

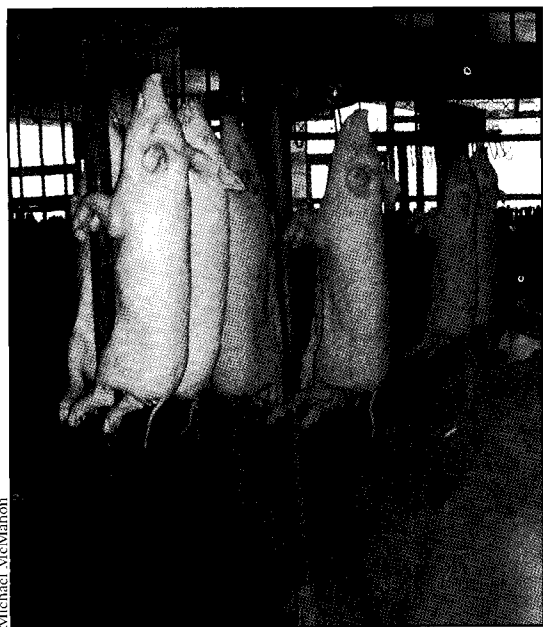
The Best Revenge

by Michael McMahon

From the Mountains Above Batumi

The Black Sea city of Batumi used to be beautiful, and, under a foot of freshly fallen snow, Batumi is beautiful again. Stuccoed terraces of tired 19th-century buildings sit doorstep-deep in white. Chuckling gutters trim the softness draped over corrugated iron roofs. Concrete tenements fade out of focus, their drabness merging with the gray of the sky. Snowflakes fall like feathers. Behind them, the tree-scratched foothills of Georgia's mountains are like an etching on frosted glass.

There has been a power outage, as there often is in post-Soviet Georgia. At midday, the entrance corridor of the indoor market is lit by candles in bottles. Inside, daylight falls feebly through the glazing, covering the stalls in crepuscular calm. On the ground floor, long rows of trestles display vegetables and fruit set out in neat geometrical patterns. On the mezzanine floor, there is meat. Plucked and dressed chickens hold out their feet to browsing shoppers. In a candlelit corner, a ten-yard table is jumble-sale high with offal, liver by heart by kidney. Underneath it, a half-dozen calves' heads gaze from the floor into the middle distance with an air of—well, detachment. A carousel of pink-skinned sucking pigs is turned by a man puffing on a cigarette.



Michael McMahon

Pigs hang in a market in Batumi.

I hadn't planned to linger in the city. I had hitched a lift on the press plane to Adjara so that I could get up into the mountains of the Caucasus. I had a hope—a crazy hope, really—that I might find there not only unspoiled scenery but unspoiled people living in and with it. Maybe, just maybe, there might still be some margins of post-post-Christian Europe unmarked by the culture that has turned most of us into such miserable shoppers-and-fornicators. On day two, I have my chance to find out. The snow hasn't eased up, but Maka, my translator, has found a driver with a four-wheel-drive vehicle.

When the car door opens, Georgian folk music rolls over the steps of the hotel. Maka recognizes the song instantly. It is "Chakrulo," she says. NASA sent it into outer space as an example of the human voice at its best. Bidzina, our driver, is an engineer. He has offered his time and his car as an act of friendship to a stranger. Such things are not unusual in Georgia, explains Maka. If I want to see and write about his country, he is more than happy to help.

We head off into the mountains along roads that soon turn to tracks. The snow on the trees holds daylight as a soufflé holds air. Mist the color of unpolished pewter hangs over the river. We stop at a tiny village called Machakhela—famous for its gun-making, says Bidzina. Do I like shooting? Absolutely. I describe a formal English shoot, and Bidzina looks at me in disbelief.

When I tell him that I am really a rough shooting man myself, he pulls over to the side of the road, goes round to the back of the vehicle and gets out a pump-action shotgun, which he loads. "Come," he says, "We shoot!" and we crunch off through the snow to a spinney by the side of the track. He takes a shot at a blackbird perched in a tree, but it must be at least a hundred yards away, and he misses. A little later, he thrusts the gun into my hands and points to what is surely an owl. Rather than refuse outright to shoot it, I play for time by asking what kind of bird it is. "I don't know," he says. "Shoot it, and we'll find out." The owl saves the situation by flying off.

