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Mints, by Ataqam, translated from Azerbaijani

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Ataqam is the pen name of Azerbaijani author Azer Hasanli. He wrote *Mints* in 1999 and published it in a collection of his short stories entitled *The Winged Bridge (Qanadlı körpü)*. *Mints* is set in two locations: a village in the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan, and a camp for people displaced from this region when much of it was occupied by Armenian forces in the early 1990s. The story sits in an Azerbaijani literary tradition of focusing on the human impact of a situation rather than its causes.

I chose the story *Mints* for this special issue of *The AALITRA Review* as it presents challenges frequently encountered by those working from less translated languages, as well as problems familiar to all literary translators. In this commentary I look at some of these challenges and how I dealt with them. My overall approach to translating *Mints* was to seek to be faithful to the text, while creating an English equivalent that reads well and reflects the atmosphere and tone of the original.

One challenge that is more marked when working from a less frequently translated language has to do with cultural background. The culture to which the language belongs is usually less well known, or maybe hardly known at all, to English-speaking readers. *Mints* opens with the narrator arriving at a refugee camp. There is no mention of where the refugees have come from, but any Azerbaijani reader would know that they have fled the conflict in Karabakh. Does the English-speaking reader need to know this? I am not sure, as the story stands on its own. I mention the Karabakh war in my introduction, however, as the journal asked contributors to put their translations into context.

An issue closely linked to cultural background is the use of footnotes, anathema to many publishers. As a reader I rather enjoy judiciously chosen footnotes, so have included three. The first concerns the Willys jeep. It is so much part of Uncle Osman's identity that I thought it worth giving an explanation (I should add that author Ataqam added explanatory notes to the text for me, so it was much easier to write the footnotes than it might otherwise have been). However, not wanting to make the text seem too culturally complex and, therefore, potentially off-putting, I did not add a footnote four paragraphs later to explain the term "trophy" used to describe the Willys. To readers from Azerbaijan and the former Soviet Union as a whole, it clearly echoes the popular "trophy films" seized from Germany by the Red Army.

I added the next footnote on Nizami's *Eskander-name* or *Tale of Alexander the Great* for readers particularly interested in language. The quotation in the original *Mints* is an Azerbaijani translation and uses the Azerbaijani version of Alexander's name, İskəndər (Iskandar). I used the English Alexander so that readers would know who is being referred to without having to look at the footnote. The lines have both rhythm and rhyme in the Azerbaijani, but unfortunately I could create only limited rhythm in my translation.

The final footnote gives a brief description of a balaban. I chose not to refer to it in the text as a clarinet, as this would deprive the instrument of some of its distinctive features. I opted against a footnote on the dervish though, as the story makes clear that he is someone who travels from place to place and gives moral teaching.

Translators from Turkic languages frequently face the challenge of long, complex sentences. Though *Mints* is written in a relatively simple style, it does have some longer sentences. For example, in the opening paragraph, I broke a single sentence into four:

Everywhere were shabby tents, countless shelters draped in threadbare kilims and faded carpet runners. They stood in random rows, like headstones in a Muslim cemetery. Young women waited in line at the water tanker, plastic buckets in their hands. Subdued men, shoulders hunched and arms folded, stood in silence beneath a large awning, sunlight filtering through the holes.

The original Azerbaijani sentence has the effect of conveying almost all at once the different elements that make up the scene.

Another issue faced by all literary translators is the use of dialect and regional words. I thought it would sound odd to use English dialect in the story's context, so where possible I tried to use more colloquial words, such as "lug" rather than "carry" for the Azerbaijani *hərləmək*. "I had entered year five and would lug about with me all the books our teacher had assigned us for the summer holidays". I could not always find a colloquial way of rendering these dialect words, though. For example, I gave a straightforward translation of *Əl-qolunu oynadıb nə haqdasə vərəvurd eləyirdi*, "waving his hands in the air as he talked to himself".

