

Rebecca Gould

Sogdian Merchant Scripts

Teresa didn't want to go. She had too much to worry about, too many distractions. She preferred to let her pain incubate, to let it fester. So when her elderly neighbor Beatrice woke her up, shortly past midnight, to celebrate Easter and share a boiled egg, as red as blood, she was both irritated and bemused. What kind of person bangs on their neighbor's door in the middle of the night to share an egg? she wondered to herself. When Beatrice informed her that her son wanted to show her Old Tbilisi, and to introduce her to the history and culture of the city where he had been born and raised, Teresa agreed. But she was less than pleased.

"I'm leaving for America the next day," she warned her neighbor, "So I'll have to finish early."

Beatrice shook Teresa's hand before she parted that night, winked slyly, and insisted she take another egg. "I'll be gone that day," Beatrice added before she parted, "But you and Irakli will have fun."

All that month, Teresa had been cooped up in her apartment. Meditating. Mostly about a man she had never met, but whom she knew better than her own soul. They shared in common a passion for certain obscure subjects, like Arabic epigraphy and Persian paleography. More than that, they shared expertise in the peculiar annotations that itinerate Sogdian merchants of early modern Central Asia made on Arabic manuscripts, in a handwriting all their own. These merchants, whose scripts no one had ever fully deciphered, inscribed their vernaculars in cobalt blue calligraphy, as if to signify that their pasts could not be vanquished by the new Islamic dispensation. Past scholarly attempts to relate the inscriptions to other Iranian languages, such as Yaghnoobi and Ghori, had fallen flat, in part because no living scholar was able to comprehend medieval Ghori.

Working together with the philologist, Teresa succeeded in cracking one of the most difficult scripts. But many more scripts remained to be deciphered. These mysterious scripts, which only they could begin to understand, and only by working together slowly and intimately, caused them to fall in love. Or, more precisely, caused *her* to fall in love with *him*. If he loved her, he never let on.

Their expert knowledge was shared by no one. She always knew she was destined to fall in love with a philologist, but she had not been prepared for the blast when it hit her. Their connection—forged over

months of email, of electronic intimacies dense with imputed meanings never articulated—was as fleeting as it was tantalizing. It consisted of questions about words no one else knew or could understand, even if they had been told their meanings. Together, they luxuriated in the verses of Hafez and Sa'di, both of whom were cited extensively by the Sogdian merchants in their peculiar script. Sometimes the merchants translated classical Persian verse into their Iranian vernaculars. At other times, they left the texts in the original, multiplying the Babel of tongues enshrined by the old manuscripts.

Everyday, for almost a month, Teresa and the philologist exchanged messages. They were both enthralled by the archive they were creating, their time capsule for the next generation of scholars. They bonded over the marginalia that only they could decipher. Like everything else in their relationship, Teresa and the philologist shared these manuscripts electronically, using material Teresa had scanned during an earlier research visit to the Pamir on the Tajik side of the border (Afghanistan was in a state of war at the time of her visit). They compared variants. They speculated about which reading was more certain, and what caused the divergences, among texts, scripts, calligraphies, and visions. Together, they entered another era, time travelling as only philologists can time travel, through the many mountains these manuscripts had traversed before they landed on the internet. Teresa and the philologist lived within the materiality of Islamic texts, which became the materiality of their relationship, and the foundation of their love.

And then, four months into their friendship, he dropped the bomb.

“My wife just gave birth to a baby,” he wrote her in a note that was much briefer than usual. “Congratulate me.”

Congratulate him she could not do. A baby? She didn't even know he had a wife. Teresa didn't write that of course, but it only proved one of her longest-standing convictions: brilliant men always find ways to balance their intellectual passions with their bodily hungers. For women, it's a different story. They have to choose. Career versus family. Passion versus intellect. Madonna versus whore. Even smart men are in search of ego massagers, not of intellectual equals.

Teresa didn't answer him. Surely, he didn't need her congratulations. Instead, she lashed out by writing a scholarly article about the low status of women at the Samanid court. Yes, there were token exceptions, female queens, Scheherazades of various (usually disreputable) backgrounds, prostitutes, courtesans, harem singers. These whores and harem singers influenced male rulers in often unseen ways. But the main thrust of her argument was easy to prove. Even powerful women could only exercise

their power invisibly. Samanid women were not public intellectuals who held the world in the palm of their hands. Instead, their bodies were mere stepping-stones for men seeking to dominate the world.

