
In the mountains, even a child
Knows this Zviadauri’s name.
You fool, he’s forever trying,
To exterminate us all.
He attacks us like a wolf,
He ambushes us on the trail.’
Jokhala thought deeply,
His face filled with regret,
As if an arrow had been fired,
Into the very centre of his heart.
‘It was he who killed your brother,
With his gun, in the birch-wood.
We know his face,
Fierce with rage.
“I am here, I, Zviadauri!”
He screamed from above;
We heard him clearly,
We were watching him from afar.
He filled Pshav-Khevsureti
With cattle he stole from us.
He stood behind the army,
Swift-footed, wearing a grey chokha.
Why do you shame yourself, you wretch,
For this insatiable creature?
How can you sit near him,
Without vomiting in his face?’
‘All that may be true...
But what are you trying to say,
You can’t tie my heart
To your wishes with a thread.

He is my guest, this day,
Though he owes me a sea of blood,
I cannot betray him.
I swear it, by God, his creator.
I ask you to loose him, Musa,
Not to torment him further,
When he leaves my household,
Then you may do as you wish.
Who has ever betrayed a guest,
In Kisteteti, even in story?
What have I done, then,
That you are all at my door?
You forget the rules of your own cult,
That is why you act so wrongly;
What would you say to my family?
You are in my house, not outside!
Woe to you, children of Kists,
Who come to my door in force!
You attack an unarmed man,
How does that make you feel?’
Musa (to Jokhala)
‘We will bind you too,
For shaming the tribe, you wretch!
Will you dare to disobey
What we order?
You’re barking like some sheep-dog,
You are talking foolish nonsense;
On behalf of this non-believer,
Treating your brothers as the enemy,
Do you realise your own life
Will be filled now with misfortune!’
Jokhala (to Musa).
‘What? Do you call me a dog?
Then I’ll act like one, too!’
He drew his dagger,
And thrust it to the hilt into Musa’s heart.
‘Look, here is the true dog,
See how bold he grows with me!
You trample on my manhood,
Do you dare to curse me?’

I swear, by Allah, I'll slay you,
Before you can murder me with your sabres
May the wrath of land and sky show you no mercy,
For the unjust thing you do!
'Oh God, what has he done,
He's given way to madness...'
Jokhala was attacked
By the whole force of Kists,
They tied his hands...they made sure
He could not wield his sword...
They threw him into the hallway
His hands and feet bound like a corpse.
The people's condemnation is thunder,
Their saliva, the moisture of rain.
They seized the wounded man too,
Zviadauri....
What does Zviadauri say,
Why is his face like a stoic's?
Grief is killing that brave man,
Because his hand lacks a sword:
'You have seized me, you dogs,
A fortunate day for you!'
He said this quite calmly,
And he said nothing more.
They were dragging him to the graveyard,
Where the Kists were buried;
As a sacrifice to the dead,
To bear water for them there,
To obey them as their servant,
And wash their feet...

VI

On the far side of the village was a hill,
Scorched, and dusty;
Many brave men lay there,
Lion-hearted, nobly bred.
The silent hillside sloped below,
A torrent flowing through clay.
Those who wielded sword and gun
Their strong hearts no longer beat;
The voiceless ground devours them,
Harsh and insatiable;
Everyone thinks of it
As the very likeness of a human being...
Strength cannot save us from mortal fate
Nor cunning words.
This is Nature's deep flaw,
That always offends my mind:
It kills everyone, good or bad,
And no-one survives in the end.
When the ship is wrecked
Every passenger is drowned!...
The sun had not yet risen,
The dew still rested on the grass,
The breeze had not yet blown,
Had not spread from above.
Countless men and women
Were gathered there.
Zviadauri was brought
Hands bound before the crowd,
All are eager for his slaughter,
Yet who among them would grieve?
Death terrifies us all,
When others are killed, we long to watch;
Most of the time men do not feel
The wickedness of their actions.
There are so many sinful souls,
Who live their lives without remorse;
Yet who does not wish to destroy
One who harms them?