The Azerbaijani words *dayı* and *əmi* also needed special treatment. Their direct translation, "maternal uncle" and "paternal uncle", can work well in other contexts, but here the words are used as a form of address. I opted for "uncle" and "great-uncle" to differentiate between them, but still wonder if there is a better solution. My English version reads, "The village children called sweet-tongued men like Osman Qaramanlı 'uncle', and used 'great-uncle' for angry, bitter men like Restless Maharram...".

I will finish my commentary by highlighting a challenge that must be common to many who work from languages less frequently translated into English: a lack of dictionaries and online resources. There is a good, but far from comprehensive, Azerbaijani-English dictionary in the Latin script, and I well remember my delight as a struggling learner when it was published in 1998. The dictionary forms the basis of the *azerdict.com* online resource, which includes users' additions of varying accuracy. I am very grateful to another site too – *obastan.com* – which pulls together all the Azerbaijani dictionary resources, but even the main Azerbaijani dictionaries are not comprehensive. This did not pose too great a challenge in terms of comprehension when working on *Mints*, as author Atağam provided explanations of dialect and other words. However, I like to look up words that I know in dictionaries, often online, in the hunt for the translation that hits the spot. I may find exactly what I am looking for, but often the act of browsing is enough for the right translation to come to me. To make up for the lack of Azerbaijani-English resources, I sometimes took the Russian translation of an Azerbaijani word or phrase and looked it up in English on the site *multitran.ru* which has many fine suggestions from Russian translators.

I should add in explanation (maybe this is a rather long footnote) that the language of what is now the Azerbaijan Republic has been written in three different alphabets over the past century: in modified versions of the Arabic script, the Latin script and the Cyrillic script. The use of the Latin alphabet was reimposed in 2001. A consequence of all these changes is the loss of the older corpus, made much worse during the Soviet anti-religion drive when many books written in the Arabic script were destroyed, sometimes in the mistaken belief that they were religious texts or copies of the Koran. Iran's large ethnic Azerbaijani minority still uses the Arabic script, although the government discourages the use of Azerbaijani as a literary language.

Bibliography

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**Ataqam - Nanəli konfet
(hekayə)**

Qaçqın düşərgəsi yoluna burulub bir anlıq ayaq saxladım. Gördüyüm mənzərəni canıma hopdurmaq istəyirdim: Yan-yərəsi nımdaş çadırlar, süzölmüş palazlar, rəngi qaçmış layçalarla örtölmüş, müsəlman qəbiristanlığının başdaşları kimi baysaq sıralanmış saysız alaçıqlar, əllərində plastik vedrələr su maşınının yanına düzölüb növbəsni gözləyən qız-gəlinlər, dəlmə-deşiyindən gün şüaları süzölən talvarın altında dinməz, əlləri qoynunda, boynubükük durmuş kişilər...

Havada bir azot atomu da tərənmiydi. Addım atdıqca qalın toz qalxıb havadaca asılı qalırdı.

Osman dayını şəkildə necə görmüşdüm, elə də qarşımdaydı. Komasının kölgəsində, “Villis”indən qalan şirmayı halqalarla bəzədiyi sükanı sürtüb təmizləyirdi. Tez-tez cibindən kirli dəsmalını çıxarıb alnından gözünə axan təri silirdi.

Yaxınlaşdım. Sükanı sol qoluna keçirdi, sağ əlini gözünün üstünə günlükləyib mənə xeyli baxdı. Tanımadı. Qalın eynəyini silib bir də baxdı...

Osman dayı ilə çoxdan dostlaşmışdım – düz qırx il qabaq...

Kənddə uşaqlar qaramanlı Osman kimi şirindil kişilərə “dayı”, Quşdan Məhərrəm kimi, nə bilim, Sərəncamın əri Abdal Əvəz kimi acıdıl, əzazil kişilərə “əmi” deyirdi. Niyəsini bilmirdik, elə eşitmişdik, elə də deyirdik.

Osman dayı dədəsindənqalma iki cöngəni, bir qısır düyəni, on iki keçini əldən-ələ keçmiş yağmal “Villis”ə dəyişmişdi.