Now that her unrealized love affair with the philologist was officially over before it had even begun, Teresa hoped to make the most of her stay in Tbilisi. She wanted to start a new research agenda, and to file away the Sogdian merchant scripts in the dark recesses of her brain, in a place she would only access twenty years into the future. But forgetting was proving more difficult than she had bargained for. It was easier to lean, slowly, into the pain, and to stay there forever. Instead of venturing out into the archives as she had planned to do when she arrived in Tbilisi, so as to crack one of the scripts she and the philologist had been working on when he dropped the bomb, Teresa found herself in bed, day after day, imagining what it would be like to read manuscripts together with the philologist in bed, their bodies as intertwined as their minds once were.

Teresa didn't want to see Old Tbilisi. She agreed to accompany Irakli only because she knew it would be good for her, giving her a much-needed distraction from the man she would never know in the flesh, from their virtual intimacies, from the languages they had created together, languages that still, after nearly a month of silence, dug far too deeply into her soul.

Irakli didn't have a car. For some reason, she had been expecting that he would drive her to the top of Nariqala, Old Tbilisi's fortress. She must have misunderstood Beatrice's proposal. Instead, they walked down Rustaveli. Tbilisi's main thoroughfare was bustling with booksellers and businessmen, until they reached the bright red-striped mayor's residence. It was a hot day for the middle of May, and Teresa regretted that she had not brought water with her.

Irakli apologized for not speaking English. Teresa told him that there was nothing to apologize for. English was a language she had no desire to speak. It was the language in which her love for the philologist had taken root, notwithstanding the many tongues they shared. One of the few languages she did not share with the philologist was Russian, which made it an attractive medium for starting life anew. A second language they didn't share was Georgian. She was delighted to move between Russian and Georgian with Irakli, her self-appointed guide to Old Tbilisi's monuments.

After they exited Rustaveli Avenue, Irakli escorted Teresa through the medieval alleyways and dark corridors that stretched all the way from Freedom Square to Nariqala. Irakli explained how, in centuries past, the

carriages of the rich and the carts of the poor had maneuvered over potholes and through dim alleyways. First czarist and then Soviet power had changed these streets, turning the oversized mansions into communal apartments, widening the narrow passageways, and adding plumbing, but much remained the same from czarist times and even earlier.

The churches did not interest her much, but the sulfur baths of Abanotubani (Bath District) were stunning. Dating back to the seventh century, and attributed to King Irakli, these baths were refurbished in the sixteenth century by Tbilisi's Persian, Armenian, and Azeri merchants, who hoped to buttress their reputations by displaying their love for their adopted city. Now the baths were one of the most striking Persianate architectural monuments in Tbilisi's cityscape. Across the street was the ancient Metekhi Church, near which Abo of Tbilisi sacrificed his life for refusing to convert to Islam in the eighth century. Abo was the only Arab saint in the Georgian pantheon.

To the right of the sulfur baths, the Blue Bath's faux minarets hovered above. They were more stunning even than the mosques that adorned the lavishly illustrated manuscripts Teresa and the philologist had shared. The blue and gold tiles covering the Blue Bath's walls belonged to an age of peaceful exchanges between peoples of different faiths, languages, and ethnicities: Muslims, Christians, Armenians, Georgians, and Azeris. That era was long past, even if these monuments had the power to evoke nostalgia for times past.

Back in those days, when Tbilisi was still a crossroads for oriental civilizations, bathers cared only about having their bodies rubbed down in soap, of being cleansed from the impurities that had accumulated on their skin, so that they could return to the street, to selling and trading their merchandise with the other merchants of Old Tbilisi. Now, by contrast, Irakli, her self-appointed guide, couldn't refrain from making snide remarks about the recent influx of Africans and Iranians into Tbilisi, as if these foreigners posed a danger to the survival of the Georgian people. Every country has their flaws, Teresa reflected to herself, but how ironic that racism should flourish here, of all places, in Old Tbilisi, a city that had for so long been idealized as a place of tolerance, not least by Irakli himself.