VII

Here is the grave of a Kist,
Surrounded by the crowd.
Moollah begins to pray,
Remembering his dead:
'Suffer, no more, Darda,
Nor be troubled,
Here are your brothers
At the door of your grave,
Be joyful, we sacrifice to you,
No longer swallow your anger against your foe,
May this dog die for you!'
The stranger's voice is heard,
His hackles are rising,
His hair like a tiger's.
Lime is burning
In the victim's inner core.
Will this subdue his rage,
A blade with a rusted edge!
They fall upon Zviadauri,
Set the sword at his throat:
'We sacrifice you to Darla!'
They all cry.
(Zviadauri) 'Your dead are the dogs!'
He shouted to the crowd.
A brave man, defiant.
Unwavering, his brow.
The Kists were confounded,
The crowd reared up.
'He refuses to die,
Behold, this dog!'
They are shouting and as they do
Slowly driving in the sword.
'You are the dogs!' he murmured in his throat
Before they severed his head!
'Look at him, look,
Not a blink from his eyes!'
Life is ebbing, he is bleeding,
Zviadauri is dying,

But an enemy hand could not quench his heart,
His heart was still his heart...
And witnessing all this
One lovely woman melted,
Hiding her tears
Standing there, behind the crowd,
She wanted to aid him:
Her heart screamed: 'Don't kill him!'
She was thinking, angrily:
'I wish I had a scythe,
I wish the female cult
Gave me the right,
To grant him life
In exchange for all these souls.
I wish I were the one
Who might sleep in his arms,
Whose breast, now damned,
Lay on his breast,
Would that one ever tire
Of her husband's love!'
The Kists were angered, shamed:
Their wish was not fulfilled,
They could not make a fitting sacrifice
To the dead;
Their victim slew their hearts
And diminished their joy.
Ashamed they desired
To wield their swords as one
And make of the corpse
Ribbons stained with blood.
But they did not dare from shame:
And 'Shameful!' all were thinking.
Their hearts and minds
Vexed and troubled.
As they headed home,
Heads low, descending, they said:
'We'd not have killed him
If as an enemy he'd not harmed us.
He was a brave man',
All swore to Allah,

‘That’s why he fought like a tiger,
Defending the honour of his land.’
But “treat your enemy with harshness”
God himself commands us,
The sooner then must we
Drive a knife into their hearts.’
They abandoned Zviadauri’s
Corpse there, alone;
For the dogs to drag at him,
Birds to tear and dismember him;
‘He was no sacrifice, let him rot there
That too is no less harm.’
The Kists proclaimed this
Proudly, in loud voices.
And their voices were echoed
By the mountains’ dark ravines.
Night fell,
Light faded from the heights,
Darkness entered stealthily
The sun sank to rest.
The sunlight faded,
The sand no longer shining;
No longer seen now, vanished,
The white hair of the black summits.
Embroidered, veined with sorrows,
The face of those rocks,
That are forever grieving,
With pure streams like tears.
For death, mourning is fitting,
For a dead brother, a sister’s weeping,
For the forest, the stag’s trail,
Or the howling of wolves,
For a brave man death in battle,
Shattered sword in hand.
For war, the victory feast
With the enemy defeated.
Zviadauri was mourned
By the fret and fall of water,
The moan from the tall mountain
Freed on the breeze,