Mints – by Ataqam

**Translated by Anne Thompson-
Ahmadova**

I turned onto the refugee camp road and paused for a moment to take in the scene before me. Everywhere were shabby tents, countless shelters draped in threadbare kilims and faded carpet runners. They stood in random rows, like headstones in a Muslim cemetery. Young women waited in line at the water tanker, plastic buckets in their hands. Subdued men, shoulders hunched, arms folded, stood in silence beneath a large awning, sunlight filtering through the holes.

Not an atom of nitrogen stirred. My footsteps kicked up a thick cloud of dust which remained suspended in the air.

Uncle Osman looked just as I had pictured him. He was standing in the shade of his hut, polishing the steering wheel decorated with mother-of-pearl rings, all he had left of his Willys jeep¹. Sweat trickled into his eyes, so he kept taking a grubby handkerchief from his pocket to wipe his forehead.

I walked towards him. Shading his eyes with his right hand, he stared at me, but didn't recognize me. He cleaned his thick spectacles and looked at me again.

Uncle Osman and I had become friends a long time ago—forty years to be precise...

The village children called sweet-tongued men like Osman Qaramanlı “uncle”, and used “great-uncle” for angry, bitter men like Restless Maharram, or, let's say, Serenjam's husband Abdal Avaz. We didn't know why. We'd heard other people doing it so we did it too.

Uncle Osman had inherited two young bulls, a heifer and twelve goats from his father, and he swapped them all for the Willys trophy.

¹ During World War II, the USA gave the Soviet Union a variety of vehicles, including the very first jeep, the Willys, under the Lend-Lease programme. Most of the vehicles were not returned after the war and were sold illegally into private hands. Uncle Osman's Willys is one of these vehicles.

“Villis”inə qoşqu qoşub dağ kəndlərində qənd-çay, şirniyat, ətir, qab-qaçaq, uşaq paltarları satardı. Qoşquya “kəcavə” deyərdi. Ərzağı, pal-paltarları Bəkir kişinin dükanından nisyə götürərdi.

Dağ kəndlərində müəllimlərdən, tibb işçilərindən savayı az adamın əlində nağd pul olurdu. Osman kişi nisyə aldığı malın çoxunu elə nisyə də verərdi. Evinə dönəndə maşınını kəndin başındakı kəhrizin üstündə saxlayıb əl-ayağını yuyar, gülpəmbəli qırmızı Çin termosundan çay süzüb nisyə dəftərinin üzünü ağlamaya köçürərdi.

Dəftəri hamıdan gizlədərdi. Bir dəfə dəftəri “Villis”in oturacağına açıq qalmışdı. Boylandım, dəftərdəki yazılardan heç nə anlamadım: üçbucaq, ortasından qoşa xətt çəkilmiş dördbucaq, buynuz, parabüzənə oxşar xırda dairələr...

Osman dayı məktəb oxumamışdı, hamının bildiyi hərflərlə yazmırdı, özü üçün ayrı yazı sistemi qurmuşdu.

Onu bir dəfə pəncərədən “Əlifba” öyrənən birincilərin sinif otağına kədərlə baxıb udqunduğunu görmüşdüm.

Osman dayı ilə bağlı belə bir pıçı eşitmişdim: Deyirdilər ki, mayın ortasından düz sentyabrın axırına qədər bazar günləri kəhrizə kişi xeylağı getməzmiş, çünki qızlar-gəlinlər yay odunu canlarından çıxarmaq üçün lütlənib kəhrizdə çimərmişlər. İyirmi beş il qabaq - Osmanla Səməndər onbeşlərinin içində olanda ikisi də Qırımızısaqqal Hətəmin nəvəsi Bəsirəti istəyirmişlər. Bəsirətin meyli Səməndərə imiş. Bir gün Osman xəlvətcə Cin Süleymanın kəhrizin dibindəki bağında ağaca çıxıb Bəsirətin çimməsinə baxıbmiş. Ertəsi gün Osman Bəsirətlə qarşılaşanda belə deyibmiş: “Sağ döşündəki qoşa xala canım qurban, mələyim!”