Following closely behind Irakli, Teresa climbed the steps to Nariqala. The old fort was mostly in ruins now. Like so much of Tbilisi's past, although originally built by Georgians, who optimistically called it Shuristsikhe ("undefeatable fort"), Nariqala was soon taken over by the Umayyads, and then by the Mongols, who renamed it Nariqala ("little fort"), perhaps hoping to convey their majestic power through the

diminutive. When the Mongols left Georgia in the thirteenth century, the n intervening between *nari* and *qala* was obliterated. So it remained: Nariqala, one of the many words that entered the Georgian language from the east, with few Georgians conscious of its original meaning.

Teresa was exhausted by the time they had ascended half the stairs. She concealed her exhaustion by gulping down air. She wanted to go home. She wanted to lean into the pain of the philologist's revelation and his ensuing silence. How could she bear to look at another manuscript in the Sogdian script? How could she continue with her work, now that the philologist was gone from her life, now that his affiliation with another woman and his baby was public knowledge? Now that she could no longer willfully mistake their virtual intimacies for something more? As she was immersed in thinking of the merchants' script that she had deciphered together with the philologist, Teresa stumbled on a gold-plated tile that resembled the ones that covered the Blue Bath's facade. Irakli watched her bend down to pick it up.

"Keep it," he said. "It will bring you good luck."

Teresa smiled and put the tile in her purse.

They wandered down Leselidze Street in the direction of home. At that time in the early evening, Leselidze was bustling with expats and well-traveled Georgians. Almost everyone on the street spoke English. Only a few stray passers-by could be heard mumbling in Georgian or Russian. Irakli invited Teresa to stop at a restaurant called Soko (Mushroom). Soko was below the ground and insulated from the crowds. Inside it was cool and almost deserted, except for one college-aged foreigner huddled against the wall, slouching over his laptop, and two middle-aged Georgian women, who had come to chat about their husbands' love affairs.

Like a typical Georgian host, Irakli insisted on treating Teresa to all the varieties of *khachapuri* the restaurant had to offer: *ajaruli* (with an egg); *imeruli* (overflowing with cheese); *ossuri* (with potatoes); and *achma* (layered like a cake), *svanuri*, (for the meat eaters). He also ordered *lobio* (beans), *pkhali* (Georgian herbs), *badrijani* (eggplant with pomegranate seeds), and multiple plates of fresh bread and cheese. He offered wine, but she preferred lemonade with tarragon, a Georgian specialty.

Irakli liked to speak. Thankfully, he did not require that his auditor listen closely. Teresa's mind was on something—someone, rather—else. When she did pay attention, however, she learned a lot. Irakli spoke of every book he read as a child, of the paradoxes of growing up in the Soviet Union, where everything was forever until it was no more, where

literature was legislated *and* prohibited, suppressed *and* force-fed. The conversation turned to poetry. Irakli confessed to a preference for narrative, but said he admired those who could appreciate the beauty of verse.

As if on cue, Teresa recited every poem she knew from Russia's Silver Age, from Mandelstam and Akhmatova, all the way to Pasternak. As Irakli nodded vigorously, Teresa felt that her passion for the written word had been understood. Could the philologist have understood her love for verse? she wondered to herself. True, they had deciphered a script, and thereby creating a language together. Yet he had dropped her so easily, as if just by snapping his fingers, or swatting a fly. His dismissal made her feel like an insect. Was the mother of his child even literate in the many scripts they shared, let alone in the ones they deciphered?

"That's beautiful," Irakli said after a pause, then added, "As for me, I am a lover of prose."

Irakli then began to enumerate the socialist realist novels he read as a child, which bore titles like *Cement*, *The Quiet Don*, and *How the Steel was Tempered*. When he read these texts in class, they were taught to him as uncritical celebrations of the Soviet experiment, including collectivization (a political process that compelled the landowning class to give up their homes), communal apartments, and social engineering. But when he brought the novels home, to absorb by candlelight when the rest of the world was sleeping, Irakli discerned a different meaning in each text. In spite of their best intentions to toe the party line, each of these socialist realist authors portrayed collectivization and communalization as such painful experiences that it was impossible for Irakli to discern in these Soviet fictions the messages he had been schooled to believe in. The paradox, Irakli concluded, was not that so much terrible literature was produced in the Soviet Union, as that Soviet education was able to turn so many perfectly decent books into fodder for ideologies that the texts in question refused to accept.