Tears from the ranks of mist
Ordained by God.
And by the stream, a woman,
Fine, a beauty of Kist,
Pours water over her breast and forehead,
Fainting from time to time.
She cried for a long time, quietly,
Though now and then she trembled,
The death of Zviadauri
Would appear before her eyes.
She was crying without tears,
Constrained by respect:
Respect for the tribe on the one hand
On the other, her fear of God.
Grieving for an enemy
Would bring their anger upon her.
The thought was in her mind,
But her heart took its own path,
The man's heroic death,
Was etched on her heart.
That scene had pierced
The woman's heart like an arrow,
Forcing this beauty
To mourn the slaughtered one.
She is waiting for dark, so she
Can weep for the dead by night;
She gave barely a thought
To her Jokhala,
A wife is mourning another's man
What is the madwoman doing?
Perhaps they are killing Jokhala,
Breaking down the doors of the house!
She rose and glanced around
A frightened creature;
Swiftly she climbed
The mountainous cliffs;
With the fearful noise of the waters
Hissing in the gloom.
She climbed to the grave, leaned
There, then knelt in reverence,

She was sobbing, out of breath;
Tears melted the stone.
She took a knife and approached
Zviadauri's corpse,
She cut three hairs from his beard
For a keepsake,
She wrapped them round a coarse twig
With her tapering sculpted fingers.
What is that deafening noise?
Her ears are ringing...
From the graves can be heard
The anger and moans of the dead!
As if infants were crying too,
Wailing bitterly!
It's the voice of a shared anger,
Of a common grief:
'What are you doing, you shameful wretch'
Was their bitter complaint,
'Almighty God will vent his anger on you!'
Was the cry from the grave.
Swift clouds
Appeared on the surface of the sky...
She ran away, looking back,
The dead themselves ran after her,
'Where can you hide yourself,
If you try to escape us now?'
The voices behind her cry,
The mountains echo their words,
Reverberating everywhere
Not just in one place or two.
'Traitor!' they all cry,
The peerless stallions,
The grasses, stones, and sand,
All around.
Here, from his grave, rises
Her dead brother, Ebari,
Unequaled among his peers,
Famed horseman of the Kists;
He shouted after his sister,
With thunderous words:

'Oh, my sister, what have you done to me?
Why do you shame me so?
You have dug me a second grave,
Though I am dead and buried!
Is this how you prove yourself my sister,
Is this your womanhood?'
He glided along the path,
He howled towards the graveyard.

VIII

(Aghaza) ‘What are you after, damn you?
Where are you going?
Who permits you to tear at a good man’s flesh?
You dog, with greedy eyes!
Are Zviadauri’s bones
For you to pick at?’
So Aghaza cried,
Hurling a shower of stones.
The dead run behind her menacingly,
Along the edge of the rocky ravine.
She can still hear their voices,
Echoed by the mountains.
Aghaza’s agate black hair
Was filled with their disapproval.
As she neared her house,
She saw light streaming from it;
She wanted to scream for help,
Wanted her voice to be heard,
But she couldn’t speak a word,
Sweat poured from her forehead...
She felt she was suffocating,
Poured out like water on the threshold.
Jokhala was seated by the hearth,
One knee crossed over the other,
‘Woe is me,’ she said, that’s all,
The words died on her tongue.
The husband embraced his wife,
And helped her to the hearth.
‘What has happened to you, woman?
He asked, anxiously.
As if I lacked for sorrows,
Have you become one too?
What’s happened, what is it?
Tell me, open your lips!
Has anyone tried
To grasp you in his arms?
Tell me. I’ll not be angry
I’ll make him regret in an instant

Any disrespect to my honour,
I'll knock the foolishness out of him,
As I made Musa regret
Coming to our door.'
He was waiting for an answer,
Standing over her,
At the same time gripping his dagger,
His hand on the hilt.
The woman could not speak,
Though her face looked calm.
Jokhala walked all round her,
Waiting for what she might say.
By midnight, Aghaza
Had slowly come to her senses.
She said to Jokhala: 'What is all this?
Why are you so troubled?
Why do you imagine
What has no reality?
It's all illusion...husband
I've not seen a living soul.
Who would dare do that to me?
Don't I wear a bride's head-scarf?
I returned from the graveyard
I was searching for your horse in the ravine
Instead of a horse, alas
I met with giants.
One dressed in a black felt cloak,
With an enormous body:
(Lightning in my eyes,
The reek of its flesh)
With vast ears, and teeth,
Loathsome, and black in colour.
He reached out his hands,
His enormous hands,
On his head like a mountain-top
Was a dark hat of leather,
He said: "Come with me,
Live with me, woman,
I have a heap of gold and silver
I'll hide nothing from you."