Higher up the valley, Bidzina asks

whether I am interested in churches. Yes, I am. We park in a little yard in a village and climb some steps to an unremarkable, cement-rendered building. The interior is bare and barn-like; indeed, the place was used as a barn under the communists, before they turned it into a cinema. Now, it is a place of worship again, and two men in their 20's—"servants of the church," Maka calls them—are tidying away some books. Bidzina asks them where we can eat, and one of them, Davit, insists on inviting us to lunch. It is obvious they can ill afford it. They are wearing clothes that would be rejected by any English charity shop. Bidzina suggests a compromise: He'll buy us all lunch in a restaurant, and they can contribute the drink. His friend, Gelasi, says he has some homemade wine at his house, just up the track. What he fetches fills a five-liter container.

The café-bar in the village is a covered yard between some houses, in which cabins like windowless railway compartments have been built. Ours has just enough room for the five of us round the lino-covered table down the middle. We sit on planks covered in coarse industrial carpet. The walls are carpeted, too, and decorated with drawing pins arranged to form crosses. A string of fairy lights runs round the ceiling. In the corner, an empty fish tank sits on a painted iron safe. We keep our coats and hats on. It is cold.

The meal begins traditionally with bread and salt, and Gelasi goes off to fetch some clay drinking horns. They hold about half a bottle's worth, and there is no way of putting them down when they contain wine. The toasts, explains Bidzina, are to be what Maka translates as "bottoms up." Each is preceded by a little speech. "May God bless our friendship," says Davit. "Without friendship, there is nothing." He tells me that the plump pita breads that have been brought to us are called *jadi*; they used to be marked with crosses under communism, to remind people that Christianity was still alive in Georgia.

Between the toasts and speeches, Gelasi tells me that, when Davit was at school, he was beaten for his answer to the question "Does God exist?" Davit is a cantor

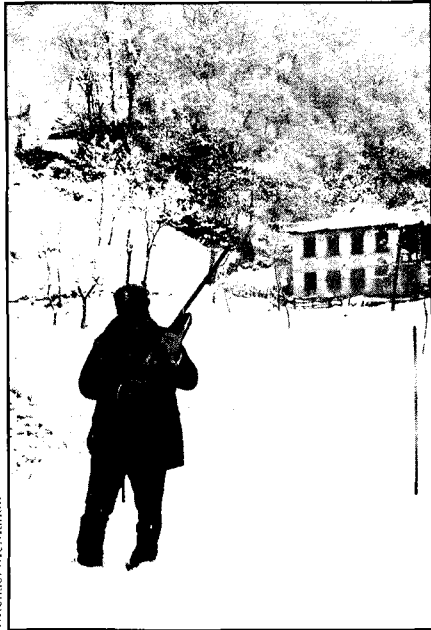
and a folksinger, too. We try to make him sing for us, but he is too shy. By the end of the meal, we have clobbered the five liters of wine between the four of us, Maka having discretely held back. We embrace before departing, and she photographs the four of us standing in the now-melting snow. I feel buoyantly, defiantly, cheer-

fully sober, but, when the photographs are developed, they suggest that this may not quite have been the case. On the return journey, Bidzina takes the bumps with carefree confidence. Back in Batumi, the snow has all but vanished, but I don't notice the potholed roads or broken paving, for the streets are filled with peo-

ple—and Batumi looks even more beautiful than before.

Shortly after Michael McMahon's visit, the "rose revolution" reached Batumi. The indoor market has been closed, and the power outages are longer than ever.

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Sparing the owl.

A snow-covered day in the Georgian mountains.

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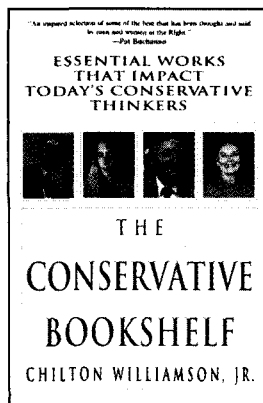
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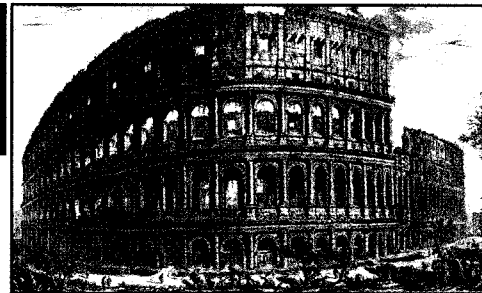
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