When Teresa and Irakli left the restaurant, it was raining. Hard. They walked a few blocks before stopping beneath a stone entrance to a French Catholic Church. According to the plaque to the right of the entrance, the church had been erected in 1802, which meant in the very early years of Russian rule, before the colonial government had had time to set up offices. That the church appeared to be in perfect shape meant that someone was paying to have it refurbished. Georgia's visa-free regime was paying off, Teresa reflected.

Irakli loved to talk. Whether the subject was politics, the economy, or the future, he could go on forever, so long as the main topic of

conversation was Georgia. Teresa didn't mind Irakli's loquaciousness. To the contrary, she was grateful: it gave her an excuse for being silent. How I wish you were the philologist, she thought to herself. Now that the philologist turned out to be a husband as well as a father, now that there would be no more deciphering of Sogdian merchant scripts, he had been reduced in her imagination to a symbol of himself, a cipher for a profession, for a way of living with texts and a way of being textual. The philologist was a text, albeit a text she desired more passionately than any human. Notwithstanding his textual prodigiousness, the philologist lacked humanity. He was not someone who could love her or want her in the way she wanted him. And yet, although he was a phantom she had never met, Teresa wanted to be with him more than anyone else in the world. "How I wish you were the philologist I used to love," Teresa repeated to herself, as Irakli extemporized on Georgian history.

While she was still deeply immersed in thinking about the philologist, Teresa realized that her new companion shared a name with the second-to-last Georgian king, Irakli II. In the closing years of the eighteenth century, Irakli surrendered his country to Russia under great duress. Faced with an impossible choice, of witnessing his beloved Tbilisi ravaged along with the rest of Georgia by the Qajar ruler Agha Mahmed Khan or controlled by the Russians, King Irakli opted for the latter. Many Georgian poets have since reflected on his fatal mistake in anguished verse. The Romantic poet Nikoloz Baratashvili died shortly after composing his most famous monument to Georgia's tragic fate: *Bedi kartlisa*. After Irakli placed Georgia under Russia's protection in 1795, the country was ravaged to the ground by invading Qajars, just as he had feared but hoped to avoid through union with Russia. The colonial state had promised long in advance to come to Georgia's aid should the Qajars decide to invade, but the troops never materialized. Russian betrayal was to become a pattern in Georgian history, persisting into the present, and poisoning relations between the two countries.

The rain slowed their progress. Irakli continued narrating Georgia's past as they stood in front of the steel gates that faced the church. Women walked past, their black calico skirts drenched, the buckets they carried covered with wet cloth. Drops of water trickled from their heads to the ground. Irakli was moving backwards in time, bypassing the Safavids and the Mongols and approaching Georgia's medieval florescence. He stalled when he reached the reigns of David the Builder and Queen Tamar. Finally, Irakli reached the borderland between history and myth, and arrived at the legend of Medea. According to the Greek version of the myth, Medea was from Colchis, in western Georgia. To this day, many

Georgian girls are named in honor of the mysterious Georgian woman who killed her own sons, he noted, rather than have them live in shame with a father who betrayed their mother by marrying another woman.

“When you think about it, judging on purely human terms,” Irakli added, “she wasn’t such a great woman.”

“No,” Teresa agreed. “But the point isn’t whether she was good or bad. Her suffering is shared by all women.”

“You think you have something in common with a mother who killed her own sons?”

Teresa smiled. “I sympathize with all women driven out of their mind by jealousy.”

Irakli stared at her, confused. “I think Medea should have been willing to sacrifice her love for her children’s happiness.”

Teresa was not so sure. “It’s easy to relate to a woman who will do anything to get revenge.”

Irakli continued to stare. What was making her talk like this?

A long silence followed, during which the rain continued to pound on the metal grating overhead. Water flowed down the sidewalk. A young boy splashed in a puddle until his mother called his name, and pulled him by the hand.