I ran in fear from him,
The giant too was running and howling,
The earth was shaking
Under his lumbering feet;
The voice scared me, the mountains
And valleys too,
Winding this way and that,
I barely reached here to tell you,
Out of breath and suffering.
Jokhala said: 'Besides this giant,
There must have been something else,
I can't believe what you say,
My thoughts are confused.
Why were you crying?
Tears have flowed down your cheeks;
Tell me now, tell me truthfully,
Or I'll lose patience!
Some sorrow, some vital
Feeling has pierced your heart.
You can't hide from my eyes
Every trace of that feeling;
There is no way to erase
Every trace of drink from the cup!...'
'Why should I hide it from you, Jokhala,
What in my words could enrage you?'
The wife said, tremulous
Quivering in her voice,
'I sacrificed my tears
To that guest of yours.
I felt pity for that unfortunate man
Dying here in a foreign place,
With no kin, no brother by,
To feel pity for him!
Who when he was struck by the sword,
Never even flinched.
Perhaps I sinned against you, and God,
Yet I cried for him, what could I do!...'
'Why would I be angered at that?
To speak truth is better than lying.
You shed tears? You have shown mercy!

Who am I to judge that a wrong?
It is always fitting a woman
Should mourn a brave man.'

IX

Next morning, Aghaza
Drives out the cattle,
Birds are swooping,
Attracted by the corpse;
Aghaza too is drawn
To the rocky heights of the graveyard,
From which she scares the ravens,
The vultures, wings beating,
The insatiable eagles,
Feasting on the spoils of the dead;
With furtive movements of her hand,
Her eyes glittering like the sun,
She throws pebbles from the rocks,
While seeming to be knitting,
So cleverly, that no one
Can guess at her thoughts.

X

News reached Biso,
Like a clap of thunder:
'They have killed Zviadauri,
One like sunlight from the sky,
The shield and sword of Pshav-Khevsureti,
Our vital defence!'
Those hearing the black news
The women, gathered;
In Biso his aged mother is crying,
Lamenting, sobbing bitterly,
'Oh, why am I still alive?
Bury me too in the earth!
Show me my son's limbs,
Bring him, let me touch them!
With my son's right hand
Throw earth on my heart!
Oh, why am I still living?
Why am I still treading the earth?
Oh, why have the dead, failed
To order me to their realm?
How can I, remain
On sacrilegious soil?
Brave men heard the news,
Heard it in sorrow,
Grappled with each other
Grieved, roused by anger...
Hardly surprising; their defender
They now mourned with bitter tears!
They brandished spears,
Sharpened and greased the blades,
Donned shields and swords,
Gathered their forces for the morning.
Nothing strange indeed
If blood flows in torrents.
Apareka cried:
You'll need rations for a week!
'A man from every clan!'
Babarauli yelled.

It was the din of men roused for battle,
Not the music of the flute!

XI

'Run outside, Jokhala,
Don't lie there calmly by the hearth,
See the force that has reached
Our mountain heights!
They are coming to visit,
They will soon be our guests,
They will make our women
Rue their rocking of the cradle,
They are driving off the cattle,
What is all this confusion!
See, their army has seized
The heights of Jaregi, and Samgori,
The wastelands of the shepherds,
They are descending from the cliffs.
Go, help your kin,
They're advancing on the enemy,
Go too, Jokhala,
Go with all the others.'
'Follow them? What are you saying, fool?
They won't let me near them!
I'll have to fight alone,
Let all Jarega see it;
Who is loyal, who is not,
Let the country see it.
The Kists think I'm a traitor,
Renouncing my own cult,
They think Jokhala,
Has sold himself for gain,
That I've betrayed Kisteti,
One careless of his own soul;
They are bringing a gravestone
To set on my living heart.'
As Jokhala spoke,
He was donning his body-armour:
Strapping his sword to his waist,
Slinging his gun from his shoulder,
It is not a Kist tradition
To wear a helmet on the head.

