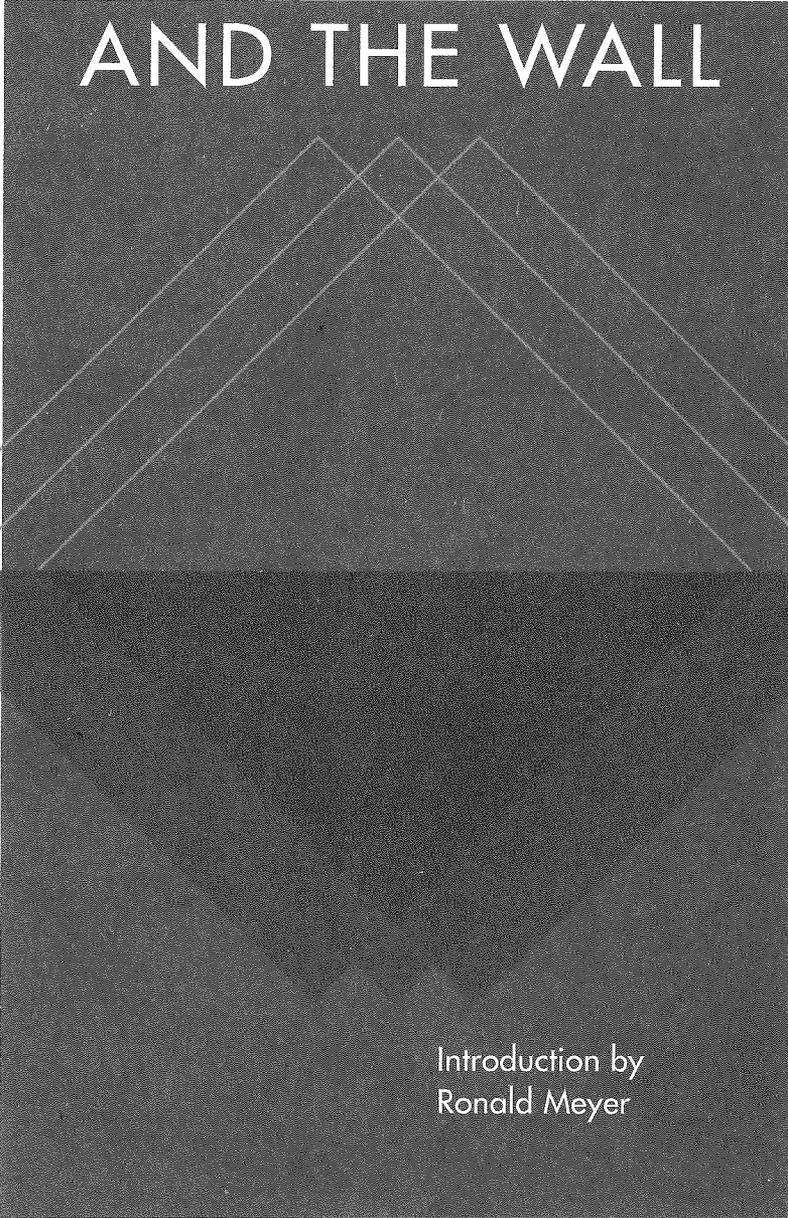


# THE MOUNTAIN AND THE WALL



Introduction by  
Ronald Meyer

## ALISA GANIEVA

TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN BY  
CAROL APOLLONIO

ALSO AVAILABLE IN ENGLISH BY  
ALISA GANIEVA:

*Salam, Dalgat!*  
translated by Nicholas Allen  
(available in *Squaring the Circle*, Glas, 2010)

# THE MOUNTAIN AND THE WALL

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## THE MOUNTAIN OF CELEBRATIONS

*In noon's heat, in a dale of Dagestan...*

—Mikhail Lermontov, 1841

(trans. Vladimir Nabokov)

Russian literature has a long and rich tradition of works set in the Caucasus. Three of the great writers of the nineteenth century—Alexander Pushkin, Mikhail Lermontov and Leo Tolstoy—all spent time in the Caucasus: Pushkin in exile, Lermontov and Tolstoy both served in the army there. This firsthand experience was put to good use in Pushkin's narrative poem *Prisoner of the Caucasus* (1820); in Lermontov's lyrics and *A Hero of Our Time* (1840), the first great Russian novel in prose; and Tolstoy's *Hadji Murat* (1904), his last major work of fiction. Importantly, these tales, set amidst the dramatic landscape of the mountainous Caucasus, are told by Russian imperial outsiders who come into contact, temporarily, with the local "noble savages" who inhabit the borderlands of the empire. Alisa Ganieva's novel *The Mountain and the Wall* (published in Russia in 2012) belongs to this tradition of Russian writing about the Caucasus, but with one major proviso: Ganieva herself is a native of Dagestan, the setting of her novel; the viewpoint is not of an outsider or onlooker, but rather of someone who has lived both in the mountains and in the capital city.