Bəsirət məsələni başa düşər, Səməndərə deyər, Səməndər də əmisi uşaqları ilə Osmanı təklidə tutub dartıb kəhrizə aparar, başını kəhrizin nəm daşlarına döyərlər. Ovaxtdan Osmanın başı pozular. Qız-gəlin də elə o vaxtdan kəhrizdə çimməyi tərgidər.

He would hook up a trailer to the jeep and sell sugar, sweets, perfume, pots and pans, and children’s clothes in the mountain villages. He called the trailer a howdah. He would buy the food and clothes on tick from Bakir’s shop.

Few people in the mountain villages had cash, only the teachers and medical workers, so many of the goods he had bought on tick Osman sold on tick too. On his way home he would stop the jeep at the big spring above the village, wash his hands and feet, pour himself some tea from the rose red Chinese thermos and make a clean copy of the loans in his credit book.

He hid the book from everyone. Once, he left it open on the seat of the jeep. I had a look but couldn’t understand anything: a triangle, a square with two lines drawn through it, horns, small circles that looked like ladybirds.

Uncle Osman hadn’t gone to school. Rather than writing in the letters that everyone knew, he created his own writing system.

Once I saw him looking hungrily through the window as a reception class learnt their ABC.

I heard a rumour about Uncle Osman. The story was that on Sundays from the middle of May to the end of September the men and boys didn’t go to the spring, because the girls and young women would bathe nude there to cool off from the summer heat. Twenty-five years earlier—when Osman and Samandar were fifteen, they had both liked Red-Bearded Hatam’s granddaughter Basirat. Basirat’s preference was for Samandar. One day Osman climbed a tree in Hotheaded Suleyman’s garden below the spring and watched Basirat bathing. When he saw Basirat the next day, Osman said, ‘I’d die for that beauty spot on your left breast, my angel!’

Basirat realized what had happened and told Samandar. Samandar and his cousins caught Osman on his own, took him to the spring and beat his head against the wet stones. Osman was never quite right after that. The girls stopped bathing in the spring too.

Deyirlər, nə Bəsirətin, nə də Səməndərin taleyi gətirər. Bəsirəti kəndə biçinə gələn kombaynçı ilə saman tayasında eşdikləri kalafada çılpaq tutarlar. Səməndər kombaynçının qarnını yaba ilə deşər, gedib girər qazamata, vərəmləyib iki ildən sonra elə orda ölür. Bəsirət dədəsi evinə qapanar, evdən çölə yarasa kimi ancaq gecələr çıxar.

Osman da o hədsədən sonra evlənməyəcəyinə and içər. (Bəsirət dədəsi evinə qapananda Osmanın niyə gedib onu qaranlıqdan çıxarmamasını anlamaq üçün hələ kal idim).

Hə, yalan-gerçək, bunu da xıslınlaşdırdılar ki, o əhvalatın üstündən illər keçəndən sonra, guya, Osman alverə getdiyi dağ kəndlərinin birindəki zirvədə sal daşları üst-üstə qalaqlayıb qız düzəldib, daşları xımlayıb-gülxətmiləyib, başdakı daşa Bəsirətin yaylığına oxşar yaylıq bağlayıb daş sevgilisinin başına dolana-dolana üz-gözündən öpürmüş.

Beşinci sinifə keçmişdim. Yay tətlinə müəllim evə çoxlu kitab tapşırırmışdı. Kitablari özümlə hərləyirdim.

--- Onların hamısını oxumusan? – Osman dayı dolu səhənglərimi qatırın üstünə aşırıb başı ilə dəri heybəyə yığdığım kitablari göstərdi.

--- Yox, oxumalıyam.

--- Nağıldı?

--- Nağıl da var, şeir də, əfsanə də.

--- Əfsanə nədi?

--- Yalançı nağıl.

Osman dayı çənəsini aşağı əyib gözlərini iri açdı, təəccüblə mənə baxdı:

--- Yalançı nağıl?! - Birini danışa bilərsən?