“Irakli,” Teresa finally broke the silence. “Have you ever been in love?”

Irakli closed his eyes and smiled faintly. “Yes,” he said. “Once, a long time ago, I was in love with a girl. That was in 1991, right before the Soviet Union crashed. We struck bottom, lost all our money. Our currency was devalued. Most of my friends lost their jobs. Others never received their salaries because the companies they worked for went bankrupt. Many of my friends died of hunger, others of heartbreak. They felt they had no future, nothing left to live for. During those difficult years, that girl I loved had the chance to move to America. A relative invited her to stay. She left and never returned. I never saw her again.”

“Did she love you?” asked Teresa.

“Why do you ask?”

Teresa was still thinking about the philologist. She was measuring Irakli’s disappointment in love against her own recent disaster. Surely the philologist never loved her. Did he even care for her at all? Would he have abandoned her as had Irakli’s beloved, under similar circumstances?

“I don’t know,” Teresa said. “I was just wondering.”

Without answering her question, Irakli continued, “I made a choice after she left for America. I promised myself that I would devote my life to helping my mother. She needed me more at that time than any other

woman. Ever since she left, my mother and I have struggled to survive the collapse of the Soviet Union. Only in the last few years have we managed to make a comfortable life that matched our standard of living during the Soviet period. All those years, my mother needed me to work, but most of all she needed me to protect her. She doesn't need me so much now. But old habits die hard. I've given up on the other kind of happiness I dreamed about before the Soviet Union fell."

Teresa looked at Irakli. She felt that she was seeing him for the first time. With the sting of the philologist's abandonment still fresh in her memory, still etched onto her body, Irakli's words could have been her own.

"We've both given up on finding a partner," she said quietly. "Do you know why birth rates are so low among educated people? Because the more a person learns, the less a person believes in the future. To have children, you have to believe in the future."

Irakli stared back, unsure how to respond. The rain had stopped, but they lingered in front of the gate, lost in reflection.

Irakli was the first to break the silence. "Don't mistake me for my namesake," he finally said. "King Irakli should never have surrendered his country to Russia. He had no right to sacrifice the lives of others to protect himself. He should have been willing to die for his country."

"Maybe he didn't know what he was doing," Teresa said.

"Maybe not. But that was the effect."

"It isn't fair to judge people by the effects of their choices, when they can't know what will result."

Irakli didn't respond. "We'd better set off on our way home," he said. He reached for her hand. Without stopping to think about what she was doing, and with her mind still on the philologist, Teresa placed her hand in his.

"You've sacrificed everything, Irakli," Teresa said on the way home. "Do you have any regrets?"

Irakli didn't answer. For once it was Teresa who was the talkative one, and Irakli who remained silent.

They walked down streets haunted by Soviet legacies. Iashvilis Kucha. Besikis Kucha. Griboedovis Kucha. Esenin's Kucha. Each of these streets was named in honor of one of the many poets who had blessed Tbilisi with his presence: Iashvili, Besiki, Griboedov, and Esenin. So many poets had walked these streets shortly before being arrested and carted off to the GULAGs, or worse, tortured and killed. So many poets had sacrificed everything in order to practice their art, to write poems they believed in, and to say what they actually thought. Even given their

willingness to sacrifice, the price they paid was probably more than they had bargained for.

They passed a plaque for Paolo Iashvili, who committed suicide in 1937, and then for Iashvili's best friend Titsian Tabidze, executed the same year, after having been accused of spying for the United States of America. Shortly before he was killed, Titsian cleverly answered the interrogators' demand that he reveal the names of his collaborators by saying he had collaborated with Besiki. He did not tell the interrogators that Besiki was a seventeenth-century Georgian poet, the last great Persianate voice in a world that had first been overpowered by European, and then by Soviet, laws. The interrogators scoured Tbilisi in search of the spy whom the accused poet had identified as Besiki, but no one could tell them where he lived. Both poets, Iashvili and Tabidze, died at the height of their powers.

"If Medea was wrong to sacrifice her sons, and Irakli was wrong to sacrifice his country, then when is it ever okay to do something for yourself?" Teresa asked.