He walks along by himself,
Intent on meeting
With the foe.
The Kists are scattered over the heights.

XII

The army of the Khevsurs advances,
Their flag-bearer in the lead;
They swarm towards the graveyard,
The Kists' house of silence:
They seek their dead warrior,
To gather his bones,
To put out the eyes
Of Zviadauri's tormentors.
But they were met by the Kists,
Concealed at the gully's edge;
Who grasp their guns,
They won't yield
To the Khevsurs.
Agile young men
On both sides fire their guns
Shouting their battle cries,
Both sides suffer wounds,
Both sides fight on, regardless.
The bullets had their fill
Of blood, harming many.
Still the Kists did not break,
They stood firm as a fortress.
Babarauli of the Khevsurs,
Called for a sabre attack.
It came down to cold steel,
Shields gave way to sabres.
The Khevsurs are seeking
Rich treasure and spoils;
Shield, do not despise the sword
That hangs beside you.
The Khevsurs scrambling down
Met an insurmountable boulder.
Suddenly from behind it,
Sprang a lone Kist with a sabre,
Astounding the army of Kists,
By repulsing the enemy force.
Some thought it a mirage,
They called out, in disbelief,

‘Who is attacking the Khevsurs?
Is it one of us? Who is he?’
‘It looks like Jokhala,
Yes it’s him indeed!’
One shouted, others agreed,
They all stared, dumbfounded.
At his disdain for the enemy force,
Though they brandish swords and daggers.
Then the enemy killed him,
Pierced his chest with their sabre tips.
At that the Kists too rejoiced:
‘Let them kill him, he deserves to die!
Even now he treats us like fools,
As he has spurned us before,
Daring to set himself over all the rest,
And cover us in shame.
He met the enemy army alone,
And won over us by chance.’
The Khevsurs slaughtered Jokhala
On the rocky summit, on the heights.
They attacked the Kists,
Scattered over the slope.
A whirl of daggers and sabres,
Struck them in their chests;
The ringing and clatter of shield and sword
Rose to God above.
The Kist army fled,
They went scurrying towards their towers,
The Khevsurs chasing after,
Their helms glittering;
They gathered from the graveyard
The bones of Zviadauri:
Scattered some here, some there,
Torn apart by carrion birds.
They put the bones in their saddle-bags,
And headed for home,
Their hearts’ desire achieved,
The vengeance they had sworn.
They gathered the sheep and cattle,
Drove them over the mountains;

They took revenge on their foes,
Answering every desire!
His bones they carried with them,
Home from that foreign soil,
The Hope of Pshav-Khevsureti,
Their Fortress, their Iron Door.
His brothers will cry for him,
For the dead, according to custom,
They'll inter his bones to lie
Beside his ancestors:
The tears that ran down his chest,
Have exacted the highest price!

XIII

‘Mourner of a stranger,
Khevsurs slew your husband.
Go mourn him, Aghaza,
Bury him in his grave.
The raven croaks at his head,
The wind sifts through his beard,
(Aghaza) ‘May your enemies know
The bitterness of my bitter existence!
Nobody comes near me,
Nobody cares about me.
I buried him on top of the cliff,
And I dug his grave myself.
All turn their backs on me,
All stand aside.
They even shut the graveyard,
Where I might bury my dead.’
‘Jokhala betrayed us,
That is the place for him,
Where he fought alone,
Spreader of poison amongst us,
Destroyer of our health,
Traitorous, unrelenting.’
‘Fire is burning me, brothers, fire is burning me,
Flameless, unmoving;
It slays my heart, confuses my mind,
With unfathomable thoughts!’
So the wife mourned Jokhala,
Shedding endless tears,
A chamois, with neck bent gracefully,
Loose hair, face like the moon,
She was sewing herself, like a pearl button,
To her husband’s chest.