Evə getməliydim. Nənəm tapşırırmışdı ki, Soltanlıdan qohumlar gələcək, samovara tökməyə su yoxdu, yolda-rizdə avaralanmayım, amma Osman dayı səhənglərimə kömək eləmişdi, sözünü yerə salmaq ayıbıma gəldi. Həm də, düzü, hərdən öz-özünə nə dildəsə mahnı oxuyurdu, səsi çatmayanda üzünə şillə vurub “düz oxu,

They say that things didn't work out for Basirat or Samandar. Basirat and a combine driver visiting for the harvest were caught naked in a haystack. Samandar ran the combine driver through with a pitchfork. He went to prison, caught TB and died there two years later. Basirat shut herself away in her father's house, only going outdoors at night like a bat.

After this Osman vowed never to marry. (I was too callow to understand why Osman didn't try to take Basirat from her father's house in the dead of night.)

True or not, the gossips also said that years later, up near one of the villages where he sold his wares, Osman built a pile of large flat stones in the shape of a girl. He coloured the stones with henna and mallow and tied a shawl like Basirat's around the top stone. Osman would fuss over his stone beloved, kissing her eyes and lips.

I had entered year five and would lug about with me a pile of books our teacher had assigned us for the summer holidays.

Uncle Osman hung my copper pitchers of water on the mule and nodded at the leather saddlebag of books. “Have you read all those?”

“No, I've got to read them.”

“Are they stories?”

“There are stories, poems and legends.”

“What are legends?”

“Stories that aren't true.”

Uncle Osman's jaw dropped and he stared at me, round-eyed.

“Stories that aren't true? Can you tell me one?”

I had to go home. Grandma had sent me to fetch water for the samovar as our relatives were coming from Soltanli. I wasn't to dawdle on the way, but Uncle Osman had helped me with the water pitchers and I was embarrassed not to return the favour. And to be honest I was rather scared of him, as he would sing to himself all the time in a language I didn't know and when he hit a wrong note, he would slap

Osman!” qışqırırdı deyə, ondan bir az üşənirdim.

Kitabı açıb qoca dərviş əfsanəsini oxudum. “Kəndə bir dərviş gəlir...” Osman dayı tez-tez məni saxlayır, sual verirdi: “Saçı uzun idi?” Kitabda yazılmasa da, “hə, uzun idi, dabanına çatırdı” deyib əfsanədəki dərvişi Osman dayının xəyalındakı dərvişə oxşadırdım.

Suallar artırdı. “Dərvişin uşaqlara danışdığı nağıl haqda da yazılıb orda?” “Yox, yazılmayıb” “Dərviş uşaqlara niyə sınağan oyuncaqlar bağışlayırmış?” “Osman dayı, dayan, oxuyum, axırda hamısı yazılıb”

Əfsanənin sonluğunu – camaatın dərvişi döydüyü yeri oxuyanda Osman dayının gözü doldu. Abzası mənə bir neçə dəfə oxutdurdu, tam yadında qalana qədər dilinin altında təkrarladı: “Dərviş hər qarıya bir gil lövhə qoyub yoxa çıxmışdı. Lövhədə bunlar yazılmışdı: Vaxt gələcək, sizin uşaqlarınıza kimisə ürəyini bağışlayacaq. Balalarınızı indidən vərmiş elətdirirəm ki, o vaxt ehtiyatlı davranınlar, dünyanın ən sınağan, həssas oyuncağını – ürəyi sındırmasınlar”.

Osman dayı əlini cibinə atdı, bir ovuc konfet çıxarıb mənə uzatdı. Konfetləri qapıb cibimə doldurdum. Tez kağızını soyub birini ağzıma atdım. Nənəli konfet! Necə də dadlı idi!

Beləcə, Osman dayı ilə dostlaşdıq.

Bir neçə gün sonra Malyatan təpəsinin ətəyindəki yovşanlıqda çəyirtkə tutub hinduşkalara yedirdiyim yerdə Osman dayı “Villis”ini düz yanımda saxladı.

--- Kitabların hamısını oxudun?

--- Yox hələ, Osman dayı, birini bitirmişəm, indi o birini oxuyuram.

--- O nədəndi?

--- Şeirdi. Yaman uzundu, - şikayətləndim, - amma asan yadda qalır.

himself across the face shouting “Sing properly, Osman!”