"It's okay to do something for yourself when no one else will be hurt, and when all the consequences of what you did will be erased the next day," Irakli answered. Teresa wondered to herself if it would ever be possible to join her body with the philologist while abiding by Irakli's strict terms.

Soon they arrived at the shared courtyard of the apartment where Teresa had been staying for the past month. It fronted a building on Griboevdov Street adjacent to Tbilisi's Music Conservatory that had been converted from a palatial residency built by a colonial administrator soon after the Russian annexation of Georgia in 1801 into a communal apartment housing twenty families. By that time, decades after the end of Soviet-mandated housing, the number of families living there had dwindled to ten. The building's other residents had either died or immigrated to America.

Irakli invited Teresa inside his portion of the communal apartment, on the side of the courtyard opposite her apartment. Beatrice had gone to the countryside with her niece, so the apartment was, for a rare evening, empty of every other human inhabitant.

They sat together over tea for a few minutes. It did not take long before conversation yielded to another kind of proximity. His hands lingering on her knee, he kissed her. She did not resist.

"Is this okay?" Teresa asked. "Will your mother be upset if she finds out?"

"No one will ever know," Irakli smiled.

Teresa then recalled Beatrice's wink on Easter evening as she thrust a second egg into her hand. She realized that Beatrice might in fact have been hoping even then that matters between her and her son would take the current course.

When their bodies joined, the feeling was somehow predictable to Teresa, but also unexpected. Who would have thought that making love could be so easy, so free of ulterior motives, so independent of second guesses, so much about the present?

Having never met the philologist, Teresa lacked a precise sense of his physical appearance. That made it all the easier for her to merge his body with Irakli's thin frame, and he lay in bed next to her.

Irakli was a nice man, she decided. A bit loquacious, but quite smart, and a sensitive reader of literature. He lacked the philologist's genius for deciphering scripts, but he knew Chekhov, Dostoevsky, and Flaubert. He couldn't recite poetry, but he could listen to it, which was almost as important. He understood the ironies of existence. He could resist Soviet dogma. And most important of all, he understood the meaning of sacrifice. Unlike the king after whom he was named, Irakli would not betray his family for the sake of personal gain. He had given up on women to help his mother survive. For that last feat of generosity, Teresa could have fallen in love with him in other circumstances. But, circumstances being what they were, she did not allow herself to speculate beyond the present.

Teresa kissed every corner of Irakli's body, every crevice, contour, and hole. The spidery hair on his legs that extended in columns all the way to his toes was particularly alluring. Did the philologist have black hair like that, she wondered? Teresa started by imagining that it was the philologist whose body she was kissing, and that the philologist was kissing her back. Eventually, however, the philologist vanished from her consciousness. She became one with her body, until, somewhat suddenly, her body joined with Irakli's. For a brief five minutes, Teresa was utterly a part of Irakli and utterly alone. The philologist was gone. He was on another planet, along with his wife and newborn baby. They fell asleep, hand in hand, on opposite sides of the bed.

Teresa awoke early the next morning. Her return flight for America was scheduled to depart later that day. Time to pack. Irakli was deep in sleep, and she did not want to wake him, did not want to make him dwell on the consequences of what their bodies had done to each other. At least she had forgotten, temporarily, about the philologist and his Sogdian merchant scripts. Now Teresa felt ready to return to the scripts they had left undeciphered, even if it meant returning alone. She would publish the results of their virtual exchanges, crediting the philologist where credit

was due, but otherwise honoring his peaceful exit from her life. These publications would launch her future, and perhaps win her international fame. She would be grateful to the philologist for helping to launch her career, and would remember fondly the words they exchanged, even though she could not help wishing that things had turned out differently, that their virtual intimacies had been more than purely virtual.

Teresa kissed Irakli's forehead and tiptoed towards the door. He was still sleeping. As soon as she reached the kitchen, she opened her purse and fished out the gold-plated tile that had fallen from the faux minarets fronting Old Tbilisi's Blue Bath. She broke the tile in half against the rim of the table, placed one half back in her purse, and left the other on the table. Goodbye, Georgia, she thought to herself. You are receding to the world of myth, of dream, to the world of Sogdian merchant scripts, to which I will only return in my memory. Then she gently pried open the door and tiptoed out. Irakli continued to snore.