XIV

The night is dark, rain pours,
The ground is quivering.
God, take care of those in torment,
Help them, have mercy on them!
Good is good despite all,
Show love to the wretched one!
Take the prayers of the tormented
To your heart like roses!
If you can't help, accept
The souls of those in pain!...
Enough of this threatening sky
Dissipate, you clouds!
The river thunders, angrily,
Bursting over the boulders,
It's wrath unchanged today,
Not knowing why it laments.
It has no fear of torment,
It knows nothing of death.
It only knows one thing:
Shedding its tears, and howling,
Endlessly joyless,
Forever howling and crying...
The wind scours the ravines
Shouting from the mountain;
On the cliff, the woman, her hair unbound
Stands, gazing at the river.
She seems like a fading star,
In the gloom her trembling mouth.
Speaks not a word...
She quivers, she stares at the river;
Dreadful the noise it makes,
Dreadful the way it flows!
Snarling, severe,
The black torrent rages.
'Do not drown yourself!'
If they would only call to her.
The woman shut her eyes,
Leapt swiftly into the depths.

‘Why live on, to what end?
Such were her last thoughts.
In Kisteti no one cares for me,
Not one thing, not even a pebble.
Both of us harmed the Kists,
They damned my husband...
I bear a greater sin,
I shed tears for a stranger.’
The water took Aghaza,
Drowned her in its silt and sand.

XV

On that cliff-top, where Jokhala
Was slain in the fight with the Khevsurs,
At night they see an image,
Carved on the hill, by an avalanche:
Jokhala stands high on the boulder,
Shouting towards the graveyard:
'Zviadaur, my brother,
Why won't you show your face?'
From the graveyard there comes
A ghost with sword and shield,
He has crossed his arms
Over his heart,
He'll come and greet
His brother silently.
There Aghaza too will rise,
With a sad, mournful face.
A fire burns beside them,
Dimly smouldering on the mountain.
Aghaza plays host to her guests,
She roasts a ram over the flames.
They are drinking to courage,
To each others' respect
For the rites of host and guest,
To comradeship, brotherhood, sisterhood.
When you see them together
You can't have enough of gazing;
Yet something dark appears
Filling your sight,
Dense, black in colour,
As the words of the poet.
It shrouds it like an enchantment,
No weapon can pierce it,
No prayer can charm it away,
Nor any hand remove it.
Only the river's noise is heard,
Raging downwards, roaring,
While beauty stares into its depths

Her neck bent, gracefully...

1893 წ.

Notes:

Vazha-Pshavela (July 26, 1861 – July 10, 1915) was the pen-name of the Georgian poet and writer Luka P. Razikashvili, a classic writer of the new Georgian school of literature. He was born in a small village Chargali (in Pshavi, a mountainous province in Eastern Georgia). He graduated from the Pedagogical Seminary in Gori and then spent two years studying in St. Petersburg. He returned to Georgia and worked as a teacher of the Georgian language (Kartuli). He is the author of numerous literary works (including the poems ‘Aluda Ketelauri’, ‘Bakhtrioni’, ‘Gogotur and Apshina’, ‘Host and Guest’, ‘Snake eater’, ‘Eteri’, and ‘Mindia’) He was a representative of the National-Liberation movement of Georgia. Vazha-Pshavela died in 1915, in Tbilisi, Georgia.

Host and Guest shows the ability of the ancient traditions of hospitality towards the stranger to overcome differences of race and religion. The Kist-Khevsur conflicts occurred during the 18th and 19th centuries. For further information on the fascinating historical background to the Georgian tribal areas, click the links to the Wikipedia articles on the [Kist](#) and [Khevsur](#) peoples.