I opened a book and read the legend of the old dervish. “A dervish came to the village...” Uncle Osman kept stopping me with his questions: “Did he have long hair?” Though it wasn’t mentioned in the book, I said, “Yes, long, down to his ankles.” I painted the dervish that Uncle Osman imagined.

The questions came thick and fast. “Does it talk about the story that the dervish told the children?”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“Why did the dervish give the children such delicate toys?”

“Hold on, Uncle Osman, I’m reading the story. It’s all written here.”

When I came to the end of the legend and read about the people beating up the dervish, Uncle Osman’s eyes welled with tears. He made me read this paragraph several times until he knew it off by heart: “The dervish placed a clay tablet at every door, then disappeared. Each tablet bore the words: One day someone will give their heart to your child. I have taught them to behave with care when that day comes, lest they break the most fragile, vulnerable plaything in the world—the heart.”

Uncle Osman pulled a fistful of sweets from his pocket and offered them to me. Grabbing the sweets, I stuffed them into my pocket. I quickly unwrapped one and popped it in my mouth. It was a mint! And it was so good!

That’s how Uncle Osman and I became friends.

A few days later I caught some crickets in the wormwood patch at the bottom of Malyatan hill and was feeding them to the turkeys when Uncle Osman pulled up right next to me in his Willys.

“Have you read all the books?”

“Not yet, Uncle Osman. I’ve finished one of them and am on the next now.”

“What’s it about?”

“It’s a really long poem,” I complained, “but easy to remember.”

Osman dayının xahişini gözləməyib əzbərlədiyim parçanı oxudum: “Keçmiş zamanda, Yunanıstanda, İskəndər adlı..” “Bir şah yaşarmış, Buynuzu varmış” yerində içini çəkdi. Maşından düşdü. Həmişə bərk təəccüblənəndə etdiyi kimi, çənəsini sinəsinə yapışdırıb gözlərini bərəltdi:

--- Nə təhər!? Buynuzu varmış?! Adamın?
--- Adam deyil, Osman dayı, İskəndərdir, -
özümü çoxbilmiş göstərdim.

“İskəndərin buynuzu var, buynuzu” misrasını deyəndə, Osman dayı qeyri-ixtiyari hər iki əlinin şəhadət barmağını başına qaldırıb özünə buynuz qoydu və ləzzətli güldü. Cibindən bir neçə nanəli konfet çıxarıb ovcuma qoydu.

On gün sonra Osman dayını Suray xalanın qızı Gülsabahın toyunda gördüm. Həyətdəki tut ağacına söykənmişdi. Əl-qolunu oynadıb nə haqdasə vərəvurd eləyirdi. Yaxınlaşıb salam verdim. Məni görəndə kimi üzü güldü. Əlimi sıxıb özünə tərəf çəkdi. Araq iyi burnumu çimçəşdirdi.

-- O şeir nə təhər idi? Onu bir də de, başam.

Əlimi əlindən qoparıb bir az aralandım. Şeiri astadan, eləcə, Osman dayının eşidəcəyi səslə dedim. “İskəndərin buynuzu var, buynuzu” yerində məni saxladı, yanbızları ilə təkən verib tutdan aralandı, çovustanın ağzındakı kətli gətirib qabağıma qoydu.

--- Başam, mən ölüm, çıx bu stulun üstünə, o yerin bir də bərkədən de.

Kətilin üstünə çıxsaydım, camaatın diqqətini çəkəcəkdim. Qorxurdum ki, luğaz eləyib şəbədə qoşalar. Osman dayı tərəddüd elədiyimi görüb, arıq boğazının dərisini hulqumundan çənəsinin ucuna qədər çəkdi, elə boğazı çəkili, başını göyərçin udan qutan quşu kimi yeyin-yeyin sağa-sola döndərib məni kətilə çıxartmaq üçün hansı tanrıya and

Without waiting to be asked, I recited an excerpt I'd memorized.