Alisa Ganieva's (b. 1985) entry onto the literary scene is a public relations team's dream. A native of Makhachkala, capital of the southern Russian republic of Dagestan in the Caucasus Mountains, she moved

to Moscow for university and graduated from the prestigious Gorky Literary Institute, where she studied literary criticism—rather than prose fiction. Ganieva submitted *Salam, Dalgat!*—her first novella—for the 2009 Debut Prize, an award given to writers under the age of 25 that routinely sees 50,000 submissions from all over Russia. *Salam, Dalgat!* narrates one day in the life of young Dalgat as he travels around the city and meets with characters from diverse social classes, ethnic groups, religious confessions, and professions. This remarkably mature first story opens at a market that the reader can hear, smell, and feel; Dalgat then attends a literary ceremony, is the victim of a mugging, and witnesses a shooting at a wedding. Ganieva submitted the work under a male pseudonym, so that many assumed that the work was a thinly disguised autobiography of the male protagonist, Dalgat. At the award ceremony, when the winner was announced to be Ganieva's pseudonym, there was tremendous surprise when she stepped forward to accept the prize. As Ganieva said in an interview, "They were expecting some brutal, unshaven guy from the mountains."

Dagestan ("land of the mountains"), a republic in the southernmost portion of the Russian Federation, is situated in the Northern Caucasus region, with Chechnya and Georgia to the west, Azerbaijan to the south, and the Caspian Sea to the east. Makhachkala, the capital city characterized by Ganieva in an interview as "backward and provincial," is located on the sea and stands in stark contrast to the mountains, the nexus of traditional culture in *The Mountain and the Wall*.

Russia formally annexed Dagestan in 1813, following an agreement with Iran, but the resistance against Russian rule, led by Dagestan's Imam Shamil, among others, during the subsequent Caucasian War, forestalled Russia's complete dominion until the 1870s. It is not accidental that the historical Shamil is referenced in the novel's prologue,

nor that the main character is named for the historical fighter. Russia's most heterogeneous republic, Dagestan is home to some 30 languages and unique ethnic groups, including Avar, Dargin, Kumyk, Lezgin, and Russian—but none represents a majority. Ganieva herself is an ethnic Avar, but identifies with Russian culture.

Dagestan has been a center of Islam scholastics and culture since the Middle Ages; Muslims today account for more than 80 percent of the population. Officially repressed during the Soviet period, Islam in the Caucasus has witnessed a strong rebirth since the 1990s, and today experiences the same pressures exerted by “fundamentalists” and “religious extremists” (as they are named by some in the novel) that we encounter in other parts of the globe.

In *The Mountain and the Wall* Ganieva imagines what would happen if Russia were to construct a wall to insulate itself from the strife and turmoil of its Caucasian republics, a topic of intense debate within Russia today. What we witness, primarily through the eyes of Shamil, who stands at the intersection of various storylines, is a dystopian vision of chaos and intimidation, demonstrations and mass meetings, women forced to take the veil, street shootings, and the pillaging of museums and cultural institutions. Despite the importance of the wall as plot device and the impetus for the chaos that grips the city, we never see it. Even though Shamil spends the first day at a newspaper in the city and obsessively watches television for news reports, his only source of information is rumor and conjecture. Shamil's friend Arip, freshly arrived from Moscow, also cannot fill him in. Although Arip's bus from Moscow is held up for two hours at the border crossing, he is unable to provide eyewitness testimony about the wall, because the windows on the bus are filthy; all he could see were towers and barbed wire.

The “mountain” of the book's title alludes to the “Mountain of Celebrations,” first introduced fleetingly in the prologue as an “enchanted village.” The reader witnesses this enchantment in Part I through the eyes of Shamil. He and Arip are hiking in the mountains and come across a village, where they meet an old man who speaks in riddles. He tells them that this is the Mountain of Celebrations (Rokhel-Meer, the same place name given in the prologue), and invites them into his house, where he feeds them. Sleepy after their meal, Shamil and Arip take a nap before meeting the other villagers. But they wake up the next day on the mountainside, no village to be seen, and not knowing how they came to be there. The two men have either shared the same dream, for they both remember the same events, or have both been the objects of the same enchantment. Arip, significantly, at one point denies that this act of enchantment took place, but later recants and assures Shamil that he remembers the peculiar incident. As the reader will see in subsequent episodes, the mountain represents a special locus of history and family, beauty and enchantment.