There was a king who lived in Greece.
Alexander was his name,
And on his head grew horns, horns,
And on his head grew horns.²

Uncle Osman breathed in sharply and jumped down from his jeep. As always when he was surprised, his jaw dropped to his chest and his eyes grew round.

“How come? On his head grew horns? Wasn't he a man?”

“No, he wasn't, Uncle Osman. He was Alexander,” I said, pretending to be knowledgeable.

“And on Alexander's head grew horns, horns.” As he repeated the line, Uncle Osman automatically put his index fingers to his head to make horns, and laughed in delight. He took a few mints from his pocket and put them in my hand.

Ten days later I saw Uncle Osman at my cousin Gulsabah's wedding. He was leaning against the mulberry tree in Aunt Suray's yard, waving his hands in the air as he talked to himself. I went up and said hello. He laughed when he saw me, pressed my hand and pulled me towards him. I screwed up my nose at the smell of vodka.

“How did that poem go? Tell me again, my dear friend.”

I snatched my hand away and stepped back. I recited the poem softly but enough for Uncle Osman to hear. He stopped me when I got to “And on Alexander's head grew horns, horns”. He pushed himself away from the mulberry tree with his bottom and took a stool from the doorway of the bread oven hut.

Putting the stool in front of me, he said, “My dear friend, I beg you, get onto this and speak up.”

If I climbed onto the stool, I would attract attention, and I was afraid of being mocked and sneered at. Seeing my hesitation, Uncle Osman quickly looked left and right, stretching the skin of his thin throat to the point

² These lines are from 12th century poet Nizami Ganjavi's epic poem in Persian about Alexander the Great, *The Book of Alexander (Eskandar-Nameh)*.

verəcəyini dalaq kələfində aradı və dizlərini azacıq qatlayıb, çöməli yalvardı:

--- Səni Bəsirətin canı, çıx.

Bəsirəti heç vaxt görməmişdim; o, mən doğulmazdan qabaq qaranlığa gömülmüşdü, amma indi - sərxoş Osman dayı dilinin qaytanını açıb canının gözündə öldürdüyü Bəsirətin adını çəkməklə mənə xırxalamışdı. Yan-yörəyə boylandım. Xurşud toy mağarında yaşlı balabana dəm vermişdi. Camaat əlində işini yarımçıq qoyub onun təzə qoşduğu yanıqlı “Qarabörə” havasını yaxından dinləməyə axışdı.

Kətilin üstünə çıxdım. “İskəndərin buynuzu var, buynuzu...”

Ləzzətdən gözləri parıldayan, ağız qulağının dibinə getmiş Osman dayı əllərini əvvəl başına aparıb qoşa buynuz göstərdi, sonra da cibindən bir ovuc nənəli konfet çıxarıb mənə uzatdı.

Yenə arzuma çatmışdım. Nənəli konfetləri sümürdükcə özümü dünyanın ən xoşbəxt adamı sanırdım.

O nənəli konfetin eşqinə harda Osman dayını görürdüm, özümü gözünə soxurdum.

Osman dayı da mənə harda görürdü, tələsirdisə, əlini başına aparıb buynuz göstərirdi, tələsməyəndə, maşını saxlayır, alnımdan öpür, daş olsun, kötük olsun, hündür bir yerə çıxmağı xahiş eləyib o şeiri bir də dedirtdirir, nənəli konfet payımı verib yola salırdı.

Aradan uzun illər keçdi. Biz şəhərə köçdük. Kəndə yolum az-az düşdü. Gedəndə də elə atüstü gedib qayıdırdım, Osman dayı əksərən kəcavə qoşduğu “Villis”i ilə dağ kəndlərində alverdə olduğundan, görüşə bilmirdim.

of his chin, like a pelican swallowing a dove. He was wondering which deity he should call upon to get me onto the stool. Almost crouching before me, he begged, “Get up on it, for the sake of Basirat’s soul.”

I’d never seen Basirat; she had been lost in darkness before I was born. But now drink had loosened Uncle Osman’s tongue. It was as though he had grabbed me by the throat by swearing on the life of his beloved Basirat. I looked around. In the wedding marquee Khurshud was playing the mourning balaban³ with passion. The guests were stopping what they were doing and flocking to listen to him play the plaintive air Qarabora.

I climbed onto the stool. “On Alexander’s head grew horns, horns...”

Eyes shining with pleasure, his smile stretching from ear to ear, Uncle Osman put his hands to the side of his head in the shape of horns, then took a handful of mints from his pocket and gave them to me.

I had achieved my heart’s desire again. As I sucked the mints, I thought myself the happiest person in the world.

Whenever I saw Uncle Osman, I would make sure he saw me.

And whenever Uncle Osman saw me, if he was in a hurry he would make the shape of horns on the side of his head, and if he wasn’t in a hurry, he would stop his jeep, kiss me on the forehead, ask me to stand on something—a rock or a tree stump—and recite the poem again. He would give me my portion of mints and be on his way.

Many years had passed since then. We had moved to the city and I didn’t often find myself in the village. When I did go, I would make a flying visit just for a day. I didn’t see Uncle Osman as he would be up in the mountain villages plying his wares from the Willys howdah.

³ The *balaban* is a traditional wind instrument, similar to a clarinet. It became known as the “mourning balaban” as it was played at burials.

İndi budur, əlini gözünə günlükləyib mənə baxan səksən yaşlı Osman dayı qarşımdaydı; sümükləri quruyub boyunu kiçiltmişdi. Mənə altdan yuxarı baxırdı. Eynəyinin şüşəsini kirli dəsmalıyla silib gözünə taxır, yenidən çıxarır, şüşələrə hovxurub bir də silir, təzədən gözünə taxır, əli ilə eynəyi irəli-geri aparır, mənim kim olduğumu anlamağa çalışırdı.

İki addımlıqda – Osman dayının komasının arxasında xeyli hörgü daşı qalaqlanmışdı. Qalaqdan iki daş götürüb Osman dayının qarşısında yerə atdım, hər ayağımı bir daşın üstünə qoydum, yaxşı eşitsin deyə hündür səslə bizim dostluq himnimizi aram-aram deməyə başladım: “Keçmiş zamanda, Yunanıstanda...”

Osman dayının sifəti dəyişdi: qırış yanaqları qarmon körüyü kimi qulaqlarına tərəf dartıldı, gözləri irilənib eynəyinin şüşələri boyda oldu, ağızı yavaş-yavaş aralandı, aşağı damağında səksən ilə sinə gərmiş sonuncu iki dişi göründü.

“İskəndərin buynuzu var, buynuzu” yerində dodaqlarını tərpedib mənimlə birlikdə misranı bir neçə dəfə təkrarladı.

Sükan əlindən düşdü.

Əlini hövlnak cibinə apardı.

Şalvarının, köynəyinin cibini eşələdi, eşələdi..., heç nə tapmayıb yerə çökdü. Sükanı yerdən götürüb sinəsinə sıxdı. Çiyinləri əsə-əsə dayanmadan “İskəndərin buynuzu var, buynuzu...” təkrarladı.

İyun 1999

And now here was an eighty-year-old Uncle Osman, shrunken with age, shading his eyes from the sun and gazing at me. He wiped his spectacles with the grubby handkerchief and put them on. He took them off again, blew on the glass and wiped them again, put them back on, and moved them back and forth, trying to work out who I was.

A couple of feet behind Uncle Osman's hut was a sizeable pile of building stones. I took two stones from the heap and put them before Uncle Osman. With one foot on each stone, I started to declaim loudly the anthem of our friendship: “There was a king who lived in Greece...”

Uncle Osman's face changed; his furrowed cheeks stretched up to his ears like the bellows of an accordion, his eyes widened to the size of his spectacle lenses, his lips slowly parted so I could see his two remaining lower teeth.

He moved his lips when I got to “On Alexander's head grew horns, horns” and together we repeated the lines several times.

He let the steering wheel fall, and quickly rooted around in his trouser and shirt pockets. Finding nothing, he sank to the ground. He picked up the steering wheel and clutched it to his chest. Shoulders trembling, he repeated “On Alexander's head grew horns, horns.”

June 1999