Shamil's family, like many of the characters in the novel, is originally from the mountains. It is no accident that when the reader is introduced to Shamil he is visiting a mountain village, collecting material for a newspaper feature on the ancient goldsmiths who have plied their intricate craft there for millennia. Shamil is entranced by the fine metalwork, but also connects it to the present—not an unusual jump for a young man. He begins writing his article in his head:

Religious extremism is on the rise in the Republic of Dagestan, claiming more and more victims every day. It is at moments like these that you begin to value the

power of Dagestani culture. In order to learn the extent to which our traditions still endure, I set out for the village of Kubachi, where the local armorers have been honing their craft for twenty-six centuries.

The cultural repositories in the city are pillaged in an act of religious zeal after the alleged construction of the wall, but the mountains, the originator of this culture, remain a haven for those who flee the city to escape the chaos.

In the prologue, Zumrud recalls the time she spent as a child in her great-grandmother's "mountain home." (Ganieva herself spent her childhood with her grandmother in the mountains before moving to Makhachkala.) Significantly, Zumrud reminisces about village weddings, when the old women would sit on the flat rooftops and observe the dancing. Weddings—a central event in the life of the people of the Caucasus—are a favorite plot device in Ganieva's work, beginning with *Salam, Dalgat!* and including her most recent novel, *The Groom and the Bride*, published in Russia in spring 2015. Weddings proliferate throughout *The Mountain and the Wall*—for example, we observe Shamil's neighbor Kamilla go from the hairdresser to a lavish wedding packed with political and business elites in the city, which is interrupted by these same elites being called away, perhaps in connection with the wall. Another symbol of the changing social fabric and the status of Islam is Madina, Shamil's fiancée, who takes the veil and is married in a religious ceremony to another man without her parents' consent. A counterpoint to both of these weddings is the one recounted in the epilogue, which takes place in the mountains. Moreover, numerous tales are recounted with love as their primary subject—the most poignant of which is the story of Khandulai, the

Black Widow, from Makhmud Tagirovich's novel, which Shamil reads while standing in a never-ending line to buy bread.

Interpolated tales provide respite from the dystopian gloom of the narrative—and provide an opportunity for Ganieva to entertain the reader with the introduction of styles and language that fall outside the colloquial idiom of the main narrative. In addition to Makhmud Tagirovich's novel, the longest inserted text, we are given excerpts from his much less successful poem, which freely mixes events of a half-century past with details from the post-perestroika period; and includes this immortal line of which he is inordinately proud: "The cow, a roan, went mincing past, and left a gift upon the path." Tellingly, Shamil reads the novel, still in manuscript, but is ignorant of the poem. Makhmud Tagirovich also retells at a dinner party the story of his namesake's unrequited love for the beautiful Mui, whose well-to-do parents will not permit their daughter to marry the son of a coal miner. "To drown his sorrows," Makhmud enlists in the Dagestan cavalry, comes across a Michelangelo *Madonna with Child*, is stuck by the resemblance to his beloved Mui, and pens the narrative poem *Mariam*. An example from the other end of the spectrum is the schoolbook Shamil happens upon from Soviet times with its admonitions against arranged marriages, praise for collectivization and Soviet contributions to life in the Caucasus, and its picture of the backward and dismal traditional life in the mountains. The diversity of these tales and the styles in which they are told, ranging from socialist realism to fairy-tale pastiche, comment on the histories and fates of Ganieva's characters and Dagestan more generally. The young people in *The Mountain and the Wall* are composite products of these myriad sources, which they must evaluate and balance as they make their way as adults.

The final interpolated text Ganieva introduces is the newspaper of the newly-created Emirate, which Shamil reads by the seaside. The front page features an address by the emir exhorting jihad and martyrdom. Following the quotations from the newspaper, we read: "Shamil set the newspaper aside. Darkness was settling in." Darkness here should be read in two senses, the physical and metaphysical. The darkening skies over Shamil bear witness to the darkening of society and culture in the city. Ganieva, however, does not leave her characters in the darkness that has enveloped the city. Instead, the epilogue brings us back to the mountains—and a wedding. As in the prologue, the women observe the dancing from the flat roof and the songs echo in the snow-capped mountains—a far cry from the ostentatious and showy wedding Kamilla attends in the banquet hall amidst a flurry of hundred-dollar bills. Without advocating a return to the mountain, Ganieva points to the importance of the site for her characters' sense of self and the country's history. Shamil may indeed pursue a career in journalism in the city, but he will surely maintain his family's ties to the mountains, representative of the diversity of cultures that straddle the past and present, urban and rural, modern and traditional, in Dagestan. Ultimately, Ganieva's novel is not about politics, and not about the Caucasus being separated from Russia, but about the fate of her contemporaries, the young people of Dagestan, who both seek to reclaim the traditional past that was obliterated by the Soviet regime and to make their way in the twenty-first century.

*Ronald Meyer*

*Brooklyn, April 2015*

## PROLOGUE